

Dia Art Foundation

Todd Colby and Bobby Byrd

Readings in Contemporary Poetry

Tuesday, September 15, 2015, 6:30 pm

Introduction by Vincent Katz

Todd Colby has published six books of poetry: *Ripsnort* (1994), *Cush* (1998), *Riot in the Charm Factory: New and Selected Writings* (2003), and *Tremble & Shine* (2004) were all published by Soft Skull Press; *Flushing Meadows* was published by Scary Topiary Press in 2013; and Colby's latest book, *Splash State*, was published by the Song Cave in 2014. He lives in Brooklyn, New York.

A Todd Colby poem arrives with a rumble. It bursts into your listening or reading space. It is not orderly, but rather rambunctious, occasionally bellicose, sometimes political, but mostly burrowing in to the level of language and communication that seems to arrive spontaneously, gearing his image of a day to the altered senses he engenders in his listeners and readers. Todd is an energetic presence, an individualist, who is also a team player. The dictionary says of the word "rambunctious" that it is of unknown origin. How rare and cool is that? Maybe we could say Todd Colby as a poet is of unknown origin, for though we can observe his familiarity with, for example, New York School poetry, and we feel rushes of Ashbery and O'Hara and even Schuyler in there, still, Todd is too committed to being Todd to let the literal intrude on his desire. Most of all, his poems are love poems. I am curious to find out to whom they are addressed, but he by and large keeps that a secret, which has the effect of making his poems love poems to life. He likes mornings, and he is aware of the effects of time:

I could have you, need you, break with you.
I could spend hours with you; eating pieces
of you and making the world change
with you...

(from "Morning Poem")

While in "Wings" he writes:

There are mornings, and then there are
golden glimpses of something totally
amazing like awe or coffee.

Todd Colby, for all the zany cunning his poems effect, is at heart a sane poet in an insane world; he is dedicated to that. Please join me in welcoming Todd Colby to Dia.

Bobby Byrd grew up in Memphis during the golden age of the city's music scene. "Black music, the great DJ Dewey Phillips and WDIA radio," he says, "probably saved my life." Byrd and his wife, Lee, meandered through the Southwest until they moved to El Paso with their three kids in 1978. In 1985, they founded Cinco Puntos Press, which published his most recent collection, *Otherwise, My Life Is Ordinary*, in 2014. Byrd has received a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship for Poetry, the D. H. Lawrence Fellowship, a National Endowment for the Arts International Fellowship to live in Mexico, and, with his wife, a Lannan Fellowship for Cultural Freedom.

Bobby Byrd's poetry has taken a rambling path, but don't let the literal bio, important as it is, fool you into thinking you know Bobby Byrd. He's got a sly glint in his eye that should alert you he sees things above and beyond, not unlike a poet who was once his favorite, then fell into his disfavor, only to win it back again. Like Philip Whalen, who was a Zen monk, Byrd is a Zen priest, and his seemingly casual observations have the chilling ability to cut to the bone. He has a couple of poems about killing flies, including "Houseflies," about a fly that spent the night in the refrigerator, which ends:

I grabbed it between my thumb and forefinger.
It was cold to the touch and I felt its thorax crack.

Byrd is no less unflinching in poems on the deaths of friends, and especially, his mother. In those poems, his depth of connection and pain are deftly communicated, largely by refusing to kowtow to sentimentality. One age-old technique for living with tragedy is humor, and Byrd is adept at this gambit, often spiraling it within a sensual, and sometimes sexual, embrace.

Setting is important in Byrd's poems. In a rare Byrd poem set in New York City, he writes about taking the #66 crosstown bus. Like many New Yorkers, he feels the park, and his emotions connect to someone met by chance, who becomes his "muse":

Tonight I'm glad

For confusion and contradiction
Especially now
I am old enough to know

...

I'll see you tomorrow if I can find you
I've learned during all these years
That the bus must turn around and go the other way

Tonight, we have the privilege of listening to and learning from one of poetry's true adepts. Please join me in welcoming Bobby Byrd to Dia.