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Artist Katherine Dolgy Ludwig is all about music, and undergoing a feverish dance workout in her Brooklyn painting studio, bopping till she drops with the Ramones, Ice T, Patti Smith blaring. Bending, pulling, stretching, she's hard at work framing her lavishly large and bold collection of new watercolor paintings. It may all be an exercise in futility. Dolgy Ludwig's paintings quite simply cannot be contained. Neither can the artist, whose hectic pace can only suggest she's living in a world that has more than 24 hours in a day.

Her current marathon is for her most recent cross-category shows at Chelsea's A.I.R. Gallery. May 1-24 at her aptly titled "JustAmericanWords" of paintings rooted in American lyrics. Dolgy Ludwig will be painting giant watercolors in the center of the gallery space, surrounded by similar five foot works, "riffing on the

music and words given to me by my subjects." Not only will the artist be splashing paint daily to music recordings in the midst of the intensely public environment where she likes it, one week into the exhibition she'll be painting with musicians live in a free and public event at A.I.R. Whimsically titled "AIRplay08", it's an all woman marriage of music and art, at this gallery that is the longest running supporter in the United States of female artists "I was asked to create an event, and I thought it would be meaningful to bring innovative grrrrrrrrl musicians to a place where they can perform experimentally with the same freedom as visual artists have historically had at A.I.R."

On the evening of May 8, Dolgy Ludwig creates a symphonic crash of paint and experimental melody as jazz singers Tessa Souter, Mari Okubo, and newcomer guitarist Lily Maase perform with the Co-Producer of AIRplay08, 2008 Oscar Nominee for Music Tevin Thomas on keyboards.

Thomas and Dolgy Ludwig met at the home of mutual friend Ornette Coleman, where Mari Okubo, a Japanese opera singer who performs Coleman's music written specifically for her, also became interested in the project AIRplay08. Thomas knew soulful British vocalist Tessa Souter, and Dolgy Ludwig had worked with young American solo electric guitarist Lily Maase before. A.I.R. Gallery with its Feminist roots appreciated the ideas of the project where women from an international background with different musical inspirations could work together spontaneously and without censure to create something that expressed a personal vision. "To be more oneself is the essence of a powerful art expression, and women's work in all the arts - who are grossly underrepresented in the cultural record, as the artists Guerrilla Girls and critic Jerry Saltz continue to point out - must be allowed into 'the big conversation'. I created AIRplay08 - like all my euphonic collaborations synthesizing words and sounds and visual images - to be unpredictable, and therefore potentially magnificent at all times."

The many small live paintings made side by side with Dolgy Ludwig's subjects while still musically evocative are painted thick and tough, and form a figurative bedrock to the flying fancy of the collection of over twenty very large word paintings stretched in all directions in the exhibit JustAmericanWords, with titles like WorkingClassHeroStillSomething2B, WontBackDown, Chutes2NarrowInBushwick, and NewYorkIsABrickHouse! - and the collective effect is an explosion of manic form and color where the painterly interpretation of the lyrics jubilantly sings and springs from the oversized paper picture planes.

One of the centerpieces of the new collection is the wildly evocative rap lyric of "BrooklynFunkUniverse" by musician Everton Sylvester. "I made BrooklynFunkUniverse for myself. I thought it might be an infringement of copyright to paint someone's words, but I just wanted to have this painting on my own wall. I felt illicit painting it there in the studio, but I felt great to be able to just make as an artist what I wanted to own, it's a way around the whole idea of product which has nothing to do with love and energy and art.

"It's a cult classic but I heard it for the first time when a Brooklyn sculptor I painted gifted the music to me. Then, I found the address of the musician Everton Sylvester who wrote and performed the song "I Got Cash" with his group the Brooklyn Funk Essentials, and I mailed him a burn of the jpg on disc. He wrote me back that it was not a copyright infringement in his opinion, that he loved the painting. He said that though the song had been called Pornography when it first played, I had made it Art.

"This music inspires me to make a painting alone in the studio. I feel exhilarated listening to the music running on a loop on my headphones for the two weeks it takes for these five foot watercolors, and the concentration needed to work in this medium only adds to the intensity.

"Now, it is also important in this painting that something narrative has moved me initially to make the piece - in this case the seemingly funny words spiraling from the center like a tiny sardonic voice that you realize is actually raging against the still present racism in America - so there is a reasoning behind the red, white and blue color choices, stars and stripes and the vision of a universe of words that can hurt but also affirm, hence the title. But everything points to the humanity of that voice that is evident always.

"I have been told that there is tremendous sexuality in the paintings, that they are Hot. Work like DoWhatYouWant InAmerica, ConcreteJungleBoogieCreationStory and MarryPopinsDoesManhattan, all made immediately after BrooklynFunkUniverse, literally drip with sex, I agree. But it's just a visualization of that essential sparkliness and crackle that makes you want to dance, sing, drip, befriend, even make kids. Much better than war. You live longer too."

Like BrooklynFunkUniverse each of Dolgy Ludwig's paintings today have unspaced run-on titles. In a way, it's a take on computer technology and how e-mail addresses and other verbiage run together. Dolgy Ludwig's electric energy level and enthusiastic embrace of the technological world suggests that when the calendar flipped from December 31, 1999 to January 01, 2000, she was the first to sign up for the 100-year dash into the new century. Indeed, while she is home schooling the youngest of her four children in Brooklyn, she keeps in constant contact with her three teenagers and husband at home in Toronto through "Skype" and other hi-tech modern devices.

There may, however, be a rather more low-tech explanation for the titling. "Outside my Bushwick window I saw graffiti that was spontaneous and had formal integrity, and was meaningful to me.

"Later, outside my Hell's Kitchen window New York City at night was like those same run-on graffiti words on the wall, and all my paintings reflected this. The titling like the framing is a continuous formal challenge for conscientious visual artists who want to make all the art of a piece.

"Graffiti that has meaning for people is like the blues. It comes out of human pain, and rap which makes art from suffering, and the city lights seen from way up high indicate that people are living all around us, and art can gain succor from this awareness of a larger sound, a larger music.

"You know in your heart that no frame can contain a great painting, can properly transition it from the two-dimensional picture plane to the multi-dimensional world of your life whether in the gallery encounter or your home. Just as no good piece of music can be contained - if you close your eyes and listen all sound is one composition."

This notion of continuum has also been evident in Dolgy Ludwig's professional art career, which has been ongoing for only the past several years but feels longer, given the dramatic evolution in both her work and the diversity of locations where she has practiced her craft. "The new work is obviously a complete break with past image making in the new ways of dealing with the space of the surface, but my work is always informed by a long history of study. I have four university degrees, including film, architecture, theater, as well as painting.

"Picasso and Matisse are the best examples, both prolific hard-workers, whose styles developed and in radical ways changed, but their signature didn't need to be a word on the canvas, you could always tell the individual hand of each."

These past images she refers to, and past shows, include 2004's much-buzzed Las Vegas exhibit of Playboy Bunny paintings "Some Girls Next Door" and 2007's "SPLASH!" an event on Toronto Island CoProduced with jazz presenter Ron Gaskin, where Dolgy Ludwig, frantically paced, whipped out fluidly dynamic portraits of a string of musicians who were painted as they performed - which followed on the heels of OneGRRLGal her painting performance at art.les.studios with New York local jazz band SEARCH, and is a forerunner to AIRplay08 upcoming at A.I.R. Gallery Chelsea.

In 2003, looking for subjects "with strong fighter faces that were full of war and grief," Dolgy Ludwig began "The Police Project" a collection of live portraits of British bobbies stationed in a rough London neighborhood, many in poses unconventional, yet curiously familiar. "We talked together as I worked and the resultant paintings I see as a collaboration - so I gave them digital copies to remember our experience together." This marriage of the familiar with the unconventional is a constant, if not always commented on, aspect of Dolgy Ludwig's work.

Even in earlier paintings at the start of the century where she would be channeling Cezanne into one of her richly colored still lifes of fruit, there would be Post Modern, fancifully shaped and colored windows and other portals moving off in one corner or other of the painting. Like Cezanne, she took the traditional subjects as a starting point to stretch the dimensions of conventional painting practice, moving volumetrically past the traditional genres into visual places unknown. The landscapes began to bend on the horizon line, the flowers broke free of the garden's expected visual bedrock. Likewise, in some of her earlier images, centered on voluptuous, almost Rubenesque nudes, you'll find little Keith Haring-like figures flying around the peripheries of the canvas. The energy and joyfully manic movement of these otherwise still and two-dimensional works of art gives, in Dolgy Ludwig's hand moving the paint brushes, new meaning to the term motion pictures.

"Telling a story through movement, like Eisenstein, we push the boundaries of the painting itself and enter a powerful area of stretched space, an inner dimension of time and energy. My paintings are simple: you see the color first probably, then the movement of the shapes as well, joining in the way the colors move inherently pushing forward and receding while beside each other since no color exists alone and is altered by proximity to other colors and translucencies, transparencies, opacities . But at the moment the words which at first are a jumble of sorts before the logic of their placement has effect, then that is the moment when it works, that's the time the viewer puts it all together - and sings. They sing a lot."

The motion in her pictures may certainly have been informed by her work on the set of a couple of big budget Hollywood movies filmed in her native Toronto at the beginning of the 1990's. "Antonioni, Bergman, Truffaut, Scorsese, and so on. These are visual masters and their environments of light and sound tap into a collective dreaming unconscious. They inspire everyone who has the eyes to see and the ears to hear.

"The other factor is darkness, that in the darkness of a movie theater I can feel my passions move with a room that is also fixated on the emotional and visual elements concocted by the film maker. As a painter, I hope for this completeness of reaction."

Dolgy Ludwig's other showings at A.I.R. Gallery have included "EveryoneWhoHelpedMeGetMy01Visa," sixty portraits dedicated to everybody who assisted her in attaining her entry Visa to the U.S. - a prolonged and grueling process that emerged as a kind of Comedy of Errors ... and Horrors - and "FaithPainting," another large series of small portraits made with Hindus, Orthodox Jews, Arab Muslims, and Nuns, all whom Dolgy Ludwig has befriended while biking Brooklyn. "You can't imagine the diversity of the music

I've been given to work from - I find everyone can get together around music." If her adopted New York is essentially a city that never sleeps, Dolgy Ludwig has absorbed that essence into her entire being.

"Listen, New York gives you your chance. If you can do anything well, you will be rewarded here and recognized - you want to do your best every day, just for the fun of seeing how far it will go. So that can wear you out for sure. I've been painting day and night now for a year, many days biking to paint all over town. Earlier during this Fellowship I received from A.I.R., which was juried by representatives from 'Art in America', 'The Brooklyn Rail' and NYU/Tisch so that in itself initiated my hope to live up to high expectations here, I won the National Arts Club Award for Annual Best in Show for one of my music word paintings, Mayor Bloomberg chose my landscape to represent the city for Immigrant Heritage Week, and I showed all over this year probably too many places but I didn't notice it I was flying so high, including a trip to the London Jazz Festival to paint New York pianist Andy Milne there with a dancer, and a trip to Toronto to jury for Artscape.

"So, sure I sometimes feel manic and I'd like to get sleep in the city, but you know I have an energy that is limitless here."

In the heat of an unusually warm April afternoon, Dolgy Ludwig is on the last leg of this marathon, clutching her vibrant watercolor paintings as she heads down Manhattan's 10th Avenue to her gallery.

"In New York you tap into something that is deeper than the everyday, like the core inside the earth, there's fire here within." And with that, the traffic light changes. Dolgy Ludwig is already on the other side of the street the second it flashes green.

Ira Band

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Pop music critic and arts columnist Ira Band wrote daily for the Toronto Sun for five years, then the Toronto Star for three years before beginning his current collection of pop culture essays.

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