

# APRIL 14



Paul Outlaw

*What Did I Do to Be So Black and... (a dream I had/after falling asleep/with the Fox News Channel on)*

Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions (LACE), April 2011

## **Going Berserk: Paul Outlaw in conversation with Danyel Madrid**

Los Angeles-based performance artist Paul Outlaw is best known for depicting myriad characters during a single performance, many of whom exist decades, if not centuries apart. The contrasts between these personalities are heightened, drawn out and played with through transformations that are elegantly fluid or deliberately jarring. In his own words: "...the experience of transformation—especially quick transformations from one character to another or from one reality to another—can be like being in a lucid dream-state, like being possessed, like playing games like a child, or suffering from a dissociative identity disorder. It all depends on the demands of the work, and how far I let myself go." He will soon complete his solo performance trilogy, *Here Be Dragons*, *Berserker*, and *The Late, Late Show*. Within the framework of *Here Be Dragons*, Outlaw explores issues of race and sexuality through the portrayal of twenty-five different characters. In *Berserker*, Outlaw takes on three characters: Nat Turner, Jeffrey Dahmer, and Outlaw himself, while in *The Late, Late Show*, he focuses on an immortal traveler at three different times in his life: 1855, 1955, and 2155. Outlaw and his panoply of characters illustrate the complex, multi-faceted nature of race, sexuality and American society contained within his body as well as within a wider political discourse.

On a sunny Sunday morning, I met with Outlaw in Griffith Park to discuss his practice and his many characters that he brings to life.

*Danyel Madrid:* As you mentioned earlier, a majority of your performance background stems from experimental theatre. How definitive is that boundary between experimental theatre and performance art?

*Paul Outlaw:* Performance art is one corner of the experimental theater world. Or let's put it this way: performance art is experimental, but it doesn't have to be theater.

*DM:* How have the documentary-style performances of actors/artists such as Anna Deavere Smith informed your practice?

*PO:* It was after seeing Anna Deavere Smith's *Fires in the Mirror* (1992) that I was first inspired to create a solo theater project. I was especially intrigued by the vast number of characters she embodied, the humor that was an essential ingredient of the piece, and the starkness of the staging.

*DM:* Your work tends to utilize the themes of transformation and contrast. I also noticed your work is riddled with allusions, stretching from the myths of the ancient world to contemporary politics. How do you research your characters and thread their stories together to create these rich performances?

*PO:* I spend a lot of time doing online research and finding library materials. There's a lot of reading, scanning, photocopying, and compiling. It's detective work. I'm looking for photographs, audio and video footage, maps, all kinds of things. Google is an amazing tool. Sometimes I find things by accident that lead me to re-think aspects of a project or that turn out to be defining motifs or narrative points. My background in traditional theater and songwriting comes in handy in bringing it all together. Even when the goal is

not to create a "play" per se, I'm always aware of pacing, momentum, dynamics, exposition, etc.

*DM:* For the characters you portray, I know you must feel a sense of integrity to portray them accurately. But do you ever have other feelings towards these characters?

*PO:* I always feel a responsibility to express a truth about the characters I portray, whether they are fictional or based on real people. That truth can be connected to something physical (a gesture, a dialect, etc.), something emotional or to some factual detail from that character's life. Beyond that, I usually feel joy in bringing characters to life in performance; even when a character's existence is not particularly joyous, there is a feeling of delight that comes from sharing his/her story with an audience.

*DM:* In *So Funny It Hurts*, the series of performances by eight Los Angeles-based artists, we think about the idea of something we oppose, and then moving towards the opposition as a form of confrontation. I know you will be focusing on the movement of black conservatism within American politics for your performance. How will you deal with this issue? Will this performance affect you differently because it revolves around a movement you vehemently oppose?

*PO:* At this point in the development of the piece, I can't say too much about that. It's too soon, and I'm not sure what the piece will become. Right now I'm gathering material, mostly photographic, audio and video, and seeing where it takes me. My intent is to create a very theatrical piece that is not necessarily a theater piece. I don't think that I will ultimately be any more (or less) affected by it than anything I've previously done. After all, I've portrayed Jeffrey Dahmer.

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Right: Paul Outlaw, 2011.



Four dead comics enter the room. Pieces of wood hang from the back of the ventriloquist's suit. He is surprisingly unencumbered by them, he moves freely in this deconstructed cabinet. There is a false hand in a glove that trails neon yellow wig hair from the arm of the magician. On his back, a poster of a rooster is tacked like a mean joke. On the stand-up comic, pink and white marshmallows wobble unappetizingly, and on the singer, flabby red sacks bulge and drip from his sleeves, nasty and presumptuous like a turkey wattle.

Paul Outlaw as a singing bride is terrifying behind the diaphanous wedding veil that looks as if it's clotted with ashes. The dress he wears seamlessly merges into a jagged angular set piece, like a crushed sailboat anchored to a chair. Dress and ship glow green and blue in their folds.

So Funny It Hurts was made richer by the involvement of the artist Curt LeMieux who collaborated with both Asher Hartman and Paul Outlaw in the design of their costumes and set pieces. LeMieux is one of those rare artists whose work remains recognizably his own but at the

same time is tailored beautifully to each artist's performance. His sculptures, in his own words, use "...recognizable imagery—abstract and repressed images of humans, animals, architectural and machine-like forms—and questionable materials ranging from blobs of paint and glue to non-art materials, such as socks and sticks and other unlikely but charged substances, [to] reopen their associative meanings, allowing the viewer to explore origins."

Angelino artists have a history of pushing against the standard hierarchy that relegates objects and costumes to a supporting role only as material remnants of the performance. Paul McCarthy, Mike Kelly, and Johanna Went, for instance, created performances in which objects took the form of puppet-like stand-ins for the subconscious or terrifying effigies of the cultural forces they wanted to destroy. Lemieux's performance-activated objects are similarly hyper-present; the categories of costume, set and prop can barely contain them. They are more like understudies who refuse to wait in the wings and who unexpectedly take the stage next to the actors, singing another song from another story.



## Contributor Bios:

*Carol Cheh* is a writer and curator based in Los Angeles. She is the founder of Another Righteous Transfer!, a blog devoted to documenting LA's performance art scene, and currently writes for ArtInfo and the LA Weekly Style Council blog. Her curatorial projects have included You Don't Bring Me Flowers: An Evening of Re-Performances (POST, 2010) and Signals: A Video Showcase (Orange County Museum of Art, 2008). She also served as exhibition coordinator for Tubular!, a show of California State University Long Beach MFA candidates curated by Doug Harvey (Pacific Design Center, 2010) and has diverse work experience at a number of museums, including SITE Santa Fe and MoCA. Carol is completing her master's thesis in art history, which explores mutated notions of authorship in the work of new media artist Ryan Trecartin.

*Melinda Guillen* is an arts writer and organizer from Las Vegas, Nevada. She recently graduated from the Master of Public Art Studies: Art/Curatorial Practices in the Public Sphere program at the University of Southern California. She is a contributing writer to the Art21 blog and has curated projects for Workspace, Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions (LACE) and Raid Projects. Most recently, she co-curated Work After Work, an exhibition exploring the economic conditions of artistic production at the MAK Center for Art and Architecture's Mackey Garage Top and wrote an essay for the exhibition catalog titled, "Entering the Familiar Unknown: Criticism and the Institution of Critique." She currently lives and works in Los Angeles.

*Hans Kuzmich* is an interdisciplinary artist working in Los Angeles and New York. He completed the Whitney Museum Independent Study Program in 2010 and is currently pursuing his MFA at the University of California Los Angeles.

*Danyel Madrid* is a Los Angeles-based writer, arts administrator, and long time lover of the Angeleno art scene. She has worked at several art-related organizations, including the arts/contemporary culture TV network Ovation, artist group Slanguage, the Daniel Weinberg Gallery, and as the director at Anna Helwing Gallery. Interested in both contemporary and ancient art, she studied art history and classics at the University of Southern California as well as archaeology on-site in Athens, Greece. She enjoys eating dangerously from taco trucks and reading everything from the comic book series Love and Rockets to dusty books written in ancient Greek.

*Geoff Tuck*, born in 1960, graduated from Ganesh High School in 1978. Mr. Tuck is a self-taught writer and artist. In 2007 Tuck began publishing a Los Angeles based art and culture e-newsletter called Notes on Looking and in 2010, inaugurated Notes on Looking as an online blog. He has written for X-TRA Contemporary Art Quarterly and has contributed to various museum and exhibition publications, including catalogs for Kaycee Olsen Gallery and the Studio Museum in Harlem.

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Left: Asher Hartman, Curt LeMieux, 2011.

**Zemula Barr** [collaborator, editor] is an artist and curator originally from Portland, Oregon. She recently graduated from the Master of Public Art Studies program at the University of Southern California and co-curated *Work After Work* at the MAK Center for Art and Architecture's Mackey Garage Top Space. Zemula has also worked on curatorial projects for Orange County Museum of Art, Workspace and RAID Projects and she is currently assisting with research for the upcoming exhibition *Cruising the Archive: Queer Art and Culture in Los Angeles, 1945–1980* at ONE National Gay and Lesbian Archives.

**Brian Getnick** [curator, editor] (born 1976, New York), is a sculptor, performance artist and director living in Los Angeles. After receiving his MFA at the school of the Art Institute of Chicago he moved to Los Angeles where he remains an active member of the performance art community. In addition to launching Native Strategies, he is currently co-directing the forthcoming film *Holy Blood* along with Noe Kidder.

**Molly Erin Sullivan** [designer] is an artist, organizer, designer, and educator living and working in Los Angeles. She graduated with a Master's in Public Art Studies from the University of Southern California and has worked on various curatorial and publishing projects at the MCA (Chicago), threewalls (Chicago) and at LACE (Los Angeles). She is currently teaching a course on Public Art at HOLA (Heart of Los Angeles) in the Visual Arts and Culture Program. Her other creative projects include playing bass and singing lead vocals for TONY, a Los Angeles-based band, and collaboratively scoring a rock-opera based on Friedrich Schiller's play, *Mary Stuart*.

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# NATIVE STRATEGIES

The performance art journal of Los Angeles

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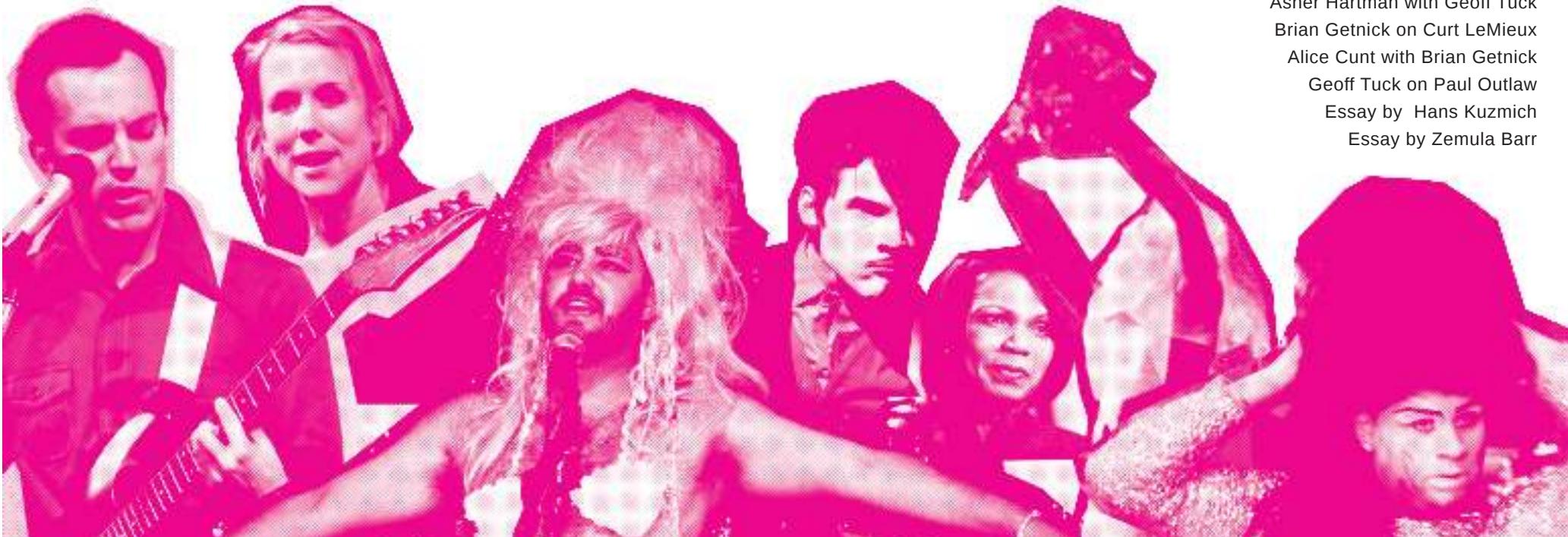
Brian Getnick on Curt LeMieux

Alice Cunt with Brian Getnick

Geoff Tuck on Paul Outlaw

Essay by Hans Kuzmich

Essay by Zemula Barr



## NATIVE STRATEGIES: SO FUNNY IT HURTS

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