

Jason Moran at the Whitney: Swinging at the Savoy



Jason Moran and The Bandwagon at The Walker, The Last Jazz Fest, 2018

By JAN CASTRO, September 2019

Thanks to mega-talent Jason Moran and curator Adrienne Edwards, the Whitney Museum 8th Floor is a live art/music/film/spoken word/ quadruple-screen listening and performance space through January 5, 2020. Jason Moran, sporting close-cropped hair and a beard that let his dimple show through and wearing a black jacket with subtle gold floral stripes, workmanlike black jeans, and blue/white tennis shoes with laces in two colors, is a mega-talent who pays attention to himself and others as he shows us why and how listening and learning are important steps in making music for the ages. This MacArthur genius, born in Houston in 1975, is also Artist-in-Residence at the Kennedy Center. He gave Whitehot this exclusive:

Whitehot: Let's talk about how you grew up in Houston.

Jason Moran: I grew up in Third Ward, Houston, a historic black neighborhood. All of my large family on both sides is in Houston and all have a relationship with the arts – not professionally but in how they digest it. Growing up, my parents gave my brothers and me a diet of dance, music, theater, and film. Then I went to an arts high school that also had everything – dance, theater, music. My parents used to visit New York, too, and tell stories about what was happening there. In high school, I found my relationship to jazz and knew I wanted to move to New York. New York was always a place in my imagination.

Whitehot: You moved at eighteen?

Moran: Yes, I moved at eighteen to go to the Manhattan School of Music to study with Jaki Byard, a pianist who played with Mingus and Sam Rivers. Jaki was my real magnet to come here.

Whitehot: Where did Andrew Hill come in? You told me earlier that Andrew Hill was “everything.”

Moran: Even in high school, I was a big fan of Andrew’s. I had met him occasionally as a fan in the audience asking him to sign my records. I started working with saxophonist Greg Osby, and Greg introduced me to Andrew because they were playing together a lot at the time. Andrew became my teacher once I graduated from college. He was a mentor and teacher until he passed away.



Jason Moran, STAGED: Savoy Ballroom I, 2015, Photo: Farzad Owrang© Jason Moran; Courtesy of the artist and Luhring Augustine, New York.

Whitehot: Wow. Obviously, there are a lot of cool jazz places in New York. How did you pick these three to recreate – the Savoy Ballroom, Three Deuces, and Slugs' Saloon?

Moran: Being a jazz musician, you end up becoming a historian because you keep searching out eras of the music, what it sounded like, why musicians were playing these songs and to what audiences. Who was in the band, who left, and why? Listening to the music, I'd also wonder what did the room look like when they were recording "A Love Supreme"? Where was this? I was listening to a Mosaic boxed set of Chick Web and Ella Fitzgerald and thumbing through the amazing book that comes with the boxed set, and I saw the Savoy Ballroom. I saw that the Savoy stage had this unbelievable arch behind the band. I thought: what is that and why is that? What did it sound like? Who were these people dancing? I started asking more questions that I couldn't get answers to. There weren't a lot of photographs of the place.

Then this idea welled up: what if we make the stage? What are the spatial requirements for this kind of music -- a big band that makes the audience dance? For the Three Deuces, I saw a William Gottlieb photograph of Max Roach, one of our revolutionary drummers – young, with big ideas on his mind – in a padded corner of Three Deuces. There they were – Max, Roach with Charlie Parker, Dizzy, and Miles Davis -- in a basement on 52nd Street totally revolutionizing the world. Wow. So this place looked like this. All that while, I'd been playing at the Village Vanguard for years and been inside that history as a performer.

Some musicians I play with now and some older musicians played at Slugs'. Charles Lloyd, Archie Shepp, and Eddie Henderson would be talking about Slugs', this club where Sun Ra and Ornette played all the time. Though that club was around in the 60s and 70s, there are not a lot of photographs of it. There was this low documentation of an important cultural space.

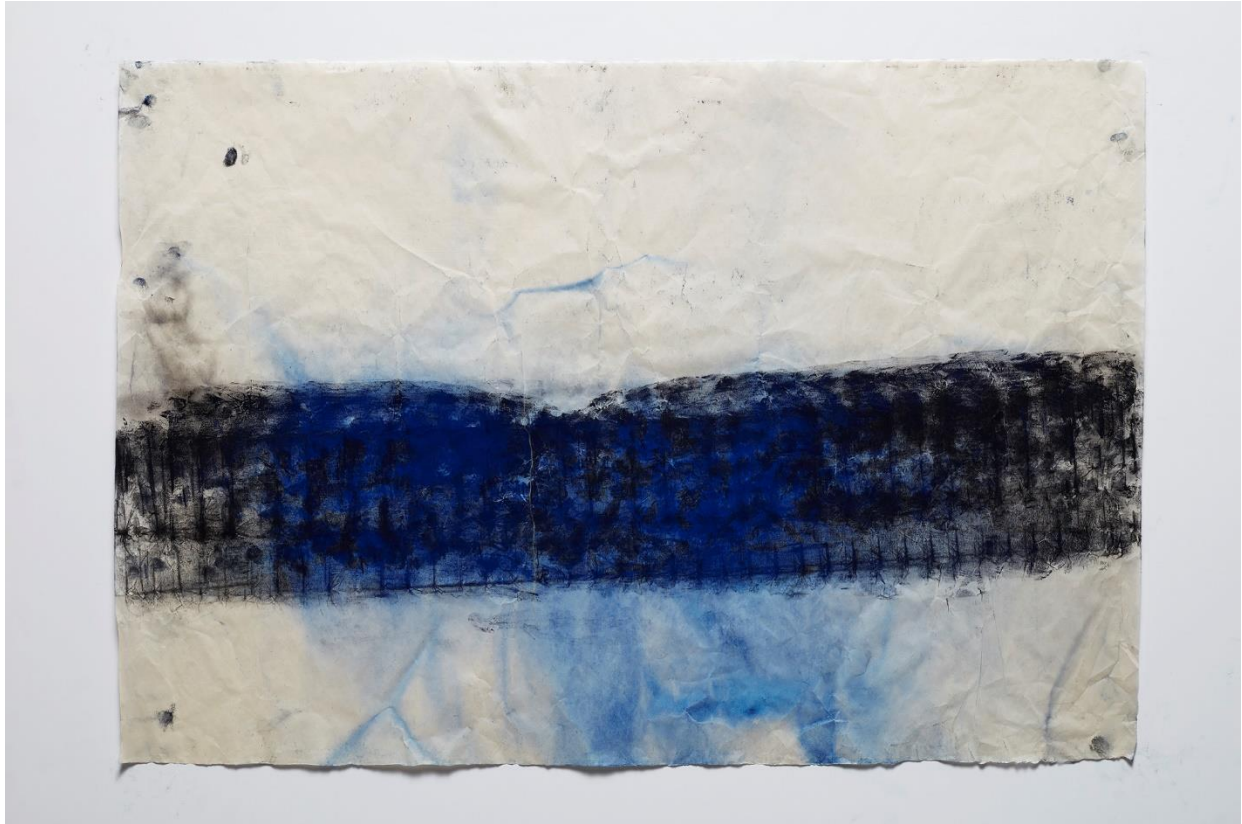


Jason Moran,

Slugs' Saloon, 2018. Mixed media, sound, 120 x 168 x 171 in. (304.8 x 426.7 x 434.34 cm). Collection of the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis; T. B. Walker Acquisition Fund, 2018. © Jason Moran; Courtesy of the artist and Luhring Augustine, New York. Photograph by Farzad Owrang

Whitehot: When did you start making visual art? What media do you use, and how does it interface with your musical compositions, which are displayed nearby?

Moran: The paper pieces on the wall are more a recording of a performance or an attempt to make another document of what was played. It's residue mostly. As much as there's an audio recording, there's a visual recording. I worked with a visual artist, Joan Jonas, for the past fourteen or fifteen years. Joan Jonas and Adrian Piper changed my life after my Mother died. Joan and I have made lots of pieces together. Always, in her performances, she creates a drawing of some sort. It becomes part of the gesture of doing a performance -- making a record of it. She taught me a way of thinking about history and performance and recordings.



Jason Moran, *Black and Blue Gravity*, 2018. Mixed media on paper, 25 x 36 3/4 in. (63.5 x 93.3 cm). © Jason Moran; Courtesy of the artist and Luhring Augustine, New York. Photograph by Farzad Owrang

Whitehot: How has that played into your artist-in-residency at the Kennedy Center?

That's a big platform. Does it relate to this exhibition?

Moran: My relationship at the Kennedy Center is that I started as Artistic Advisor, and then I became Artistic Director for jazz. The most important part was continuing the legacy that Dr. Billy Taylor had set. He started the program there. I wanted to continue the model of promoting the music's relationship to culture and society – and to invite artists in who push it forward too. The Kennedy Center supports that as it continues to grow as an institution. This exhibition is a proposition about what we're doing; audiences have to compose the rest of the song.

Note: The 53 works at the Whitney Museum range from three full-sized stage sets of the Savoy Ballroom, Three Deuces, and Slugs' Saloon venues, related memorabilia such as Ella Fitzgerald with the Chick Web Band at the Savoy in 1938, Moran's dry pigment on paper compositions,

related music scores with notations, and a 6-hour Stan Douglas video of Moran and other musicians titled “Luanda-Kinshasa,” 2013. A loop of films on three screens features Moran’s performances with art and sets by Glenn Ligon, Kara Walker, Carrie Mae Weems, Lorna Simpson, Joan Jonas, and others. Theaster Gates improvises a blues riff in one. The films and videos offer a range of original Jason Moran compositions and performances with innovative settings and themes -- about two hours of eye and ear-opening audiovisuals. To further activate the Whitney spaces, live performances are planned, including a one-day event with Kara Walker on October 12. On Friday, September 27 at 7 and on the 28th at 4 p.m., Moran performs with Archie Shepp. See www.jasonmoran.com and <https://whitney.org/exhibitions/jason-moran>. WM



Jan Garden Castro (www.janCastro.com) is author/editor of six books, including *The Art & Life of Georgia O’Keeffe*, Contributing Editor for *Sculpture Magazine*, and contributor for *American Book Review*. She has a major essay in a new edition of *The Handmaid’s Tale* (www.suntup.press/Atwood).