

AFROFUTURISM RUTH MORDECAI IBRAHIM ALI-SALAAM BREAD AND PUPPET

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60 Years of Bread and Puppet at the Karma Bird House Gallery

COMMUNITY

BY KELLY HOLT

The exhibition “60 Years of Bread and Puppet” is a rare look into the myriad layers of artmaking, in a unique setting, that personifies artistic inspiration and the joy of collaboration. Six months in the making, the exhibition opened in early September and is on view through December 1, 2023. It is the brainchild of four curators—the curation itself echoes a symphony. The exhibition was made possible with a project grant from the Vermont Arts Council and Shelter Cultivation Project.

Karma Bird House at 47 Maple Street is on the waterfront of Lake Champlain in Burlington, Vermont. Purchased twenty-five years ago by Michael and Giovanna Jager, this 1916 restored brick warehouse is a beacon of creative energy in the community. The building reflects the creative embodiment of home.

Rule 1 - Find a place you trust and then try trusting it for a while. — Corita Kent

Karma Bird House is a collection of creative space-making—offices and studios for people, organizations, start-ups, and more. Within the building is the Karma Bird House Gallery and Kestrel Coffee Roasters as well as Iskra Print Collective (whose teaching style is influenced by the “Ten Rules” of Corita Kent). The Jagers have their own individual businesses, and two of their three children now work there as well. Over the years, countless renovations have been made—Giovanna continuously re-creating spaces to accommodate the needs of new companies and individuals. The comings and goings of renters make the atmosphere fluid.

Opposite, clockwise from top left: Tanja Hoene and Alexis Smith performing *The Foot*. Shawn Dumont and Madge Baker on the sidewalk in front of Karma Bird House. A silkscreen workshop with Bread and Puppet and Iskra Print Collective. The opening event at the Bread and Puppet print shop store. Photos: Eli Atticus Jager.

“It’s always moving and changing,” she explains, “the building is like a sculpture. It’s kinetic.” Michael shared that the vision of the space is to create conditions where creativity happens. “It is our own universe imagined—a beautifully singular version. It’s a constellation: a vessel, diverse, creative.”

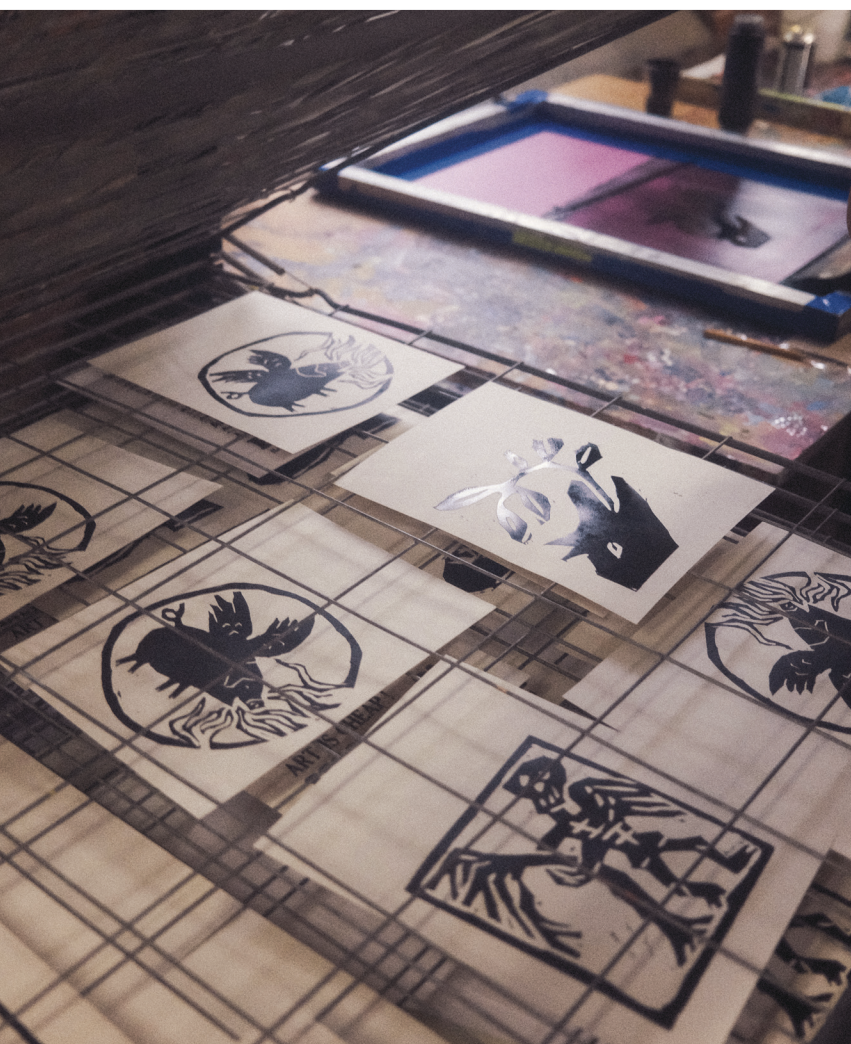
The Jagers shared their fond memories of bringing their children to Bread and Puppet growing up, describing it as a formative experience for their son Eli. “There is nothing more real than the taste of the bread and the chanting,” Giovanna noted that the recent opening reception event and performance was “a bridge of reconnection of generations...it’s a careful curation: making, sharing, bringing the work here and the placement of it all.” Their manifestos are powerful beliefs—new generations are connecting. Her favorite element of the exhibition is the papier mâché masks looking through the windows onto the street.

Michael pointed out that “The timing of the exhibition is perfect, regenerative in these challenging times. It’s honest, simple, real. Flying in the face of technology and AI. Bread and Puppet is immersed in that [analog] world and goes non-stop.”

Karma Bird House Gallery has never been a commercial gallery. It began as a way to inspire the community. Curator Jasmine Parsia works with Michael and Giovanna in the planning and vision of exhibitions. The gallery’s first show was

with photographer Spencer Tunick. There was a performance where people were nude lying on the train tracks behind the building. Two exhibitions per year are dedicated to Iskra Print Collective’s end of workshop exhibitions. This year the *ECHO: A Survey at 25 Years of Sounds, Art and Ink on Paper* exhibition and book release showed a portion of their collection of 400 posters for Higher Ground, along with a book release. There are plans in 2024–2025 to show the entire collection. Karma Bird House has welcomed renowned designer Cody Hudson for a residency at Iskra Print Collective. Iskra’s goal is do residencies and to invite artists twice a year. Plans for the Gallery include doing more with film.

Bread and Puppet is one of the oldest non-profit theater companies in the U.S. The work is political, the imagery and symbols, iconic and unequaled. Bread and Puppet was founded in 1962 in New York City’s lower east side by Peter and Elka Schumann. In 1974 the theater company moved to the Northeast Kingdom in Glover, Vermont. It’s known for summertime performances and outdoor circus and puppetry festivals amidst the state’s rolling green hills, as well as its traveling performances, nationally and internationally. There is a museum and a papier mâché cathedral on the property and much more. Living close to the land, members and volunteers bake bread and cook aioli, wash the white uniforms of performers, hang them to dry, and tend the lush gardens. Bread and





Puppet does not accept any monies from the government or corporations. Instead, it is funded through the sale of work from its print shop, woodcuts, calendars, posters, and books as well as touring performances. It has an extensive network of volunteers to help or perform.

The layout of the current exhibition mixes two- and three-dimensional art through the gallery as if a river was flowing through it. Curators followed a diagram and let the work speak to them. “This is an appetizer into knowing who [Bread and Puppet] are—materiality and being in person. The sun is my favorite symbol, a true maker’s mark. Barns, hands and faces are also powerful symbols,” shares Parsia. Schumann’s paintings on sheets divide the space in the center of the gallery allowing viewers the freedom to move among them and to take in the bold gestures. A horse’s head, a pair of goats, and puppet heads look out the windows from the sill. Work referencing Bread and Puppet founder Peter Schumann’s late wife Elka appears prominently in the exhibition. “Where does Peter end and Bread and Puppet begin?” asks co-curator Janie Cohen. There is a beautiful flow of Schumann’s symbols throughout the tapestry of objects, hands, chairs, suns, feet, horses and more.

The exhibition’s opening reception included a cantastoria including the curators and members of the community, a fiddle rant by Peter Schumann, bread and aioli, and a collaborative workshop at Iskra Print Collective featuring collages of Bread and Puppet images. The most striking aspect about the event was the coming together of generations in celebration of this vast history of artmaking and performance.

The curation of “60 Years of Bread and Puppet” brings together many levels of specialties. Cohen is an esteemed Picasso scholar (featured in a Studio Visit in *Art New England’s* January/February 2023 issue) and former executive director of UVM’s Fleming Museum. Cohen incorporated a piece partially eaten by mice of a 1981 “Burning House” from Bread and Puppet in her textile collage titled *Quell*. Cohen began going to Bread and Puppet in the 90s and attended the last annual domestic circus in 1998. She remembers “seeing mile high puppets appearing over the hill in the wind...” She curated *Masked Spectacle: Commedia Dell’Arte and Bread and Puppet Theater* for the Fleming Museum in 2011 and describes Bread and Puppet as a “body representing their times.” Of the opening event performance’s fiddle rant, “Peter [Schumann] understood the power of simplicity

in performance, conveyed so simply in gestures and words.” Cohen speaks of the beloved Elka Schumann, lost to the Bread and Puppet family in 2021, as keeper of the consistency of the work. One of Cohen’s favorite pieces in the show is *Mouth* by Peter and Elka’s son Max Schumann’s (executive director of Printed Matter, a non-profit organization dedicated to artists’ books and related publications). This was the beginning of cheap art – a movement creating affordable art as a response against the business of art and appropriation by the corporate sector.

Shawn Dumont’s eyes light up whenever speaking about curating this Bread and Puppet exhibition. “This is the real thing—the Beat Poets meet the fiddle rant.” Dumont is founder of the Shelter Cultivation Project, also housed in the Karma Bird House. “When I invite artists to do a Shelter residency, Bread and Puppet is the first stop. It’s important to dive into the process of making and lose the ego, to get behind the scenes, get dirty. [It can be] uncomfortable, it’s another world. It’s about breaking down the wall. Telling stories is a foundational piece of Vermont vernacular. Experience it before it’s gone; before it becomes myth. Bring it to our homes. My wish is to have social justice for the



community to thrive.” Dumont is so passionate about the oeuvre of work, he just wanted it all, his co-curators shared. His vision and expertise ignited the collaboration between Bread and Puppet’s print shop and Iskra as well as the performance. Dumont participated with other curators in the opening cantastoria, joined by his daughter, wife, mother and grandmother—a joyful integration of family and community. For Dumont, Bread and Puppet “symbolizes earnestness and living from the earth with respect for being an honest citizen.”

Parsia is a planner and the minimalist amongst the group. She knows the space and instinctively how to fill it. “I specialize in events, getting to know exhibiting artists, curating, hanging and opening events. The gallery keeps me in Vermont.” Parsia went to Bread and Puppet as a kid. It was part of her family’s summer checklist.

Of the process, Parsia describes, “The curation of this exhibit is a symbiotic relationship and support between the three of us. The overarching idea (time and material) to provide a window into Bread and Puppet. We visited two or three times and went through so many spaces and levels within buildings full of art.” She appreciates that the work is not too precious. The puppets are made for performances. In building the show she highlighted “There are two types of art—baking and puppetry.” One of Peter Schumann’s bread paddles is included on the walls.

Alexis Smith, curatrix of Bread and Puppet, is an integral spark in this collaboration between the Karma Bird House Gallery, Iskra Print Collective, and Bread and Puppet. One revels in the varied talents, energy and passion for the work of Bread and Puppet that Smith embodies. She studied theater and dance and is a performer, curator and activist, with particular interest in dancing with horses and healing. “I [also] chop wood, carry water—Bread and Puppet’s work ethic is in my blood.” *Art New England* took an amazing tour with Smith of five satellite exhibitions in Vermont as well as a day-long tour of Bread and Puppet in Glover, culminating in a wonderful studio visit and interview with Peter Schumann.

Smith has been an integral part of Bread and Puppet for thirty-five years. Her primary role as Garbageman Brigade brought her around the world performing. Smith also renovated the Community Center and Co-Op in Plainfield and showed Peter’s work there twenty-five years ago where it hangs in a group show today. Smith is currently in the Parking Lot Dance Co. doing local performances in Glover, Montpelier, and Chelsea. Her advice to anyone interested in participating in Bread and Puppet is “Write a letter.” It’s old fashioned, but the accepted method of asking to join Bread and Puppet as a puppeteer, volunteer or to become involved in any capacity. Smith has a great talent for organizing Schumann’s

Above, from left: Peter Schumann and Alexis Smith at Schumann’s studio. Sheet painting textures by Peter Schumann. Photos: Kelly Holt. Below: Schumann performing a Fiddler Rant during the opening at Bread and Puppet’s 60 Years at Bread and Puppet exhibition. Photo: Eli Atticus Jager. Opposite: Outdoor performance space at Karma Bird House. Photo: Eli Atticus Jager.

artwork between the studio, documentation, and exhibitions—both onsite and traveling. She exclaims, “What would be better than working with [Peter’s] art directly? I’ve recently become more involved in my job as curatrix for Peter’s work. It has become extremely demanding as his *Bad Bedsheet* painting has accelerated, especially since the pandemic.” During lockdown Schumann engaged in painting large, 10 x 20 feet bedsheets supplied from a motel. These works are gestural, using thin layers of paint and are grouped in themes. Schumann now paints two per day and is creating diptychs to add to the series.

The synergy of the Bread and Puppet installation in the Karma Bird House Gallery is palpable.

Both organizations are steeped in a rich history of modes of printmaking—for Bread and Puppet it’s woodcuts and for Iskra Print Collective, screen printing. They embrace the idea of “coming here [to Vermont] to make art, not to be famous... contributing to the community to thrive. Happy to live outside of the mainstream,” adds Dumont.

The collaboration of curators from Burlington and Bread and Puppet completes a story of social justice. Art always brings culture. We are lucky to have these ideals present in New England to visit and learn from.

Kelly Holt is an independent curator, multimedia artist and writer. Her art explores the urban landscape. She works and lives in Vermont.

breadandpuppet.org, @breadandpuppet