

Dia Art Foundation
Readings in Contemporary Poetry
Sharon Mesmer and Wayne Koestenbaum

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Dia:Chelsea
535 West 22nd Street, 5th Floor
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Introduction by Vincent Katz

Sharon Mesmer is the author of *Crossing Second Avenue* (ABJ Press, 1997), *Half Angel, Half Lunch* (Hard Press, 1998), *Vertigo Seeks Affinities* (Belladonna, 2006), *Annoying Diabetic Bitch* (Combo Books, 2007), *The Virgin Formica* (Hanging Loose, 2008), and *Greetings from My Girlie Leisure Place* (Bloof Books, 2015), voted “Best of 2015” by Entropy. Her work has been anthologized numerous times, including in *The Outlaw Bible of American Poetry* and *Postmodern American Poetry: A Norton Anthology*. Mesmer is currently at work on a new collection of poems, *Even Living Makes Me Die*, inspired by the lives and writings of thirty-five female poets of the Americas, from the nineteenth century to modern times. She teaches at New York University and the New School and lives in New York City.

I’ve been a fan of Sharon Mesmer’s louche rants and murmurs since her Chicago days, and some of her poems and prose pieces from her 1998 collection *Half Angel, Half Lunch* – its title a phrase from Ted Berrigan – have stayed with me ever since. Her poems can seem supercilious, but in fact her imagery is mostly surrealist, with a beating human heart she keeps intact. Shifting slightly from the paradigm she establishes, Mesmer leaves the reader or listener to wallow in brightly-lit insouciance with a pang of nostalgia:

Ample purple shadows between me and you,
this heart a calm palmetto grandly glamorous and tragic.
(from “The End”)

She’s written a number of poems that needed to be written by someone, and she was the one who realized it, and we are grateful, such as the one that begins, “It came to me / suddenly – / Three Dog Night / were really great!” (from “Just This”) For Mesmer is one of our signal cultural salvagers. Rarely a savager, only when necessary, a severer of false or outmoded memory, to which she is particularly unforgiving.

Her most recent poems have moved farther away from popular culture and personal history into a grander realm; the tones in these works plumb the sublime. Here’s the end of “When the Moon Turned Away”:

Come on look up because I am still the moon
and beautiful
in the rearview mirror,
like a woman
not salt-bound, not sad,
not a ghost caught crying.
At least not that.

Please welcome Sharon Mesmer to Dia.

Wayne Koestenbaum is the author of the following books of poetry: *Ode to Anna Moffo and Other Poems* (Persea, 1990), *Rhapsodies of A Repeat Offender* (Persea, 1994), *The Milk of Inquiry* (Persea, 1999), *Model Homes* (BOA Editions, 2004), *Best-Selling Jewish Porn Films* (Turtle Point Press, 2006), *Blue Stranger With Mosaic Background* (Turtle Point, 2012), and *The Pink Trance Notebooks* (Nightboat Books, 2015). In addition, he is the author of numerous works of cultural criticism, including *The Queen's Throat: Opera, Homosexuality, and the Mystery of Desire* (Poseidon, 1993), a National Book Critics Circle Award finalist, *Jackie Under My Skin: Interpreting an Icon* (Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1995), *Cleavage: Essays on Sex, Stars, and Aesthetics* (Ballantine Books, 2000), *Andy Warhol* (Lipper/Viking, 2001), *Humiliation* (Picador, 2011), *The Anatomy of Harpo Marx* (U. of California, 2012), *My 1980s & Other Essays* (Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2013), and *Notes on Glaze* (2016). He is also the author of two works of fiction and an opera libretto. His first piano/vocal record, *Lounge Act*, was released by Ugly Duckling Presse in 2017. Koestenbaum is a Distinguished Professor of English, Comparative Literature, and French at the City University of New York's Graduate Center.

Wayne Koestenbaum's poetry has evolved from his early, athletically formal, highly wrought, stanzas to his most recent, almost disintegrating, daily fragments. In between, in his characteristically energetic way, he has tackled many modes, in series, of insight, and delight. It is in fact important to consider Wayne's entire output – as writer, musician, and painter – when thinking about his poetry, in that it all evidences an intense ambition, a desire one wants to say, that only these particular forms can give voice to.

His poem "Diva Atonement Tour," from his 2006 collection *Best-Selling Jewish Porn Films*, gives a sense of his habitual approach, or should I say, response, or both? Wayne, the poet, often pictures himself as Wayne the performer, and vice versa, I would imagine. His name is up in lights. He takes the stage. The poem writes itself:

I'm having a devilish time
controlling my body's

two gods:
theatrical, tutelary.

Wayne is on stage and also under observation in these poems that not only reference opera and other forms of hysterical virtuosity but actually embody them. This is no small feat. I mean that Wayne, through his devotion to obsession, his elevation of perversion, has done what few others have even thought of attempting – he has made classical music hip again.

Of course, there's much more – “Two Little Elegies for Joe Brainard” for example. But even that poem contains the lines, “At the great soprano's husband's funeral / the synagogue smells of talc and hair oil.” It's as though Wayne can't control himself, and we are the beneficiaries. With great, what's the word? compulsive? tormented? pathological? attention to form and detail, Wayne simultaneously abandons himself to his darkest, most wayward whims. He's got his Apollonian and Dionysian in perfect synch. Let's see where he notches it up to tonight. Please join me in welcoming Wayne Koestenbaum to Dia.