



Mutual Muses: The Collaborative Life of James Seawright and Mimi Garrard

*Mutual Muses* is a two-person exhibition showcasing works by Mimi Garrard and James Seawright, who have been working together as well as individually since the 1960's. Their lives and practice have inspired each other throughout their careers. This exhibition is an interwoven love story featuring individual works by Garrard and Seawright as well as ones inspired by the other and those created collaboratively. Their life of interconnectivity as mutual muses is beautifully explored and presented in this survey exhibition.

Creighton Michael, a mutual friend and former colleague of Seawright's at Princeton University, introduced me to Mimi Garrard and James Seawright. Michael and I had begun a discussion about the movement of Seawright's early kinetic sculptures and their relationship to Garrard's video dances. This epiphany became the catalyst that would lead to an exhibition inspired by their lifelong partnership. As *Mutual Muses* emerged, I discovered a seamless timeline of separate, but closely intertwined, creative lives, initiated by Garrard's pursuits in dance and Seawright's combining of engineering and technology with the arts.

After my initial introduction, I began researching the careers of both Mimi Garrard and James Seawright. It became clear to me that the works to be presented in *Mutual Muses* would reveal a progression from Garrard's early choreography and dance, to how Seawright became inspired by her passion to combine his engineering skillset with an artistic vision of his own. Presented are the two paths of individual creation connected with elements of collaboration between the two artists throughout their many years working together. Selecting a variety of video dances to project onto and activate the walls of the gallery as well as displayed on monitors was a starting point for the curatorial process.

Through conversations with these artists, it became evident that the collaborative prints and virtual sculptures were developed from a combination of segments extracted from the video dances and documentation of the constellation sculptures. These video stills and the photo documentation were manipulated by the artists as a team and morphed into new collaborative works. This notion of collaboration became an extended practice for Garrard and Seawright as far back in their careers as 1966 when they collaborated on Mimi's *Seesaw* dance piece and 1969 when they co-designed, with Emmanuel Ghent, the interactive CORTLI lighting system for Mimi's live dance performances with the Mimi Garrard Dance Company. Several other successful collaborations with co-designed props, sound, music, and lighting followed. With Seawright's tech-savvy knowhow and Garrard's unique artistic vision for light and play through dance and choreography, they were able to produce an innovative performance lighting system. Certainly a precursor for what we all experience in live stage performances today.

As Mimi produced more as an artist, Seawright became more involved in the electronic arts movement happening around him as well. He honed his skills as an engineer and inventor to create kinetic sculptures with electrical components. His combination of technology with an art practice positioned him as one of the foremost technological artists, laying the foundation for many contemporary artists working with technology and other nontraditional electronic sensors and computerized gear.

Mimi Garrard studied and danced with Alwin Nikolais, an early modern/abstract dance innovator, at the Henry Street Playhouse in the 1960s and 70s before founding the Mimi Garrard Dance Company. She has created more than 90 works for the stage and more than 1,300 dances for video that have been shown internationally. Her videodances have been shown in festivals in the United States, Europe, South America, Africa and Asia. Her work, known for her interests in pure movement, theater, and progressive use of multi-media, was presented recently at Lincoln Center during the Dance on Camera Festival at the Walter Reade Theater and at the Library of the Performing Arts. Jim and Mimi received a lifetime achievement award from the Institute of Arts and Letters in Jackson, Mississippi.

James Seawright, born in 1936 in Jackson, Mississippi, was for many years Director of Visual Arts at Princeton University. Recognized as one of the foremost technological artists since the late 1960s, his works are in the permanent collections of the Museum of Modern Art, the Whitney Museum and the Guggenheim Museum of New York, the Rose Art Museum at Brandeis University, the New Jersey State Museum at Trenton and other museums throughout the world. Seawright became a pioneer of interactive sculptures, often combining mirrors and electronic components in his work. He still collaborates and creates new work with his wife Mimi Garrard.

The University Galleries is grateful for the support of the Art & Design faculty and staff. I extend thanks to Creighton Michael who introduced me to both Mimi Garrard and James Seawright and his continued enthusiasm throughout the curatorial process. I thank the artists for sharing their works and for being so accommodating. I would like to acknowledge the Art & Design Technician, Jeremy Gosser, and the gallery student worker team for their assistance with this exhibition. The efforts of Shelby Adams, Chase Barrow, Matt Hahnes, Mattie McArthur, Kyler Nix, DaKota Vincent, Eriko Whittaker, and Amber Zysek are recognized for their assistance with the installation, and continued success of this exhibition.

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Jim Seawright and Mimi Garrard have long been natural partners in every sense of the word, drawn together by lights, cameras, and actions, as well as obvious magnetism. Mississippi-born and -raised, theirs has been a merger of minds, talents, and complementary sensibilities—albeit, his more scientific, hers more physical and intuitive—but together, not unbridgeable. They practice their art in the realm of accessible technology, both analog and digital—where the magic can be comprehensible and engaging.

Jim began as a sculptor and a mechanical tinkerer, learning many of the tricks of his creative trade while in the Navy ROTC program, where he learned the basics of electronics. Mimi began as a dancer, studying in college with Lew Thomas and later in New York City with Alwin Nikolais.

When I visited their home and studio in upstate New York, Jim and Mimi quickly introduced me to a multitude of prints, drawings, and small sculptures filling their main-floor living space. Both have large studio spaces. Jim's is a well-equipped workshop suited for electronic and mechanical experimentation. Mimi's is 60 feet deep by 40 feet wide, with arrangements for hanging lighting instruments and projectors, and with a chroma key Marley floor. She uses the studio to create video and live dance for the stage.

Beginning my tour, my attention was immediately drawn to an abstract image that appeared to be a hand-rendered print. It was actually a computerized printout, documenting an iteration of a proliferating pattern that began simply with one dot. That pattern resembled a Navajo rug with bands of red, white, and black. Mimi showed me the original video as it evolved from the single dot, assembling (actively) and multiplying, then swelling in volume. Mimi subsequently (and generously) named the piece as printed out *A Dot for Barbara* in honor of my visit with artist and curator Creighton Michael. Incredibly, the work as it emerges in video, continually evolves, appearing to be a self-creating entity, like a life story in abstraction, moving from organic forms to modernist and cubistic shapes as well as to natural ones such as shells and sea urchins. Such transformations could stand as an apt metaphor for the couple's collaborative career.

Jim reminisces about his life and career and pulls it together in a succinct narrative, running from his early life in Greenwood, Mississippi, where he tinkered with electronics and was influenced by a music teacher and a friend's grandfather who taught him to use machine tools. He had many interests while in college at the University of Mississippi, from literature to science to music. After three years in the Navy and now married to Mimi Garrard, he moved to New York. In 1968 he was invited to teach "visual perception" at the School of Visual Arts in New York (but as he remembers, "the students "weren't interested; they just wanted to shoot photographs"). He was then invited to teach at Princeton and went on to become director of Visual Arts. All the while, he was also busy making kinetic sculptures and large-scale public-art projects, working with light and mirrors and collaborating with Mimi on her dance works.

Jim remembers how, at the beginning of his career, he was living in SoHo and made one of his sculptures *Tower*. He bought the components on Canal Street; these included a circuit board with over 1,000 neon glow lamps, which he reconfigured as a three-dimensional lattice. To his

surprise, the lights, once set into motion, worked. “I was amazed,” he says. “Then, I did variations on that.” Once he got going, he couldn’t stop.

In 1966 he then boldly decided to go to MoMA and asked to see a curator, who suggested he bring his work around to galleries. His good fortune continued as he wound up at the legendary Stable Gallery. They looked at his work and then, “within a week,” he says, “called me back.” He showed them four electro-mechanical pieces, and the gallery gave him a show. The whole production could be viewed as a variety of electronic Arte Povera. John Canady of the *New York Times*, in reviewing the show said, “Mr. Seawright’s inventions are the most successful union I have yet seen between contemporary art and contemporary science: they are as beautiful as scientific instruments and appear to be almost as precisely constructed.”

For Mimi’s part, she was obsessed by the injustice of the racism that surrounded her in Greenwood, Mississippi. That experience gave her the courage of her own convictions so necessary to being an artist. She went to Sweetbriar College in Northern Virginia, where she studied with Lew Thomas, a former dancer with Mary Wigman. One summer she studied with Alwin Nikolais at Connecticut College, and that experience changed her life. She was able to combine mind, body, and spirit in a way not available to her in a purely academic environment. She came to New York City when she graduated from Sweetbriar in order to study physical therapy at Columbia University but soon decided to be a dancer instead of a physical therapist. She studied at the Martha Graham studio and then began taking classes with Alwin Nikolais and others at the Henry Street Playhouse. She later began dancing with Nikolais, and he went on to produce her concerts at the Henry Street Playhouse for 10 years.

Their collaboration began in 1966 when Mimi had an idea for a dance on a seesaw. Jim built a beautiful 16-foot seesaw with hydraulic dampers and created the music and costumes for the piece. When, in 1968, he was invited to create an experimental work for WGBH in Boston along with several other artists, he asked Mimi to collaborate on a dance work. Their section of the program “Medium is the Medium” was called “Capriccio for TV.” It was very successful and had many showings. This experience inspired Mimi to begin to create dance for video at a time when the capabilities of video equipment for home use began to approach those of broadcast TV. Another of their important collaborations was the creation of a computer-controlled lighting system, CORTLI that began in 1970.

Anna Kisselgoff reviewed Mimi’s 1970 work *Phosphones*, for which Emmanuel Ghent did the lighting and music, in *The New York Times* in a piece titled “Dance: A Step Beyond Mixed Media”: citing *Phosphones* as “an example of how superbly integrated dance, lighting, and electronic music can be... The play of light with changes of colors and cinematic dimming with fade-outs, was as refined as its creators claimed..... It would be impossible to separate one element from another, and this was undoubtedly a measure of the work’s success.

Mimi sums up their collective career this way: “In the early 1960s, the trend was to take away traditional ways of working. There were rules about what you could and could not do if you were to be innovative. We wanted to be free and have the ability to work in any way that interested us. I wanted to be able to explore time, shape, motion, energy, and dynamics. I was doing multi-media when other people were doing pure dance, and I was making pure dance when other people were doing multimedia. I was always working against the current. Jim and I were never political or part of a group. We loved the process of working--that was enough for us, and it still is.”

Jim and Mimi have had to wait a while for their moment of re-recognition, but it appears to have arrived with today’s reawakened fascination with late-career and mixed-media artists, and a focus on work from the ‘70s and ‘80s. On September 28, 2018 (September 28-April 14) the Whitney Museum is presenting a huge group show, titled “Programmed: Rules, Codes, and Choreographies in Art, 1965–2018,” curated by Dr. Christiane Paul, Director of the Shelia C. Johnson Design Center at Parsons School of Design and adjunct curator of Digital Art at the Whitney Museum. The exhibition includes Jim’s 1966 piece *Searcher*, an early sculpture, evoking a planetary landscape interacting with the viewers and the surrounding light. The exhibition, according to the Whitney’s website, “links two strands of artistic exploration: the first examines the program as instructions, rules, and algorithms with a focus on conceptual art practices,” while the second “engages with the use of instructions and algorithms to manipulate the TV program, its apparatus, and signals or image sequences.” Since 2001, the dances Mimi has been creating for video have been shown on television, in galleries, and museums. She won six first- place awards for her video dances from various film festivals world-wide.

The couple’s combined enterprise ascended to a new level with the creation of “The Virtual Sculptures,” which were created for video from the “Constellation Sculptures of James Seawright.” Eight virtual sculptures were created between April 1, 2014, and August 2, 2015, by manipulating images from the actual “Constellation Sculptures.” These sculptures exist only in video form, and are thus called virtual sculptures. After completing this project they began to make prints from the virtual sculptures-- prints that began with literal images from the virtual sculptures but which, over time, became so altered that they were no longer recognizable as being related to the virtual sculptures. The final transformation was to create both prints and videos starting with a single dot. This show features “The Constellation Sculptures,” “The Virtual Sculptures,” and the resulting prints as well as videodances by Mimi Garrard.

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