

Oct. 26, 2010

## Seven Stories of “SEE SAW”

By Scott Easterday

*Steer skull, lilies, sod, mandala, shoes, wine, socks, saxophones, and ... goats.*



*SEE SAW* was full of duality—relationships that effect and play on each other, in the performance installation by first time collaborators Mark Southerland and Jane Gotch at La Esquina. The production ensemble (Shay Estes, Tuesday Faust, Shawn Hansen, Peregrine Honig, Mike Stover, Matt Tady, Bill Wenzel, and Neal Wilson) worked together building and growing *SEE SAW* into a live

performance piece that involved music, dance, theater, performance art, installation art, sculpture, living art, symbolic art and conceptual art. The Arts are moving toward more organic, emotional, and empathetic trends in this century—away from constructs and systems of the last century. *SEE SAW* was a process that grew over time into the multifaceted production that was performed before an audience at La Esquina gallery Friday October 22 through Monday October 25.

Originally titled “Early Tools” because Southerland and Gotch wanted to relate stories about tools that artists use to collaborate, they began interacting, observing each other’s work and planning their collaboration in June 2010. The whole ensemble started to work together in September. In October the group had 3 or 4 rehearsals per week until the week before the live performances when they rehearsed every day. Perhaps the use of the word “rehearse” is slightly off because in my interpretation the entire process in which this work grew and became known is a part of the artistic process.

The installation included an over-sized seesaw. It was 34-feet long and swung up to ten-and-a-half feet high. The center fulcrum was six-feet tall. Southerland worked with Matt Tady on the design and conceptual aspects of the seesaw and the installation. Together

they completed the wooden beam of the seesaw. Then they realized they needed help to complete the teeter-totter so they went to steel worker and welder Bill Wenzel. Wenzel made the six foot tall pivot and the supporting structure that allowed for the safe use of the high swings when the seesaw was in use. Around the supporting base of the seesaw and spreading out around it was a hill covered in grass and decorated with trophies from sporting events. Southerland called this the trophy island. There was also a pump can of water that ensemble members would pick up and water the grass throughout the performance tending to their garden of trophies. There was a steer's skull that would later be used in the performance and an area for the musicians.

*SEE SAW* was changing all the time. Each performance would draw on all the prior performances. After the Saturday performance I asked Gotch what was the most important thing she would have to say about the work. She said, "We thought we were shaping this piece but this piece was shaping us."

Peregrine Honig, a visual artist in the ensemble, introduced the idea of mirror neurons to the group. Gotch explained how the group incorporated mirror neurons into the piece. "Mirror neurons are what allow us to empathize and connect with others. We see somebody else cry and we feel as though it is happening to us." The ensemble in the *SEE SAW* production wanted to consciously use mirror neurons in the performance so that the audience could connect to the stories being told.



To help facilitate this connection, all the audience seats at La Esquina were front-row seats. A single arch of chairs formed a semicircle around half of the performance space. The other half of the space contained the installation.

It was uncertain when the piece began on Saturday night because the ensemble members were busy readying the performance area. I could tell by watching them move around the space, carefully positioning the elements of the installation, that this was the way they had been interacting for some time together. Honig and Neal Wilson attended to a large mandala constructed vertically on the back wall of the performance space. The musicians, Mike Stover (guitar, pedal steel, and percussion) and Shawn Hansen (percussion and electronic instruments) both came into the performance space well before the "beginning" of the piece and were already playing music while the audience assembled. All the music was performed live though some was captured and recorded

in loops to accompany live passages.

*SEE SAW* told seven stories about the relationship between the mind and the body, self realization, epiphany, and coming of age. After the first story started other stories would be begun as other stories were being told. There were periods where one story was in focus but all of the stories overlapped and were acted out concurrently until the each story was finished. Then, at the end, the last story was told alone.

I can only briefly describe some of the movements and music that took place in the installation. The seven interwoven stories contained a daunting amount of stimulation. If there is any criticism to this piece it might be that it was too much to behold. I say that as a writer wishing to express the extent of the details, as an audience member I did not feel overwhelmed.

*SEE SAW* had its official beginning when Gotch appeared in spot light along with a green dress also in spotlight and hanging on the wall that she would later wear in another part of the presentation. Ensemble members met in the performance space in pairs performing reflexive gestures. One person would move a certain way and their partner would reflect their movements in a story that was called "face face." This later developed into a duet with Gotch and Tuesday Faust in which the two dancers carried out the same movements that worked in and out of the floor and encircled the installation.

Another story called "coronation bull" reinterpreted Gotch's first performance she had done at age 14. She had to dance ballet at a Coronation Ball Ceremony at a state fair, the finale of which entailed carrying a real buffalo head around the stadium. In the *SEE SAW* version, Gotch portrays the event as a dark memory; she is disheveled and eventually succumbs to the celebrated buffalo head that is symbolized by the steer's skull that was paraded around during the performance. Three vases of white lilies were brought in and placed at intervals in front of the audience.

Throughout the production Peregrine Honig and Neal Wilson kept constructing the mandala. They were making it out of ribbons that people wear when attending conferences. The ribbons were gold, silver, blue, red, green, and yellow and said things like "president," "guest," "host," and "committee."

In "sod pilgrimage" dancer Tuesday Faust and artist Matt Tady's choreography on the floor imitated sliding, crawling, and falling encircling the seesaw many times around until they met together on a patch of sod. There, they removed their shoes and socks, and continued the choreography on their hands and feet that took them separately along a path that crossed over the trophy island.

In "de-tooling shay," Shay Estes, a vocalist who has worked with Southerland in previous installations, enters the space in a sexy red dress and black high heels drinking wine and

adorned in jewels. She sings *Stardust Melody* accompanied by Mike Stover on guitar. During the song Shay is slowly deconstructed by Southerland and Gotch who remove her jewels, earrings, shoes, the wine, and her dress; they take the microphone she was singing into and turn her around to face the back wall. All the while Stover's guitar playing starts to stray from an accompanying role to an independent solo that even digresses from the song itself. Estes and Tady rode the seesaw while Estes sang *Sentimental Journey*.

Next Gotch and Southerland opened a vertical door on the side of the performance space and in marched seven baby goats and their keeper. The goats went to the trophy



island and started to eat food pellets placed there for them. The audience was delighted to see them. They were a living aspect to the performance. (And they left a real life result to be cleaned up after the performance.) When the goats finished eating, they roamed the performance space freely interacting with some of the audience. They were a lighthearted happiness in an otherwise dark and beautifully tragic piece of artistic reflection and tribute.

In "double sax death" Southerland played his double saxophones that he modified to play with his two hands in tribute to Rahsaan Roland Kirk who was a multi-instrumentalist whose death in 1977 was the result of a second stroke caused by playing two instruments at once. At the end of this story, the lilies were gathered by the ensemble and placed at the feet of and in the bell of Southerland's saxophones.

At this point Southerland broke character and addressed the audience directly. The rest of the ensemble passed out glasses of red wine to the audience while Southerland related the story behind the last story, "take a sip." Southerland explained this piece is another tribute to musician Helen Gillet, a New Orleans resident whose life was greatly affected by hurricane Katrina. After the hurricane had brought destruction on New Orleans she went to her regular Tuesday steady gig at the Cafe Brazil. The club was not open but was filled with people lying around on the floor using the bar as a shelter. The owner was there and gave Gillet two bottles of wine saying "play for this." It was the first time Gillet played solo. That moment inspired Southerland to write the last piece of music for the final story of the performance. Shay Estes sang a tribute song and Southerland soloed on saxophone while the Stover and Hansen ride the seesaw. By the end the little goats had all found their way to Shay's side on the grassy hill of the trophy island.

For those of you who did not witness *SEE SAW* for yourself, you must know that I have only scratched the surface of the multifaceted performance installation, and for those of you who did see it, maybe hearing about some of the background of the artistic process has added to the experience.

**REVIEW:**

**Charlotte Street Foundation's Urban Culture Project**

***Seesaw***

Friday, October 22–Monday, October 25

Saturday, October 23, 8:30 pm (Reviewed)

La Esquina

1000 West 25<sup>th</sup>

Kansas City, MO