

The West Hollywood Plummer Park Community Center Hosted Event To Revive Jamaican Jonkonnu Artistic Tradition



Jeffrey Anderson Gunter and Marie Kellier

The City of West Hollywood Community Center in Plummer Park came alive with history, culture and heritage on Saturday, August 10th, when International Eye LA presented 'Two Faces of Jonkonnu: Resistance and Joy.' The event was part of an ongoing project by Jamaican artist Marie Kellier to support revival of Jamaica's Jonkonnu tradition. It was funded by a grant to International Eye LA from the City of West Hollywood Arts Division.

International Eye LA empowers individuals and communities by activating safe spaces with creative, multicultural and

healing activities in arts, culture, business, education and humanities.

The almost capacity audience for 'Two Faces of Jonkonnu: Resistance and Joy' was enraptured as artist Marie Kellier presented an evening devoted to the history, heritage and socio-cultural context of Jamaica's Jonkonnu tradition, which she presented through a contemporary and creative lens. The room was beautifully framed with several 8-foot banners reproduced from a series of lithographs by Jamaican artist Isaac Mendes Belisario, who captured and presented first person accounts of Jonkonnu performances, accompanied by paintings of the elaborate costumes they wore in the 1700's. The lithographs, which Kellier said initiated her investigation into the status of the tradition, were first published in Jamaica between 1837 and 1838 and more recently by the Jamaica Gleaner to shed light on the almost total disappearance of the tradition. Additional paintings of Jonkonnu images by Jamaican artist Bernard Stanley Hoyes rounded out the display and helped to represent a modern interpretation of the practice.



Jankano Supporting Belly Woman

Master of Ceremonies Jeffrey Anderson Gunter officiated the evening's activities and helped to welcome Jonkonnu characters Queen, Belly Woman, Pitchy Patchy, Actor Boy, Jack in the Green and Devil to the red carpet. Original music composed by Ricardo Wilson, M.D. provided the rhythm to which each character walked the red carpet, wearing beautiful Jonkonnu costumes designed and fabricated by Kellier. Each character was highlighted and their history and purpose shared with the intrigued audience.

In presenting excerpts from her ongoing research, Kellier described Jonkonnu as a performance masquerade that was developed and used as a tool for resistance, survival and celebration among enslaved Africans in Jamaica in the 1700's. For those unfamiliar with the tradition, she went on to comment that "Amidst the toil, confinement and rigors of enslavement, artists, musicians, dancers and other creatives from diverse African communities gathered the materials and supplies they needed, found ways to communicate with each

other, carved out time to develop characters, fabricate costumes and present this unique and iconic art form with dance, pantomime and music. Research into Jonkonnu practice she shared, indicated that Jonkonnu performers were feared by plantation owners both because they did not understand it and because Jonkonnu were always suspected of being involved in 'subversive behavior' while 'jonkoonooing.'

A dramatic interpretation of the the Belly Woman character in relation to slave owners during 'Two Faces of Jonkonnu: Resistance and Joy' explored origins of the 'Belly Woman' character in the context of cultural retention, creative resistance, freedom and the human ability to survive and thrive in the face of unspeakable acts of oppression.

Upcoming development of her work on the Jonkonnu tradition, Kellier revealed, included fabricating additional original costumes for the characters King, Horse Head, Cow Head, and House Jonkonnu. She is currently seeking more funding sources while preparing a manuscript, a website, and a feature length film.

The evening concluded with acknowledgement of some of the organizations and individuals who have been instrumental in supporting the work and a photo op session with the Jonkonnu characters. International Eye Los Angeles is additionally supported by grants from the City of Los Angeles Department of Cultural Affairs, Alliance for California Traditional Arts (ACTA) and Office of Supervisor Holly Mitchell, with organizational support from LA County Department of Arts and Culture and California Arts Council.

The event was produced by MARIKEL.



Jankano Enactment