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As told to Brandon Stosuy, 3107 words.

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Kianí Del Valle on being a multi-disciplinary dancer

When we first met you didn't have an agent. Since then, you hired one. How has having this agent helped you focus on your creative work?

He used to be a dancer. He's my manager and my agent, so he's doing both. Not all dancers get an agent and a manager. It's such an obscure art where that doesn't always happen. When you do get one, you're lucky, especially if you have a good one.

We touch base once or twice a month to see where I am or what I want to do. He has access to my Google Calendar. He has all my touring dates and the dates where I show my solo work. Then, in between those dates, he's booking me for other jobs. I've been on tour with [the electronic musician] Clark for five months.

In between, I'm doing commercial gigs. I don't want to do commercial stuff all the time. I made that clear in the beginning. I'm one of the more contemporary choreographers in the agency. I explained that to them in the beginning, so I think it's been helpful. Because he's doing management, and being an agent, I get bookings for jobs, but I also get that one person to talk to about my process every month. And he understands me so well that he's also influencing the jobs that he books me.

He's been respectful of my down time because for me it's important to have my own practice and not get overworked constantly. I have my own solo practice, which is important to me. It's been good in terms of my own way of thinking, my own creative process, of seeing what I'm doing and making. When I didn't have him, I was doing and doing and doing without actually sitting and processing what was happening. Now, twice a month I can sit down and go outside my brain and we look at my brain from outside and we're like, "Okay, what am I processing? What's happening?" It's like a creative therapist or something.

Dancers are sometimes seen as part of the background. As a dancer, how do you make it known that what you are doing stands on its own?

That's an ongoing battle. Dance has been an important part of every culture. Every development of every culture has had dance. It's been part of the history of music videos, music shows, too. But for some reason, this is still a constant battle for dancers and choreographers.

The thing with the Clark tour is that we're doing a hybrid show. It's a show for a museum, but we're in these music festivals. When you have dance in a music show, it's automatically contextualized as go-go dancing. "Oh, there's go-go dancers." Or there's like super commercial dancers, Beyoncé dancers. But we're doing full-on contemporary dance. We're extraterrestrial tomboy ninja aliens. We're changing costumes onstage. We're moving LED lights, installations.

This is super rock and roll. We show up. Our moment of rehearsing is soundcheck, which now we call "body check." "Okay, when the musician starts checking the sound, we've got to check the body..." We mark with neon tape like crazy. The whole floor looks like a fucking crazy map of marks, because we don't see shit in the show. We have wigs in front of our faces. It's completely pitch black. There's smoke. It's super dangerous. There are cables everywhere.

Some places use too much smoke. The smoke machines are not good. The fucking floor is completely wet. You almost fall. You have a wig. You don't see anything. We have electronics we're moving. Things are plugged into things.

It's difficult, but we've become great dancers in the process. We're in this super macho music world that at first feels uncomfortable because we're girls onstage, telling the crew, "Oh, you need to move the monitor and do these things." They don't like that. Also, they don't understand that dance needs to be treated differently.

I feel like clients want the dance, but they don't want to deal with the process and the caring that you need to give to a dance. They know they will sell their product better, but they don't know how to deal with it. That's not the case for Clark, but the techies in festivals and other people, they just don't get

it.

There's that, but it's even something as simple as getting credited properly. The only way for us to change it is to keep the battle going. I've talked about it with other choreographers. Even people that you think are super established are still not being credited properly. It's a discussion I have with my musician friends and with my collaborators. I feel like the people around me understand it because they respect my work and they get it, but in general, it's not like that. Not all curators or collaborators are respectful of that. The same goes with producers of a show.

We're also not paid properly. If there's a big feature film and there's a choreographer working on the film, they're training movement, coaching all the actors, basically defining how these people will move and walk—or how he or she grabs a glass, or limps on one leg. It's not just a dance scene. We need to be paid properly for that.

What is it that draws you to collaborate with non-dancers?

I like having an audience that doesn't necessarily have a trained dance eye. I hate how elitist dance is. Like, "Oh, I only dance in the opera house." Why does dance need to be elitist? Everyone can dance. When I teach my workshops, they're always open-level. I don't do workshops for only advanced students. Everybody should get in tune with it. It's something that should be tangible for everyone.

I was trying to be a dancer for dance theater. I danced at Alvin Ailey in New York and I danced for independent choreographers in New York and I also danced in Israel, so I have the experience of being part of companies. The typical, traditional idea of being a dancer and a choreographer is that you train hard to be part of a company. Then, after you're part of a company for a long time and you can't really do it anymore, you end up choreographing...in the middle of your career, probably not in the beginning.

My path with dance has been different because I come from a background in painting. I started painting when I was a little girl. It was my passion. My parents were busy and they put us in a lot of extracurricular activities. My sisters were in a chorus and I was painting and dancing three times a week. Eventually, I went into an arts high school in Puerto Rico, where you take painting everyday. I was focused. I was going to graduate high school and become a painter. It was something everyone expected. Dance was more of a hobby. Close to my last year of high school, I realized that I wanted to dance.

Back in the day, I also liked a lot of punk. I was always influenced by a lot of things, but I didn't know how to put them all in a gumbo, into one salad, and do something with them. Then later I realized that maybe that's the audience I was targeting, too.

I like that I make work that a lot of non-dancers see. When I teach a workshop, it's how I see the complete translation of my work, because non-dancers are coming, there are musicians coming, and there are professional dancers coming. There's no ego in the room. Obviously, the professional dancers want to be challenged, so I have to push them in class, so they don't feel like they're not really getting what they need. But they're also really influenced by these people who are non-dancers. You discover things by not having an ego with the work you do.

I feel better when my work has an audience that's more versatile. Something that happens when you just concentrate on being a dancer in a theater is the same people recycle the same audiences constantly.

How do you know when it's time to take a break?

I'm in that moment right now. I love the Clark tour, and I love the choreography, but I have three other projects that I've started but haven't been able to be so fast with because I'm on tour until the end of the year. I'm at that point where I'm like, "Okay, I love the crew, I love everything. I'm really grateful about this tour. I'm seeing all these countries all over the world. It's awesome, but we're just two dancers."

The other dancer is a dancer, but I'm a dancer *and* choreographer *and* I direct dance films, so for me, it's a little bit like, "I'm not only dancing." I consider myself a conceptual dancer in the sense that I have a lot of creative voice in every project I do, even with Clark. One of the choreographies they let me do is from the last Clark video. They also allow me to collaborate with [choreographer] Melanie [Lane], Clark's wife. They're aware that I'm like that, and they don't want me to get bored, so they're giving me space. They're giving me that space for me to feel like I could interact more deeply and creatively with the project, because they're my friends and they understand me.

You work a lot with musicians. How do you keep it interesting?

I'd gotten tired of the process of like, "Okay, take this track, make a piece." So I was like, "Okay, why don't you just look at me dancing and make the track from me?" I wanted to invert the process. Especially in the music industry, or when doing music videos or touring with musicians, that's not the case. Once I told this to Sam Shepherd, who performs as Floating Points. He respects me so much that he was like, "Fuck, like you're totally right." He felt like that he was not respecting my process.

I've been on my own since I came back to Berlin. I moved to this loft, and I have my own studio here, and I'm working with the sound guys from Boiler Room Berlin. We're having sessions in between touring. We have contact microphones on the floor, and we're also using bullet microphones. At this point, I've been doing maybe four months of research for a solo project, which involves the sound of the body. I'm creating

patterns and composing with my own body. It's super analog, just sounds that you could create in the space with your body. Like stomping. Or, if you flap against your body, like your chest, the sounds of your body in the space and also sounds that come from inside your body, like breathing sounds.

Dancing is such a physical thing. I imagine, if you're doing it too much, your body will eventually start breaking down. How do you protect against injuries? Do you have any kind of regimen? Do you just work through the injuries if they happen?

In terms of injuries, I'm good with my body. I'm responsible. I train a lot. I take vitamins. Injuries haven't happened, but I've gotten really sick on tour. I have my whole kit when I go on tour. I take shots of B12 or shots of iron liquid. We need to stretch a lot because it's intense and physical, what we're doing. It's also really nerve-racking because you're moving in a physical way, but you're not seeing anything. And while you're not seeing anything, you're moving objects onstage.

For me, it's important to train the brain, because I've been in situations where I'm like, "I probably shouldn't perform." I just don't know how I do it. I focus my brain and find a way to do it. I always do it. We had situations on tour where I had a tooth infection. My wisdom teeth had to go out. I was completely sick. I had to go to a hospital. I took an airplane, I performed. The other day, I got food poisoning the day before taking the flight. The taxi was coming at 6:00 a.m. I was puking since 4:00 a.m. I puked in the airport. I puked when the airplane left Berlin to Poland. The whole way to Poland, I was in the airplane puking. When we got to the venue, the promoter was like, "Okay, I don't know. Maybe we don't do it with dancers." I was standing there. I said, "Guys, I'm performing." Everybody was like holy shit.

I just really find a way of training my brain to go through this process. There's a thing called body-mind centering. It's a process of connecting and being completely in tune with your body and your brain. I do it. I did ask for a medic, though, because I was like, "Maybe I need a medic so I don't puke for an hour and I could perform in that hour and not puke." They came and gave me a shot and I performed.

I think humans make a big mistake. They think their heads are just a mode of transportation for the bodies to go to meetings and talk to people. It's not. You need to train your body, but it needs to also be in tune with your head. Merce Cunningham was in a wheelchair choreographing forever. I feel like if I have my brain, I can still dance.

How do you avoid burning out?

I'm so inspired by the work and by the people around me. I'm just really on a roll and don't think I have a perception of where my limits are. But that's definitely something I should work on, especially now that I'm 33.

I'm never emotional about things. But last year, when I got to a point of burnout, I was crying about everything. Then I'm like, "Maybe I'm burning out." When that's happened, both times I took an airplane to Greece and rested, and was at a nude beach eating fish and reading a book for two weeks. I definitely shouldn't get to that stage where I'm like really fucked and crying about things.

For a long time I didn't have a lot of friends that were dancers. I felt alone. Most of my friends were filmmakers or journalists or curators or musicians. Actually, most of my friends were guys, too, for a while. But over the past five years, I've started making more dance friends. In that process of meeting other dancers, I also got intrigued about their processes because I felt kind of crazy and weird on my own. My friend was telling me the other day, "With you, it's a little bit different because you're working in such an interdisciplinary way." A lot of dancers start dancing in a company and that's it. Or they're choreographing and they're not dancing in their work anymore. But I'm dancing still and I'm choreographing still and I'm just doing a lot of different things. I'm writing my own treatments. I think that's why I don't have a perception of when I'm burning out, because my brain is going in so many directions.

My first art was visual art and organically, 20 years after, I'm finally understanding my movement through drawings. I didn't even think they were drawings. I was like, "Oh, I'm just marking things. The circles are going from point A to point B." It was just a fast way for me to remember the choreography, so the next day when we go back to the studio, I tell the dancers what to do. Then the dancers were like, "If you show us that, we don't understand anything. This is something you understand because your brain is connected to some kind of visual way, but you're the only one that understands it." I was like, "Oh my god." Really, actually facing my own self, being like, "What am I doing? That's so weird."

It's full circle to how you started.

All of those things are coming back to me. My own questions are being answered. I'm a dancer and a choreographer and a dancing director, but I just think I'm a visual artist who's doing it with my body. I love visual art. I love film. I'm responsible with my dancing. I train everyday and I'm inspired by it, but I need all those other things to be able to create my dance.

My creative process is a little different. I go to the studio everyday, but I also go to the museum twice a month. I have a multidisciplinary brain. In Berlin there were days that I'd wake up and be like "Let's shoot something." We'd go to the studio and shoot video. I like to do things at the same time. There's no other way I could do it. I have an eye that absorbs a lot of things. It needs all of those things so I can translate them into movement. I also have periods in my life where I try to paint again, and I see a lot of painting in my choreographic work. For me, I'm still painting in a way.

Kiani Del Valle recommends:

Music:

Kaitlyn Aurelia Smith

Jlin

Show Me the Body

Fania All-Stars

Rashad Becker and Eli Keszler

Terry Riley

Floating Points

Gazelle Twin

Meredith Monk

Kodak Black

Plies

Tim Hecker

Clark

Portishead

Haxan Cloak

Books:

Where Is Ana Mendieta? by Jane Blocker

Unmasking Europa: The Search for life on Jupiter's Ocean Moon by Richard Greenberg

"El libro de los Abrazos" by Eduardo Galeano

I Love Dick and Aliens and Anorexia by Chris Kraus

Grapefruit by Yoko Ono

Choreographing Empathy: Kinesthesia in Performance by Susan Leigh Foster

Choreographic Dwellings edited by G. Schiller, S. Rubidge

OVERALL ARTISTS I LOVE:

Albert Omos / Director, Animator

Crystal Pite / Dance

Melanie Lane / Dance

Leos Carax / Film

Tony Conrad / Film, Music etc.

Name

Kiani Del Valle

Vocation

Dancer, Choreographer, Director

Fact



photo by Stephanie Balantine

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