Celebration of Pearl Primus comes to UMass

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tlevakis@thereminder.com

AMHERST – In a celebration of Pearl Primus, a pioneer of Black dance, the University of Massachusetts (UMass) Fine Arts Center, in collaboration with the University Museum of Contemporary Art (UMCA), is hosting “From My Heart to You, Dance and the Unifying Force of Social Consciousness.”

The exhibit that opens on Feb. 3 will be a celebration of Primus’s life and work at the fine arts center and has the goal of exploring how dance can connect, tell stories, heal and raise social consciousness. Primus, a legend in contemporary dance and whose work drew on the African American experience, was also a choreographer, an anthropologist, and a teacher, including a stint at UMass.

One of Primus’s most known work is her dance along side a 1945 poem titled “Strange Fruit.” The poem, published by Abel Meeropol under the pen name of Lewis Allan, is a commentary on racism and lynching in early 20th century southern America. Primus uses the poem in her act where she shows through her dance, a woman reflecting on witnessing a lynching.

Co-curating this project together have been Aston McCullough, assistant professor in the Department of Music and Dance, and Loretta Yarlow, director and chief curator at the UMCA. McCullough, a dancer since he was 8 years old, has a master’s degree in dance education from New York University, which connects to Primus who also spent years of her education at the same school.

Since his start at UMass in 2019, McCullough has worked alongside students in helping them look deeply into works of art and inviting them to find ways that the work was alive for them in their own experience. With positive results in these scenarios, McCullough felt it was a great process and that this should be shared with other people.

"It just sort of happened that one good idea sort of gravitated towards another good idea and there was this sort of synergy and timing," McCullough said.

Yarlow, in her position at the UMCA since 2005, is looking forward to this exhibit as the community as a whole attempts to transition to normal life.
"We reopened to the public in September and have been really thrilled to be able to offer the museum as a space for contemplation and getting ourselves back into the real world," Yarlow said. "The art that we show is of the real world because it's a contemporary museum focusing on the art of our time. We are thrilled to be able to have this next exhibition that we co-curated with Aston."

Yarlow said the museum is one of teaching and civics making them community-oriented. She feels with the museum's collaboration with faculty, students and the public, that it serves as a wonderful way in bridging together these audiences and communities in one public space.

Back in the fall, the Fine Arts Center hosted a panel of collaborators, colleagues and friends of Pearl Primus for a panel and showing of a film on her career as a celebration to honor her legacy. This snowballed into now where more effort as been put in to celebrate her work, this time through a new exhibit.

While the exhibition is a celebration of Primus, it also includes work from the UMCA collection by Lucinda Childs and Barbara Morgan, well known contemporary dancers and artists, as well as additional works on loan by artist and also former UMass professor Richard Yarde, choreographer, dancer and artist Trisha Brown, and others. These pieces were selected in the curating process by McCullough and Yarlow.

“We are choosing art from the collection but showing their work in juxtaposition, so a new dialogue is created, a new interpretation of the work and the collection,” Yarlow said on the exhibit. “We see this as an exciting new iteration of dialogue with a collection because its several dialogues. The exhibition itself is a dialogue of art and dance, but its also a dialogue with Aston and new ways of looking at performance in stationary works of art.”

Yarlow added that with Aston’s interest in dance and healing through the arts, the exhibit seemed like a beautiful way to bring it all together in a time she said was needed for healing.

“It's really rich what we've been able to curate and bring together for this exhibition,” McCullough said. “We can use the arts and experiences with the arts to allow ourselves to be changed, and by ourselves changing, we in turn are changing the world. That's sort of what I'm interested in. That's a lot of what Pearl Primus philosophy, I think, is as well.”

While the exhibit opens its doors on Feb. 3, the opening reception that was planned is currently postponed. Yarlow said to stay tuned for any news on a possible rescheduling of the reception.

But on Feb. 4 and 5, there will be a live performance at the Bromery Center, the new name of the Fine Arts Center named after Randolph W. Bromery, the university's first Black chancellor. The performance was choreographed by McCullough and will be a contemporary piece that incorporates other pieces of art in creating a new dialogue.

McCullough will also be performing a solo improvisational piece himself on March 22 live from 5 to 6 p.m. within the exhibition space.

"That will be a response to the central idea of the exhibit piece which has been about the ways in which dance transforms the viewer caught in the moment,” McCullough said.

“There are so many new ways to look at the dialogue between art and dance,” Yarlow said on the exhibit. “Just to have Aston in the exhibition space performing will make an exciting new way of looking at this project.”

With so much work put in to honor and create dialogue on Primus’s work, McCullough reflected on what through her work has inspired him through his life and career with dance. McCullough mentioned “Strange Fruit” as a piece of work that has always stuck with him from her work due to its commentary and especially due to the times in which she was performing.

“I was struck by the courage that she had as a scholar, as a dance maker, as a professor, to tell stories that are hard to hear,” McCullough said. “Thinking about the time in which Pearl was telling these stories about American history, and telling these stories about racial injustice and pain, at a time when people were less willing to hear them then they are now. Even though we have a long way to go of course in any journey towards evolution, I think at the time she was doing this was very courageous and I think that was very exciting for me.”

“From My Heart to You, Dance and the Unifying Force of Social Consciousness” runs until May 1 of this year. For more information on the exhibit and Primus, you can go to the exhibitions page on the Fine Arts Center website. The fall celebration of Primus is also available on YouTube under the UMass Fine Arts Center channel.