

# INCIDENT

## m a g a z i n e

### *Performance: Fire in Fire: Prayers for the Ocean*

Conceived and Directed by Sarah H. Paulson

Performed: Dec. 4, 2016 at Satellite 2.0 Art Fair

Curated by Performance is Alive

Performers: Sarah H. Paulson, Samantha Gray & Travis Laplante

By Steven Butz

Nearing the end of the ever-frenzied 2016 Miami Basel art fair week, performance artist Sarah H. Paulson, accompanied by two other performers, Samantha Gray and composer Travis Laplante, created a three and a half hour event which, in essence, begged us to just stop. Stop the spending. Stop the Ubering. Stop the partying. Please.

Employing minimal staging and props, the most abundant of which were two very generous mounds of red and pink rose petals, one idea which couldn't help but leap out, was "Stop and smell the roses". This message, along with the work's intended themes, could only reach a few audience members at a time in the small hotel room Paulson had adapted into another of her spare performance environments. There, incorporating one of her signature motifs of repetitive actions or activities, we see what takes on the definite appearance of a ceremony or more precisely, a ritual. The viewer can't be sure what cultures or civilizations her rituals might be drawn from because there are no identifiable clues. It feels unfamiliar. Could they be religious in origin or cultural or socio-political? These repeated actions are uncomplicated, and overall quite simple. What remains constant in her more recent work, as she continued to do here, is the sense that what we are watching is not newly wrought, but ancient. That the gestures and

actions Paulson enacts are ones she has carefully managed to unearth and recreate. Perhaps the artist herself is not fully understanding of their original meaning, but convinced of their validity and significance, she gives them new life and lets her audience parse out their meanings.



*Fire in Fire: Prayers for the Ocean*, 2016 (Photo: Julio Tardaguila) / Photo courtesy of the artist

Paulson's piece, titled "Fire in Fire: Prayers for the Ocean" was created at the invitation of Performance is Alive at the Satellite Art Show 2.0. Though its mysterious ritualistic aspects adhere to her overall performative style, here she has chosen, partly given the venue and location or perhaps at the request of the presenters, to provide detailed program notes. These actively direct and focus her audience (many of whom are asked to briefly and individually participate) on the specific themes of this work. It seems, as I recall, to differ from previous program notes, as rather too literally descriptive of her ideas, intentions and goals. Though they do perhaps help those entirely uninitiated with her work to watch with greater ease and certainly aids those too quickly passing through yet another art fair event to get the idea and take something away. The risk however can be that such detailed program notes, narrow and prescribe the encounter by telling its audience members what they should be thinking about as they experience the performance.

Once read, it can set unintended parameters around an individual's interpretive encounter with the material and might undermine more elusive personal engagements. Rather than summarizing these programs notes, I have appended the four short paragraphs\* at the end of this story.

Numerous, intermittent high points come with the repeated, brief participation of individual audience members in the ritual. They are called into the performance space and sit facing forward, on a chair center stage reserved only for them. With outstretched palms, cleansed by Paulson with ocean water, these volunteers take on the role of willing supplicants, which concludes, after a few ceremonial aspects, with each given a small treasure of rose petals, resting on the moxa singed balsa wood square and wrapped in a square of white silk. It reminded me of a very small elegant hobo's knapsack, missing only the little stick from which it would hang. There is a card tied to the small knotted silk parcel that instructs it to be taken to the ocean and that the rose petals be tossed into the waves. In effect, these volunteers cum performers are each asked to stop, in the midst of the tumult of the art fair's hurry-it's-your-last-chance-to-see-everything-day, to stop and become sacred messengers.



*Fire in Fire: Prayers for the Ocean, 2016 (Photos: Julio Tardaguila) / Photo courtesy of the artist*

Another major component of the work was the performance of composer and saxophonist Travis Laplante, who is a respected artist in his own right and founder of the avant-garde saxophone quartet, Battle Trance. Laplante provides an ongoing improvisational accompaniment during the entire duration of the piece. In the time I spent at the performance, which was the last two and one-half hours, the music was comprised of a broad and varied range of sounds, including suggestions of the urban commotion of Collins Avenue, right outside the hotel, to more frequent and wonderful descents into a long, lovely, foggy echoing of music emanating from a conch shell. Closing our eyes, we can imagine Laplante momentarily took one up to

play, giving his sax a rest. In those moments, the nearby ocean became a full-throated presence in this little second floor hotel room.

When not interacting with an audience volunteer, which was Paulson's major role, she, along with the other performer, were each kneeling in their respective mounds of rose petals and routinely scooping up armfuls and showering themselves with them. This action, one felt, could go on eternally, like the never-ending action of waves. Paulson and Gray were watery maidens in loving service, who never tired, never got distracted, and never doubted the significance of their task.

As in all of Paulson's works, those conceived alone, such as this one and those conceived with sometimes collaborator, Holly Faurot, the audience is given permission to come and go during the always lengthy performances. As compared to her twelve hour performance of "*The Reed Bed*" at the Grace Exhibition Space in Brooklyn in June, 2016, "*Fire in Fire...*" was held, as previously noted, at a modest three and a half hours. There is a concept of endurance which plays into these works, both for the performers, who must fulfill the required scope of the piece, and also for the audience members. There are many who opt for a more swift, fleeting encounter, while some choose to stay and stay. Rewards can be had either way, but I have found the greater the endurance, the greater the rewards.



*The Reed Bed*, 2016 (Photo: Rob Peyrebrune) / Photo courtesy of the artist



That afternoon after the performance, I found myself on the beach, tossing my rose petals into the waves. There is no way knowing how many of the performance volunteers chose to fulfill this mission to the Atlantic, only two blocks from that small hotel room, and it will forever remain the actual unseen conclusion to the performance.



*Fire in Fire: Prayers for the Ocean, 2016 (Photo: Julio Tardaguila) / Photo courtesy of the artist*

\*Program Notes from “Fire in Fire: Prayer for the Ocean” Dec. 4, 2016

Samantha Gray and Sarah H. Paulson bathe themselves in thousands of rose petals. Through their continuous immersion into piles of reds and pinks, accompanied by Travis Laplante’s masterful use of the saxophone to emit cascades of sound, each petal becomes a letter, a prayer, a love note, from the heart of the performer to the ocean.

Each year tons of people flock to Miami for Miami Art Week. It is a time of creativity, opulence, celebration, debauchery, activism, education, criticism, art, addiction, performance, traffic, waste, self-expression, business, music and more. It is a week that is full of both beauty and horror.

“Fire in Fire” serves to remind viewers, the performers, and the artist alike, about the importance of place. The ocean is ceaseless, calling to us, singing, crashing, reaching, available, regardless of what stands on its shore, or is discarded into its waters. “Fire in Fire: Prayer for the Oceans” is but a breath, from the shore, in response to that constant call.

With the help of audience members, moxa (dried mugwort used in acupuncture) is burned through the center of silk handkerchiefs one after another. Rose petals are wrapped in the burnt handkerchiefs and given to individuals from the audience, with the agreement that they will release the petals into the ocean.