

Mad Gestures Worth Making



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There has always been a thin line between madness and creativity, like the fine line between love and death, destruction and rebirth. The act of creation can involve a leap from sanity; the act of love can verge on death; the process of decomposition can spawn new life. All these threads are found in an odd and fascinating exhibit that contains elements of tragedy, comedy, and artistic resilience from local artist Clifton Childree, called *Orchestrated Gestures*.



Overview of Orchestrated Gestures installation by Clifton Childree. Photos by Francesco Casale.

Anyone with an appreciation of history, storytelling, music, and the absurd will want to visit this mad-sad fun house while it stands for this month.

So step in.

A cacophony of sound assaults the ears when walking into Childree's exhibit at the Dorsch Gallery, making the initial entry a little disorienting. As it happens, that is an appropriate sensation. Closer listening confirms that the sounds are in fact three distinct musical pieces from three composers who worked in the late 19th Century (two of them in the early 20th Century as well), and they accompany three sculptural installations that reflect an aspect of those lives, an aspect that is related to madness.

When you isolate the first composition, you hear a ragtime tune by Scott Joplin. It seems to emanate from a cabinet that also looks like a vaudeville-era player piano, falling on its side. Inside the cabinet a scratchy, sepia-toned film plays, which includes searching hands that seem to be playing an invisible piano, a cartoonish penis, and once in a while a loud, fuzzy "pop" sound. What is going on here?

As we discover, the great ragtime pioneer's life ended in 1917 in an insane asylum, where he suffered from dementia caused by syphilis. The music remains, but the world vision is now askew -- huge black and white stripes on the wall behind the cabinet appear as oversize piano keys, a backdrop to his internal prison. And the popping sound is a constant reminder of the shock therapy to which Joplin was subjected. In the looping film, the animated penis ejaculates not semen but musical notes, a reference to the venereal disease. It is pure slapstick. Everything is off-kilter, including our senses.



Installation with music from
Scott Joplin.

That is just as Childree wants it.

Raised in southern Alabama in a family that loved vaudeville, horror movies, and all types of piano music, Childree in Miami has developed a unique style, first revealed to most of us with the faux old-time film called *The Flew*, which garnered him local and national attention and which took him six years to make. He later incorporated that style of silent-era film in his site-specific installation at Locust Projects in 2008, where he turned the whole place into a humorously creepy carnival-come-to-town.

Orchestrated Gestures builds on all of this, but with a more sophisticated and complex result.

As we move from the Joplin exhibit to one with Germanic trappings, Childree explains that he likes the idea that all of this might have a life of its own -- maybe there is an element of Scott Joplin that actually exists in that fake piano -- a found object that he painstakingly re-created. Joplin's music, after all, still remains, and it permeates the room. There may really be ghosts in the machine.

Childree clearly loves the history, the histrionics, and the simple process of creation that is so evident in this show. His enthusiasm is infectious.

The center installation also includes a leaning (tipping? falling?) cabinet reimagined as a highly ornate and baroque piece of furniture topped off with what appear to be the pipes of a pipe organ. In fact the organ music accompanying this sculpture can at times overwhelm the

entire room, and comes courtesy of Richard Wagner (1813-1883). Listen closely and one of his most famous compositions can be discerned, the orgasmic *Liebtestod* or "love death" finale to *Tristan and Isolde*. Love, in this case a love of art, does lead to death here, as it is a sculptural moment from the life of Ludwig II, king of Bavaria, a patron of Wagner and an aficionado of high culture.

As Wagner's music starts to crescendo, Childree recounts that Ludwig utterly lost interest in the politics of governing and warring, and put his efforts into surrounding himself with beauty, sometimes to excess. One of his over-the-top castles became the model for Walt Disney's Fantasyland.

"He had 15 guys carve his bed!" Childree exclaims. "His life became only about dance, theater, music, art. He was eccentric for sure, but was he insane?" That's what the Bavarian power elite eventually declared him, and "Mad King Ludwig" ended up committing suicide by jumping from a bridge.

Or did he?

"He was murdered," Childree says, for overindulgence maybe, but really for loving art more than battlefields. A cross that marks the place of Ludwig's 1886 death is replicated in the installation, piercing the baroque cabinet, within which another film plays. In this one, Childree himself portrays the not-so-crazy Ludwig with a childlike glee that ends in death.

On one level these tales and sets seem simple and cartoonish, but on another level, they are much deeper.

The last in this triptych has a Christmas theme, as the Russian composer Alexander Scriabin was born on December 25. The cabinet that holds his life's story is reddish, and wears a belt like Santa Claus. Inside, a worn-looking, hand-colored film follows red, yellow, green, and brown hats that dance by themselves in a room -- it's surreal, melancholy, yet kind of funny.

The background: Scriabin had been slaving for years over *Mysterium*, a grandiose, multimedia project he envisioned as his



Ludwig installation with music from Richard Wagner.

masterpiece, a production that would transform the world. The composer futilely struggled with the piece, which was never completed. As Childree likened it, Scriabin was juggling too many hats and trying to do too much for little gain. In an act of madness -- or of more deadly repetition -- the hypochondriac artist picked a scab from a shaving cut so mercilessly that it became infected, which eventually led to his death in 1915.

Childree can relate to these three characters' so-called acts of insanity, this total immersion in art at the expense of almost all else. Their deterioration is mirrored in the sets themselves. The Scriabin red cabinet, for example, is covered in grime, the film inside it at times hard to see because of advanced decomposition. The other two cabinets are breaking and tilting, their inner films also aging.

Childree has added era-appropriate artifacts to all three sets as well, revealing a time-consuming process and attention to detail that makes him stand out from a contemporary art crowd that sometimes seems lethargic. A piece of Childree -- along with Joplin, Ludwig, and Scriabin -- is encased in this exhibit, but not entombed. As the artist speculates:

"Who knows? The more the [physical] deteriorates, the more the essence of the lives might seep into it." And therefore out of it.

In re-creating and retelling stories in a smart and innovative way, there is rejuvenation and rebirth. What beautiful madness.

Orchestrated Gestures by Clifton Childree runs through January 29 at the Dorsch Gallery, 151 NW 24th St., Miami; dorschgallery.com.

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[Installation with music from Scriabin.](#)