

Dia Art Foundation

David Shapiro and Angelo Micah Olin

Readings in Contemporary Poetry

Tuesday, November 11, 2014, 6:30 pm

Introduction by Vincent Katz

A native of Houston and a resident of New York, **Angelo Micah Olin** studied at Oxford and Cambridge before receiving his BA and MFA degrees from Naropa University. He published several books under the name Jeni Olin, including *A Valentine to Frank O'Hara* (Erudite Fangs/Smokeproof Press, 1999), *Blue Collar Holiday* (Hanging Loose Press, 2005), *The Pill Book* (Faux Press, 2008), and *Hold Tight: the Truck Darling Poems* (Hanging Loose Press, 2010). His first book to be published under the name Angelo Micah Olin, *The Hunger Notebook*, is forthcoming from Tender Buttons Press in 2015.

This feels like a homecoming. There should be a parade. Maybe there will be, later. Angelo is the hero of a world, a much larger world than you might imagine. One day, I predict, he will be recognized as one of our central poets. In the meantime, there is Fun to be had.

The Fun started, for readers, in 1999, with the publication of *A Valentine to Frank O'Hara*. A perfect valentine to (and simultaneous re-affirmation of) O'Hara's esthetic, the *attitude* evinced in the appropriation of and approximation to, not only O'Hara, but Ashbery, Rivers, and Ginsberg, made it clear this poet was taking a stance, backed up by the poetic chops to see it through. Somehow, Olin is able to use O'Hara's language and phrases and still have it feel freshly invented:

"Late noon light through the cartilage of some wife's ears at 4 P.M. in New York the day before Princess Diana died — why it was September then" (from "Beginning with a Line from Ashbery") Somehow, too, Olin is able to effect heartbreak within a texture of carefully studied insouciance. It's in the pacing, if the wicked imagery doesn't throw a monkey wrench into the tone. Hey, wait a minute! The monkey wrench *is* the tone.

As we move into Olin's Truck Darling period, the poems become denser, harsher, while still maintaining their stylistic energy, as though the poet is a martial artist, marshalling his savoir-faire and compendious knowledge to simultaneously defend against and attack pernicious normality, wherever it may lurk:

"Nothing's more infuriating than mental luxury without a system. I sound like a.m. radio. Still, I'd rather be lush, melancholy, & tart than boring & pedantic." (from "The Kindle 2 was a Gift!")

Angelo is still in his punk phase, in which language gets twisted, to reflect, I guess, the twistedness we all endure on a daily basis, living in the city, or worse, the suburbs, from which many of us have fled, and at which still others have been horrified. It may be that Angelo will one day return to his Larry-hearted poetry, not that the poetry will be *about* Larry, although it could, but rather that an open-heartedness return. I feel that about Angelo, and I sense its return in his poetry. Whatever it is to come, tonight we are here. Sound the trumpets, beat the drum. Welcome Angelo Micah Olin to Dia.

David Shapiro is a poet, critic, and art historian. He has published numerous books of poetry and criticism, including *A Man Holding an Acoustic Panel* (1971), *Lateness* (1977), *John Ashbery: An Introduction to the Poetry* (1979), *House (Blown Apart)* (1988), *After a Lost Original* (1994), *A Burning Interior* (2002), and *New and Selected Poems* (2007).

I once heard David Shapiro commiserating with another poet, saying, "So and so is like Picasso or Braque. We're like Gleizes." There may be some truth to this comment, in the sense that Shapiro's poetry, like Albert Gleizes' painting, is of a high technical finish, and both occupy a position that is best appreciated by true aficionados of their respective art forms. Also, both were important as critics, a fascinating, intertwined, but ultimately separate endeavor.

Shapiro's poetry, it seems to me, divides into two main categories — poems in deceptively simple sentences and psalm-like poems of incantation. His achievement is to wear his learning lightly. His knowledge of the vast terrain of English literature, not to mention French, etc., does not intrude on his ability to write simply and clearly, as in these lines from a poem published in 1972:

" . . . and now the whole water
is silver; A crucial step is taken, but years
later,
The fountain is slowed down, as if controlled
by your calm hands." (from "About This Course")

It is quite remarkable how this student, in a figurative if not a literal sense, of his predecessors Koch, Ashbery, O'Hara, and Schuyler in The New York School, does not sound like any of them. If anything, Shapiro's poetry has similar pacing and use of language to that of his contemporaries, Tony Towle, and Frank Lima. In all three cases, sentences wind their ways through poems, with surprising, sometimes shocking, turns along the way. In Shapiro's case, there is often a childlike delicacy that gives his work a faux-Surrealist air, which can take on a biblical tone, as in this passage:

"You open your hand to show the five sheep sleeping
safely under the tree, which ladies wear around their
necks." (from "The Devil's Trill Sonata")

Madness enters into Shapiro's poetry, sexual desire, and humor, but these elements do not disrupt the even, intellectual, tone. The reader never feels that the poet is out of control, and this can be a comforting experience, amid all the world can throw at one. Shapiro's poetry, unlike much contemporary practice, refuses to mirror the world, as much as it is of its fabric. Rather, his poetry provides a soothing balm, an effective tincture to temper life's challenges. But above all, it is his clear voice and music that entices us, and that is what we have the privilege of sharing tonight. Please help me welcome David Shapiro to Dia.