Hit the Streets: Otis Houston Jr.’s Call for Response

BY JOHN DRURY April, 2020

Art need not be pretty, nor technically burdensome, or even recognizable as such; it need only be, and it is best when brash and loud. And whether object, imagery or action – there are those efforts only hindered by the turning away of head and heart; a self-quarantined awakening the rash killer of man.

And of course, paid admission, pedigree and clean white cubicle do not guarantee quality – far, far from it. The inconsequential banal is too often irresponsibly groomed within our hallowed halls of arts instruction; important and dead-end beings fostered at the nipples of state, corporate sponsorship and hand me down servile. I see a saw-sage, Neo-Op and rainbow-laced decoration embraced by our galleries, at present; that best viewed mid-stretch and mut-tap, a kind of cherry topped confection sure to rot our collective soul, while lulling us into a devastating silence. I sense fear in ornament. I see social responsibility avoided, in slick and shiny downward-facing lap dog.

Otis Houston Jr. offers from the edge of passing immortality a delicate reminder; lost civility; pro-active chronicle a personal revolve, better public. The street offers a certain creative freedom and for more than twenty years, Otis - from the edge of the FDR, as it races past Harlem - has exposed the greatest theatre of all; the equity of the outdoors as echoing a demanded and clear voice. As we enter the age of self-distancing, there is a renewed urgency revealed in Houston’s spray-painted and erected pronouncements – that the sort, the indoor studio of the pampered wall-to-do and Sunday painter very rarely produces – a potent clarity of intent, the enemy of second thought and inherited comfort. Anger is best boiled. Life should be messy.

And with the recent release of “AmeriKid” - Houston’s recorded prose, a sort of combination spoken word and rapped agitation on waxed, limited edition disc (100 copies) – a lucky few are allowed unlabeled and free access the small-gathering BobMarley by which change might be truly approached... rebellion sparked. Especially interested in reaching out to our young people, Houston’s included appeal, The Children offer in direct recorded session, “We must raise up a new generation. We need to see video, rap music, pop sound and any and everything, all around. We need to sing it, play it, see it, picture it, show it, and shove it... everywhere.”
Others gathered at Apexart, attendees of the closing night, the brilliant Sam Gordon curated exhibition *Souls Grown Dough*, to witness Otis Houston Jr. (aka Black Cherokee) keep beat on his chest and perform a “live” set; a now hauntingly rare, pre-virus celebration of a group of disparate makers, known primarily to those righteous individuals actively pursuing equality in the arts and unafraid to walk at the fringes of society—in disregard race, status or revealed preferences. Revolution requires only elbow room, and little at that. It will find the surface crack in which to enter, to flex below the turgid façade and in the dark, to explode. Mutiny is contagious.

And in this time of contagion, calamity the harbinger change, the old guard in New York City—the ostiary Grand-dads, in addition this recent trend of vapid eye-candy and all that benign—is soon replaced with insurgency, and an equity cauterized in plague and indifference the elitist, monied beast. The message that Otis Houston, Jr. shares has not changed for decades, we will. We must. WM

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John Drury is a multimedia artist, published author, independent curator and instructor. Drury holds a Bachelor of Fine Art degree from the Columbus College of Art and Design (1983) and a Master of Fine Art Degree in sculpture (1985, including a minor in painting), from Ohio State University. John is the father of two teenagers, living in New York City since 1989 and has received the prestigious Louis Comfort Tiffany Award for his work in sculpture.

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