Kinlaw on trying something every single day

July 12, 2017 - The multi-instrumentalist Kinlaw is an operatically-trained singer as well as a dancer, curator, and choreographer. She is one of the owners of the experimental movement and choreography studio, Otion Front. Here she talks about finding the space to make things, doing something everyday, working without a budget, and the importance of listening.

As told to Brandon Stosuy, 2143 words.

Tags: Music, Art, Dance, Curation, Process, Inspiration, Collaboration, Independence, Multi-tasking.

As a multidisciplinary artist, are you able to find a way to represent all your different practices, or do you get pigeonholed as one specific thing?

That has gotten easier over time, honestly. As I've developed a stronger vocabulary in all of these disciplines, it's become increasingly easier for me to feel represented. Every article that comes out isn't always going to be fully encompassing of all the work I do. To be honest, some people only know me as a bass player and a singer in SOFTSPOT, or as someone who curates these crazy shows, or someone who does these immersive performances. To me, that's okay because if it's a language that touches people, moves them, and feels authentic to me, I'm glad that we found each other in that way.

There's something happening right now that also happened in Downtown New York in the '70s or early '80s, where people were more multidisciplinary in general.

As it pertains to the music world, people have been doing a lot more than just making music. That's just the nature of where that industry was going, whether you wanted it to go that way or not, in terms of support systems and how people are able to assist you. All the musicians I know, or most of them, are booking their own tours. They're directing their own videos. Just because they wanted music to be their practice doesn't mean it's the only thing that they really do for that practice.

I do have very specific performance practices that I try to fuse together as much as I can. It's not because I'm going for a certain genre. At this point in my life, I need to feel some kind of closure. I need to feel represented. The only thing that I can really control is how I'm producing work, what that feels like, and how I'm able to move all these disciplines that I've practiced for so long, so intensely, into one experience if I can. I don't want to feel like I've spent these 12 years in New York on my own floundering around. It's how I feel like a human that's been around.

Often, finding space in a place like New York City can be tricky. You run a dance and performance studio. Has that been helpful to your practice?

Definitely. My studio practice means the world to me. The people that I run the studio with are my friends. I love them. It certainly affects the work I do. It also opens up a lot of opportunity in terms of working with other people physically, because I have a neutral space where we can rehearse. There's a whole community that has been authentically built around this space. The community is not only inspiring, but also gives me support in a way that I'm really grateful for. A lot of them just happened to have become some of my best friends.

I realized earlier that I actually went to your studio to see Becca Kauffman's piece, "In Pursuit of Self Loss."

We had her as a resident. We also have a rotating monthly residency program. We just give them the space. We give them 43 hours. They make something and they have a show at the end of that process. It's truly an experimental space. We're able to give people the room to work, to rehearse with a mirror, have dancers, and work on a Marley floor. They don't have to stress out about selling X amount of tickets and capacity. We're not throwing profit at them. It's just giving them room. I think that's really special in terms of thinking about New York City, and how hard it can feel to just have space, and to really experiment.

When did you decide to move from being, for lack of a better word, an amateur to a professional?

Time made that decision for me. There were a few things at play. I moved to New York when I was 17. I didn't go to any kind of school. I didn't have a program. I moved here from North Carolina. I just started. I started trying. I was here more as an opera singer than anything else. I was heavily involved with the classical world and the more traditional practices of rehearsing and having vocal coaches and auditioning. That is very different from what I do now. I've done a lot of different things since I lived here. I self-managed all of them.

As all these changes unfold, I'm learning that if I don't recognize myself as someone who is seriously an art maker, which I am, then what am I? I also think this goes in tandem with having had to defend myself for a long time and defend the work that I do, and trying to protect myself, which is a common practice with almost all artists and freelancers, or anyone who creates their own job opportunities. It's a good idea to know how to defend yourself and how to ask for what it is that you need. This doesn't have to be a dramatic process. It's just communication. Communication is something that I'm always working on, whether it's through just making art, through shows, or just through talking and literally trying to be a better listener and better friend, and a better collaborator. Learning how to communicate your needs and express these things up front, during, afterwards, all of it is also something that is more professional.

There wasn't a day that came where I stopped calling myself a certain thing and then calling myself something that felt more elevated. Because, in a lot of ways, I still am very much to the core a bit of a DIY artist. I don't expect that to change anytime soon. The scale of things that I'm sometimes able to pull off is deceiving to people. They don't realize that I'm still working on a zero budget. The show that I just did at Wythe was incredible. This was a beautiful, beautiful show.

How do you manage to do a show like that with a small budget?

This one was harder, because I was working with two other artists. There were ticket costs, which factored into everything. This was an interesting show with a lot of confusing financial details. It was a tape release. It was a collaboration between me and Soap Library, which is a small tape label run by two women that I really love. At the same time, I had been speaking with Rachel [Petach] who works at the Wythe Hotel who came a couple shows of mine. We just started talking from there. We wanted to work together too, so I just combined those opportunities.

We worked our ass off for this show. I worked so hard on it. I didn't make anything, but I did pay the dancers a little bit. It's nothing compared to what they did. We took that whole show out of the Wythe and went on tour. I just got back from that tour. There hasn't been a lot of financial gifting in the mix. We certainly, in terms of the show that just happened at the Wythe, made something extraordinarily beautiful. The guests had a cocktail and snacks. They were treated very well, which was of utmost priority to me. I wanted them to feel special. We definitely created that environment.

Do you deal with creative blocks, or suddenly waking up and not being able to create?

I have a practice called "just try." That's my practice. I literally just try. For as serious as I said earlier that I am, and that I take feelings seriously, I take people seriously, I take all of this seriously, I am in a deep practice of trying to go easy on myself when it comes to creative output and literally I have a theory of working every day. I think that this is an important part of a lot of things. Anything mind and body oriented, I've noticed that if you do it every day, it gets easier. It somehow becomes less traumatic in a way. It creates this feeling.

I have a good day if I've tried at something. Then, I just try again the next day. If it doesn't work out, then maybe it will the next day. I think this creates balance. It makes things seem less dire. I don't want to put myself in a position where I start to really, truly get frustrated with my mind. Because, I think we've all been there, and we go there naturally. It's so clearly something that affects our body. It's so clearly something that affects our mind and the way that we feel. Yet, somehow people have the ability to separate this. They say I'm going to exercise class for the next hour. I'm going to yoga. I'm going to the gym.

It creates a little bit of a distance that, I think, is healthy for us. In terms of creative output, and thinking, and writing, you take your time. You somehow have a little bit of distance because you've structured it. If it doesn't work out that day, then you're going to try again the next day because that's what you told yourself that you do. That's a part of you being a "professional artist."

I also think that means not getting caught up in your successes. I think that's also a way that I practice. I love dissecting the good and the bad things. It's a really important reflection. I also don't think hanging onto your successes will take you that far, honestly. For me it's only led to feelings of disappointment after projects end or after they dissipate and I'm left with not a whole lot.

You said you like to work on things every day. Do you ever take extended breaks?

No, I don't take breaks. I don't want to. Maybe that's just where I'm at right now, but this helps me feel understood. Being seen sharing, communicating in that way, is a big part of what keeps me feeling understood and feeling like, to a certain extent, without sounding too desperate, feeling like I matter. These are important questions to ask yourself as you move along. They're not always totally clear. I don't take breaks, really, but I also enjoy the work that I'm doing. Sometimes it's incredibly hard. Sometimes I feel challenged or inadequate. I feel all the things, all the spectrum of things that everybody feels, I feel them. But, I don't take a break.

My partner is also a creative person. I want to leave space, too, for listening. That's just as important as anything else. I've really been doing a lot lately. I don't want to get into habits. I want to be open. I want to listen, to be open to people, and open to helping them interpret and feel balanced.

Kinlaw recommends:

Consider psychotherapy at least once a week. Whether you are or aren't insured, there are often sliding scale or even free programs that make therapy available to everyone. I go twice a week and have been for a year and a half now—it's indispensable for reprocessing, stronger communication, forgiveness. We need to stay strong.

If you don't usually cook for yourself or other people, I recommend trying it. I like to cook and do it often but if I'm really busy, I'll often resort to making one or two things that last me through the week—like, bulk cooking. I end up saving a lot of money and eating some vegetables I've cooked myself gives me clarity and power through busy times. Feed your friends with really beautiful food, drink some wine together—it'll feel so good.

Get up early and write for at least fifteen minutes straight before you talk to anyone, before you drink coffee, before checking your phone. I know a lot of people who write from their bed just after waking but if you're with a partner or share your bed, move yourself and write, draw, scribble—whatever—before dealing with anyone else.

Try calling instead of texting next time. People hardly answer anymore but when they do, it's cool.

Follow Jen Monroe of *Bad Taste* in addition to her music blog *Listen To This* as well as collaborative and solo work from brilliant co-members at Otion Front Studio. Keep eyes out for Bryan Keller's *Advanced Male* and drink literally any obscure natural wine he recommends because Bryan is the most poetic and exciting sommelier in NYC.

Name
Kinlaw

Vocation
Musician, Dancer, Curator

Fact

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