Kalup LINZY
By CHAN MARSHALL, Photography GRANT DELIN
PERFORMANCE ARTIST KALUP LINZY ISN'T JUST ONE OF THE ART WORLD'S BRIGHTEST NEW GENDER-BENDING CHARACTERS—HE'S MANY OF THEM

Interview

Perhaps the best way to understand Kathryn Lissy's brand of performance art is to stay home on a weekend and watch television. Soap operas in particular play a large role in the Lissy oeuvre, with many of his videos and stage shows built around dramatic characters and episodes. Lissy, writes director, author and actor Lenny Bruce, "creates and recreates" the music. "One of them, All My Children (2000), chronicles the intrigue and tragedy surrounding the Busswell family, who appear as characters in several of the artist's pieces, with all of its members—male and female, grandmothers and gingers—played by Lissy himself. He pulls similar double-, triple-, and quadruple-duty in his MTV-style musical clip, assuming the gait of pop star divas and baritone R&B cats singing songs about chewing gum and ashes (Lissy originals) with surprising aplomb. His stage work is no less memorable: For a performance produced by Art Production Fund in the Prospect.1 New Orleans Biennial last November, Lissy took the stage in a flowery wig and a shiny Beverly Hills-style black hoodie to perform a rendition of Bobby "Bobby" Bland's "Members Only," showing off his soulful, horned voice, along with a considerable amount of tough. But what distinguishes him from the rank of other one-man shows, stand-up comics, drug queens, and viral video-makers is both the sharpness of the axe that he swings at issues of race, sexuality, gender, class, and performance art itself, and the purely announced, unabashed humor with which he does it. The former has earned the 31-year-old Florida native multiple fellowships and awards from the art establishment, including a Guggenheim fellowship for the 2007-2008 year, and, the latter, since has caused the entertainment industry to come calling.

Lissy's performance at Prospect.1 New Orleans coincided with the debut of a new video, Key To Our Heart. The piece is a black-and-white series of three vignettes shot in the style of an old Hollywood movie, in which Lissy stars as a baron, middle-aged woman who offers a trio of young people—two female and one male, with their voices all over-dubbed by Lissy—her skewed perspective on life and love. His work also appeared as part of the Rubell Family Collection's "36 Americans" exhibit at Art Basel Miami Beach in December. Singer-songwriter and music critic Marshall recently called Lissy "an amazing Gracian," as he was working in his Brooklyn studio.

CHAN MARSHALL: I was so sorry to hear about your uncle.

KALU LINZY: My uncle?

CHAN MARSHALL: Didn't your uncle pass?

KALU LINZY: Oh, no. My dad died. My uncle is still alive. But he is like a second father to me. He is the one you met.

CHAN MARSHALL: That's why I was thinking it was your dad... I am sorry. But your uncle and your Auntie Di Di raised you, right?

KALU LINZY: Yeah, and my dad lived, like, a couple of towns over, so I would see him on the weekends.

CHAN MARSHALL: The reason I brought that up is that I am thinking about your family, and how exciting it must have been for them to visit you when you were down in Miami for Art Basel. How did that turn out?

KALU LINZY: I think they got a little bit more relaxed about the whole thing. They could see that I was making an honest living.

CHAN MARSHALL: That you're a certified artist.

KALU LINZY: Yeah, and so it opened up their minds in terms of—I don't know what it is. Actually, when I was in New Orleans for the exhibit down there [Prospect.1], my uncle called me out of the blue, just on a Sunday, and he said, "I just called to tell you that we love you and you know your purpose in life." I was so touched.

CM: That's one of the good things that we all wait for—to have that acceptance from our families. Now what town were you born in?

KALU LINZY: I was born in Clermont, Florida, and raised in St. Petersburg, Florida.

CM: When you were growing up, was it that it made you say, "I want to do this."

KALU LINZY: I knew I wanted to perform from watching soap operas and stuff like that. But in terms of being in the art world? I didn't know what the art world was. So, early on, it was just the idea of, "Oh, I'm gonna go out and go to Hollywood."

CM: Where did the comedy come in?

KALU LINZY: I think that I was always interested in both comedy and drama. I was very into Def Comedy Jam and stuff like that when I was in high school, and so, if you take something like All My Children, it's a combination of the two—it follows the structure of a sitcom and a soap opera at the same time. But it all grew out of those aspirations of being a performer and in an actor and filmmaker. I had all these dreams. CM: When we sang "Amazing Grace" together in New York all those years ago, I was blown away by your voice. Your uncle is a pastor, right?

KALU LINZY: Yeah, yeah.

CM: Did you sing in the choir in church?

KALU LINZY: Yeah, I did. I was in the Baptist church. And I eventually came back to the Baptist church, and that's where I started singing in the choir.

CM: What happened with the live performance that you did for Prospect.1 in New Orleans?

KALU LINZY: I did a performance with a live band from New Orleans. It was all put together through Art Production Fund. They asked if I could produce a performance for the biennial, so they put together a band, and then I went down for a week or so to work with them.

CM: Was the crowd you were performing for in New Orleans predominantly an art crowd? Or did the neighborhood people come to watch?

KALU LINZY: It was more art-world people but some neighborhood people did filter in. It was an interesting thing because this band was made up of these neighborhood residents, hometown people who all know each other. I was a little intimidated at first about what they would think of me—you know, doing this genre-specific character. But they were really open. Having that experience made me rethink my live performances.

CM: The video that you had at NGMA [New Orleans Museum of Art] during the biennial—did All My Children, or was it something totally different?

KALU LINZY: It was another one called Key To Our Heart, I recorded all of the voices and then people lip-synced to the characters.

CM: So it wasn't you running around, holding a court as every character, like you do in a lot of your videos. How many characters do you play in All My Children? Nine?

KALU LINZY: I play the grandmother, the mother, the four children... Six, I play six.

CM: Are those characters in your videos at all based on relatives or friends or people you know from St. Petersburg?

KALU LINZY: Well, not necessarily. A lot of them are based on archetypes or stereotypes in the culture. But some aspects of them are taken from people I know. When my friends watch the videos, they point out traits that someone in the family or in the neighborhood might have. When I change the pitch of my voice, I sounds like some of my cousins. And then I also look like one of my uncles—or all of my aunts—and my mother. So my friends see that. They decompress everything. CM: If someone said to you, "Here's a big budget, Write something for me and cast it", who are some of the people that you'd like to work with?

KALU LINZY: Well, I've always been fans of Meryl Streep, so I would love to work with her. I also like this actress Lynn Whitfield. So I would say Meryl Streep, Lynn Whitfield... Gosh, that's a good question. I would also want to work with Kim Wayans... Ashton Kutcher? There are tons of great people, but I'm trying to imagine them in the context of my work, which is a little difficult. But you never know. Sometimes people are good-enough actors that they can transform themselves into something kind of kooky. CM: Do you think you'd ever recast All My Children as a feature film?

KALU LINZY: I don't know. I'll remeke it. That could come down the road. One collector I met was saying that she could see some of the pieces working in the theater. But I do like the idea of looking at them as scripts, because some of them are sort of like a series where you could do a stage play by putting them in order and reworking them.

CM: What about making that into an actual soap opera that comes on during the day?

KALU LINZY: It's true that you put on a new soap opera during the day, though. But I definitely want to do a TV series at some point.

CM: What's your favorite soap opera?

KALU LINZY: Guiding Light. I also love Daytime and the Restless and The Bold and the Beautiful. I would love to appear on one of those shows.
It's such a thrilling process that continues giving, making children.
AG: But this kind of spiritual.
LS: Well, I don't know what it is, but it has something that keeps me alive.
AG: So where do you see the future going from these novels?
LS: From those ingrained, incredible, to something else. I achieve something that I think is fantastic and then I wait for the gallery to make their visit and say, "Ooh, that's fantastic. Let's show it." And then they show it, and they have the catalog, and people come to see it, and it's either lauded or not lauded. And then you go on to something else.

more LINZY
CM: So when you go home to Stuckey now, do you find that there's a little bit of talk around town about all of the stuff you're doing?
KL: I can't really tell. I was performing in Stuckey before I left, so I was always sort of active in the community. I do have contacts who say, "When are you gonna have a movie at the mall?" And if something like that happened, then things would probably change drastically.
CM: So, since everybody back home will be reading this, is it okay if I mention the song "Asshole"?
KL: Oh, yeah. That's fine.
CM: You wrote that based on a true story about someone you had a relationship with, right?
KL: People always ask me that, but it was based on a poem that I wrote in college, and I can say that after some years, I had a few experiences where I was able to really—
CM: Feel it.
KL: Yeah. I was flipping through the notebook, and at the time I remember just writing it, and then later on when I performed it, the emotion and the comedy were there because some things had happened... You know, I'd had some adult situations. [laugh]
CM: I'd love to see "Asshole" go Top 40.
KL: Somebody mentioned that in New Orleans—that I should record it. You think they'd let that go on the radio?
CM: I mean, come on—it's a hit.
KL: Well, I guess we'd have to deal with the censorship, but we could be exposed to that.
CM: So you're still single?
KL: I'm still single. But, you know, I was hoping for a situation to develop.
CM: That shit is hard—that love thing.
KL: Relationships... Everything is good, though.
CM: There is that time in your life where being a singular person seems romantic, but being with someone can be pretty beautiful. It's so scary because we're in that time in our lives where we're not at the club, you know? We're not at the bar.
KL: We're grown-up.
CM: You're right. At one point I just stopped going out so much, and I don't plan on going out too much in the future. You just grow up.
CM: Yes, you do. Oh, wait... Hold on... My underwear is on my head.

more BOWLES
things I have great problems discussing anything of mine. [laugh] Not necessarily a good thing. I went to the theater and to the ballet all of the time with my parents, and I loved costume. So I went to the court at the Palais-Royal and the Albert Museum. Dr. Ann Saunders, then the secretary of the Costume Society of Great Britain, could see that I was interested in these things, and she told me about the costumes of the ages coloring books. So I became more and more interested and started collecting much more seriously.

Then we moved to the country, but I would come back to London every other weekend and I'd go to Portobello Road and to the junk stores and their stores. I was really collecting costumes. So it was much more 18th- and 19th-century up to the 20s, really. It was the theme of all those great noirish movies like The Great Gatsby [1974] and The Boy Friend [1971] and Murder on the Orient Express [1974]. So those were the sort of aesthetic keystones. So then on the part of my teams, the demenores of collectors creeps in, the triumphs that one has in life. That auction was in 1976. And about six years ago I was in a vintage store in Los Angeles, and there was that same jacket.
NB: Unbelievable.
DH: Without a label! But I absolutely remembered it from 1976. I bought it. Actually, since then, I found this marvelous Louise Dahl-Wolfe color photograph of it from 1944. So everything comes to you eventually. You just have to wait.
CM: So from that auction in 1976 you started to go crazy.
CB: Completely. That was a time when you could really go to stores and junk stores and you would find things that no one wanted. Certainly no one wanted London couture from the 30s and 40s—any know, Norman Hartnell and Hardy Amies, who made dresses for the queens. Those clothes really conjure up the kind of life—style where the London designers were making town-and-country tweed suits that you could wear for lunch at the Ritz and to Goodwood races, and then they made ball gowns, and there was very little in between. That was an English woman's wardrobe then. I have lots of those town-and-country suits from single London couturier who was ever in the equivalent of an American Council of Fashion Designers of America. Then it just grew and grew. I'd buy things when I could afford them. Christie's South Kensington had costume and textile sales every Tuesday afternoon at two o'clock, which was the exact time I was supposed to be having my French lesson. So my French really suffered. I always had a terrible headache, but somehow I managed to find myself on the opposite side of town, turning dresses inside out.
NB: So this is really a lifelong passion.
DH: A lifelong passion. Yes. How old am I now