Brontez Purnell on doing as much as possible



January 16, 2017 – Brontez Purnell has published a number of zines (*Schlepp*, *Fag School*) and books (*The Cruising Diaries*, *Johnny Would You Love Me If…*, *Since I Laid Down My Burden*, etc.), and has played in a number of bands (Panty Raid, Gravy Train!!!, and currently Younger Lovers). His column at *Maximum Rock 'N' Roll* was called "She's Over It." In addition to running his own experimental dance company, he also makes films.

As told to Brandon Stosuy, 2075 words.

Tags: Writing, Dance, Music, Multi-tasking, Independence, Sex.

You're a writer, musician, and a dancer. Do you privilege any of these different aspects of your creative output?

They're all equal loves. In my practice they all inform each other. I started playing in punk bands when I was a teenager. I always had a connection to dance. I'd always written zines. Let's say you had a really bad relationship with somebody and you want to creatively do some art therapy about it. Like, a dance can inform a song, which can then inform writing—you know what I mean? And they can all look so different. I love the way one subject can disperse itself amongst all my practices and can just look so different, but what they all have in common is me. I say that I am dancer, writer, musician… and filmmaker.

Sometimes when someone does one thing, then they do something else, people say, "I can't believe this person is trying to write poetry, they're actually an actor," or, "This person is a dancer trying to be in a band." Do you find different communities have issues with your multidisciplinarity?

It's hard for me because my practice has always been so underground. Sometimes I feel like I fly so far under the radar. I mean, sometimes I'll get those criticisms from somebody saying it offhand or whatever, but I don't feel like I'm being judged. I feel like a lot of people are generally stoked about it.

Plus, if I may toot my own horn, I move through a lot of disciplines fairly well, and they all have a common core of me. When I do a dance piece my fingerprint and my signature are definitely on it… you definitely know I did that shit! When I write a rock and roll song, you know I did that shit. I work in different disciplines, and all my work essentially is, like, siblings, because it all came from the same parent.

My friend had told me, you know that saying, "a jack of all trades is a master of none." What I never knew was that that actually has been cut off. The full saying is, "jack of all trades, master of none, is certainly better than being the master of one." You know what I mean?

One thing I have to say, the reason why I was able to move through a lot of disciplines is because I, for one, am not afraid to fail at something.Which I think a lot of people really are. My first couple of dance pieces, I think they were definitely really rough. But I wasn't afraid to just keep going at it, you know what I mean? Some people will venture into something else, and when it doesn't quite look like what it's supposed to look like, they fail or whatever. Not fail, but they give up or take a strict stance of, "I only do this one thing."

I feel a lot of people don't have it in them to do a lot of things. That's totally fine, as long as they aren't judging people who need a lot of creative outlets to survive and get to their own truth.

Do you think your background in punk that has opened you up to this kind of practice?

Oh, fuck yeah. The fucking DIY revolution, I was totally stained by that. It was just this idea if you don't do something no one is going to fucking do it for you. So being exposed to that very young, yeah, it did. Also, the baggage of punk and the negative shit also gave me a lot of positive reinforcement that anything you get up and do belongs to you.

When you go on tours with bands now, when you're in a town, do you try and set up readings on the side if you have a book coming out or like a dance performance somewhere?

I just do the one thing while I'm there. Up until now I've never really done that. Plus, it's like, I don't know, when you're touring with a band it's so damn hard. Like you really have to be in it to win it. You have to constantly communicate with people. Trying to do too much on tour is just like… If I can make it to the club and tune, I don't really have much energy to do much else after being in a van all day.

If you're able to do all of these things at once, do you think anything ever suffers? Or do you find that you're able to spin all these different saucers and keep them all going without any of them crashing?

I personally don't really think it's a lot of work. If you're involved in an art practice, it's not instant gratification. Let's say you write a book, just because you finished writing it doesn't mean it's finished. There's still the editing process—same way with a record. Making a record now, most vinyl plants are so backed up because there are so few vinyl plants, that by the time you finish recording a record, it's still basically another eight months to a year before it even sees a pressing.

I do feel like I give everything my full attention. Between the different disciplines, there are so many breaks. I just have a kind of nervous energy anyways. Just because I stopped creating one thing, I couldn't sit and just wait for it to come out. Say for instance, the last book I did, *Johnny Would You Love Me… (If My Dick Were Bigger)*, in the waiting process for that to be edited that's when I wrote the Younger Lovers record.

I do have to say though, sometimes I feel like I never get to fully enjoy something because by the time something is out and you're going to the premiere you have some editor, crawling down your back, being like, "Hey I need two chapters," you know? It's not that it overwhelms me, it's just more that the work is never done, really.

I started writing *Fag School* in 2001, and I did the first issue in 2003. Originally it was just kind of like a mix between a punk zine and a literary digest, and kind of like some lifestyle, fun, cute shit. It was basically my take on *Seventeen* magazine. The new *Fag School* coming out, is probably going to be a little more—I'm going to barf when I say this—mature in tone. It's going to deal with people that are working in different disciplines, but we are going to push the literary digest more, because it's going to feature writings from a lot of other, different queer artists.

Do you think as you get older you'll be able to keep this pace up? Or do you imagine yourself doing less?

I'm working hard now, so I will get to do less eventually.

If someone says, "Alright we are booking you as a dancer," are you ever tempted to be like, "I want to kind of actually do something musical," or "I want to do a reading instead." How do you focus on the one thing you are going to do?

It depends on the venue, it depends on what they're asking, it depends on size, shape, and space. It depends on what the curation is, too. My work, my writing work, I don't think it would make sense to read it to a bunch of random people that showed up to a gathering, you know? With my readings, there's stuff I read that has to be very specifically curated. It has to be very specifically curated or it's just not going to make a lot of sense. So I feel like people generally know what they want from me, and they ask. I will say though, cause I used to be a go-go boy in gravy trains and I used to, like, dance around in my underwear back when I was younger and skinnier. The first dance show I had was at Berkeley Art Museum and originally the curator wanted me to throw an underwear party there. Part of me was moving away from that so I kind of was like, "I don't really want to throw an underwear party but can my dance company perform?" And she was like, "Wait a minute, your dance company?" That's what kinda got the ball rolling. That's the major example I could think of. Different curators

definitely want me specifically for different and very definite things.

What's the overall goal for all the things you do? Where do you see these things leading?

I have absolutely no clue where they are going to lead to. I just know that the work needs to get done.

One thing that ties your work together, I think, is a belief in the creative power of sex. Maybe not so much the "belief" in it—just the reality that it's leading to work being made.

I think about the role of sex a lot in my work… Like the years I've spent dancing, performing, and acting where my body was the instrument and essentially the focus. I was thinking about how much time I've spent on stage naked, but how it actually never has much to do with sex. Like it's always nudity that's a vehicle for simplicity or protest. Even when I write about sex, it's never really about some hot experience. I'm always writing about how sex went wrong or something funny that happened.

I guess I use sex as a vehicle to lure people in and then trap them with the very human aspects of what the other side of sex is—it can be funny, unflattering, a bummer, a vehicle for friendship etc. The notion of sex (much like the notion of love) has been so manipulated and extorted and used against us to make us feel inferior or make us wanna buy shit, that I want to make the topic of sex in my work something a little more 3D. Sex is not something that should be withheld from us or hidden or only for "attractive" people. Sex is as natural as breathing and 90,000,000x more regulated? It's really peculiar. I guess I would say that in my work I try to use "sex" or the body as this thing that does not create boundaries or separation with an audience, but instead gives my audience back their humanity.

Brontez Purnell Recommends:

1. Nikki Giovanni's "Cotton Candy on a Rainy Day": My 10th grade drama teacher gave me a copy of this book of poetry (that was actually signed by Nikki Giovanni!)-like most of the literature that had a huge impact on my youth, I read it a good 10 to 12 years before I would understand the weight of it and what the author felt like was at stake with these poems. These days I use it as a bible in times of deep depression and it never fails to work.
2. Loli and The Chones "P,S, WE HATE YOU" LP: A So Cal Chicano garage punk record of EPICNESS. It was on Rip-Off Records (a fave label of my youth). Came out in 1997 and I didn't get a vinyl copy of it until last year at a record swap. Songs include "I Hate Your Guts" "Hot and Bothered" "I D.O.N.T. (Like You)"—a favorite record of mine to listen to when I wanna throw a hex on a bitch.
3. Judy Garland Speaks: This is an EPIC audio collection of Judy Garland FUCKING WASTED and talking shit on every person and situation that got fucked up or fucked her over. I think she did this a little before she died. It is full of hilarious commentary and brutal fucking truths. A recommended listen!
4. Sylvia Plath's "Johnny Panic and The Bible of Dreams": It's this beatnik-y short story she wrote, I think, before Ariel of The Bell Jar—its about a protagonist vs. the god-like manifestation of anxiety itself- that being "Johnny Panic"-I'm doing a solo dance this year called "Invisible Trial" based off of this text.
5. MY NEW FAVORITE MID DAY PICK ME UP- Iced Green Tea (unsweetened) + a splash of Jameson-it's called an "Irish Health"

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Vocation
Dancer, Writer, Musician, Filmmaker

Fact

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