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Jeni Fulton, "Frances Stark on Reimagining Mozart," *Sleek*, May, 2017

SLEEK

Frances Stark on Reimagining Mozart into a Hip-Hop Masterpiece

L.A. artist and professor Frances Stark has hung up her cap and gown to listen to rap and rewrite Mozart



– “The Magic Flute 2017”, courtesy of LACMA

On April 28, Frances Stark’s “The Magic Flute” premiered at the LACMA. For her 110-minute cinematic adaptation of the 1791 opera by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart and librettist Emmanuel Schikaneder, she collaborated with several people in the music industry, including conductor Danko Drusko. He transformed Mozart’s original score to be performed by an orchestra made up of young musicians aged 10 to 19. Stark’s intention was to update the lyrics and take certain parts of the opera to make the piece more accessible to a contemporary and diverse audience. We interviewed Stark for *Sleek* 48 to discuss the project in addition to her past works.

Online sex and onstage daggering with hype man Skerrit Bwoy: Frances Stark’s work distorts the line between art and life. In a society where expressions of female sexuality are circumscribed and censored, her unabashed exploration of online mutual masturbation, misogynistic hip hop tropes and currently classical opera blurs categories, boundaries and genres. Distinctions between life, medium, work, concept and position seem irrelevant in her practice. Her work is a canny analysis of how we communicate and use culture in the 21st century, delving into Chatroulette and upending preconceptions about artist-subject relationships and the intimacy of communication.

Stark’s best known work is perhaps “My Best Thing”, an hour long film in 11 episodes that premiered at the 2011 Venice Biennale, featuring two animated characters recounting dialogues Stark had with a number of men, including an Italian anarchist and architect in an online sex chat room. The works are remarkable for their banality: the characters speak in internet shorthand, “hahas” abound, and the two fully clothed avatars barely physically interact. Her openness around sex and the unscripted blandness of the chatroom leave the viewer very much removed from the position of the voyeur. “I felt sexually empowered performing in those private realms. There was a compassion and tenderness that was created between me and the other men,” she says.

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– Total Performance, 1988

In the piece, a character likens art making to masturbating. “The masturbation that was taking place to create any of these dialogues was mutual,” she says. “So what I discovered in this process was this reality where instead of watching pornography, you could just be having a simultaneous experience with a person. That was a rupture, especially for women, where you could have a safe space and go cruising like all my gay friends from the Nineties. Now I know what that’s about, you know what I mean?” In a way, she feels like the community has moved on from the sort of encounters featured in “My Best Thing”. “Compared to the promiscuity in ‘My Best Thing’, Instagram can be so much more nastier, and it’s hot.” In her early practice, Stark described herself as a writer, but “My Best Thing” led her to hand over her authorship to her collaborators. “I just got lucky with these dudes and they’re fricking hilarious. So I didn’t edit that much,” she says. “It was a wonderful trajectory for me and I think it produced remarkable effects. But now I’m coming back and realising you can’t always relinquish control.”

Metaphors of masturbation play out in the script of “My Best Thing”, which becomes a rumination on productivity and uniqueness. “Does pleasure need to result in a product or have a use?” she asks. This also translates to her teaching. One of the main aspects of her pedagogy, she says, is to awaken the joy of reading. “At the University of Southern California, a lot of students thought that the meaning behind an artwork was embedded in it, like a secret key left by the artist that would unlock its secret. Everything can tell you an endless story of what it is and how it’s made and it’s fun to figure that shit out, so I was so surprised to encounter art students who were hostile to enjoy the process of unpacking it,” she says, clearly frustrated.

Last December, however, she resigned her position USC Roski where she’s taught for a decade. This decision was sparked by a well-publicised spat concerning rapper and impresario Dr Dre and his Beats headphones business partner Jimmy Lovine donating millions to establish an ‘art meets technology meets disruption meets hot air’ undergraduate programme. “No one wanted to investigate or talk about it,” she says. “It’s a paradox because at the same time, the art market is ever more powerful and there’s ever more ‘celebrification’ of places like Art Basel in Miami, and at the same time, you’re cutting art off at the root.”

While Stark was included in the 2011 Venice Biennale, her name is not widely known outside the art world. Her mid-career retrospective, which recently opened at the Hammer museum in L.A., may well change this. However, she says she still feels unsure about her place in the art world. “I feel like I don’t have one, partially because my voice didn’t matter in the 70 million dollars from the tech industry.



– “My best thing”, 2011, courtesy of the artist and Marc Foxx

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Authenticity for real

There has been a shift in Stark's work, which previously centred around autobiographical text and speech elements but has now expanded to include young, black male protagonists and their culture. L.A.-born and raised, Stark has a fascination with all facets of the city's life, including its skateboarding and rap subcultures. In fact, it was at a skate park where a chance encounter in 2012 led her to meet her muse and fellow artist Bobby Jesus. Following this, Jesus spent time at Stark's studio and began to participate in her artwork. At first, Jesus was a "kind of model" for Stark, and one that inverted the traditional gender binary between artists and their muses. Indeed, references Sylvia Sleigh, a 20th century figurative painter who replaced women in classical paintings with nude men, are also present in her work. However, Stark's approach is more conceptual: Bobby Jesus "models his life for her" and she "models her life for him". "It's fascinating for someone like Bobby, who grew up on rap, to tell me that my work is interesting. The whole thing has been a cycle of educating each other, between my son and Bobby and me."

"It's great that Bobby Jesus, who grew up on rap, tells me that my work is fun to him" – Frances Stark

Jesus isn't the surname on Bobby's birth certificate – it's a nickname Stark gave to him. But his influence on her work is definitely real and very visible, especially in her latest and perhaps most ambitious project: a re-staging of Mozart's opera "The Magic Flute". Partially a homage to the city's hip hop scene, Stark is reframing the opera through the lens of L.A. rap culture, which was initially intended to be a collaboration with DJ Quik. "It's gonna be a film," she says. "Stagecraft is not my forte because production is too stressful, and that's not what I'm interested in. I really love how 'My Best Thing' became so easy to spread around the world." She wants the piece to be about exploring the sound of Mozart's classic and "underscoring certain parts – those parts which link to contemporary issues." Perhaps the most controversial aspect the opera poses to modern audiences is its racist treatment of Monostatos, a Moorish character. Take for example lyrics such as: "Everything feels love's joys/yet I must shun love because a black man is ugly/White is beautiful, I need to kiss her." Or the fact that Monostatos is still played by a white actor wearing black face paint in many existing productions.

Stark intends to connect Monostatos to a campaign group that Bobby Jesus, a fellow artist, drew her attention to called the Moorish Science Temple of America – a movement that originated in Chicago in the early part of the 20th century, and which was a precursor to the Nation of Islam and the black civil rights movement. Its founder, Timothy Drew, believed that African Americans were descended from the Moors of North Africa – hence Stark's link to Monostatos. "It's a deconstruction of American constitution, and we want to use this to make the Moorish character in the Magic Flute an empowered rather than a pathetic and threatening figure, which I think is what the librettist Emmanuel Schikaneder originally intended," she says.



– Frances Stark, courtesy of Todd Cole

A further contemporary angle concerns the surfeit of images and their effect on the perception of subjectivity. "There's a brilliant opening scene in the opera when the prince encounters a serpent and then the three witches say, 'Oh we found you, the queen wants you to see this.' They then hand him a picture of the princess and tell him that if he can save her then he can have her forever. So they entice him with a sexy picture – its like Instagram – and he's like 'I love her, I must act', she says.

However, the production received a major setback when DJ Quik stopped returning her calls. "I had a sincere desire, as a person, as a thinker, and as an important artist in L.A., to have this conversation with Quik," she says. "Quik being non-responsive was a major heart breaker for me, this serendipitous thing of someone reaching out from another world at first, then it dying down." The production is currently on hold, while Stark rethinks her approach, however, funding is secure.

Nonetheless, Stark's sabbatical from her teaching may be far from over. At the moment, it seems as if the artist has reached a new beginning by making work about a culture that, while very much indigenous to L.A., doesn't usually cross the boundary into the mainly white art scene. To whit, a white female appropriating hip hop and entering the territory of black storytelling is in a sensitive position indeed. Stark is unabashed, and she's striding forth into areas previously regarded as off-limits for female visual artists.

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- Agonizing yet Blissful, 2001