

## THE CONFINES OF CREATIVITY: COUNTERCURRENT REVIVES 'TEN TINY DANCES,' FEATURES QUEER TEXAS ARTISTS

Posted On 01 Apr 2017



Identity Politics: Openly gay Houstonian Harrison Guy performs as part of *Ten Tiny Dances* in CounterCurrent's 2016 festival. This year, three openly gay dancers will participate in the production. Photo: dabfoto creative

***By Josh Inocencio***

For the fourth year in a row, the CounterCurrent Festival will take over Houston for a week in April and feature site-specific performance pieces that, for the most part, can't be viewed in a traditional theater space—or if they could, they'd have a vastly different effect on viewers. The performance-based pieces will include dance, music, theater, performance art, film, and audio experiences. Additionally, the free festival seeks to produce work that is socially relevant, and often has a political edge. Even more so than previous years, CounterCurrent 2017 will focus on “identity politics”—including LGBT-identified artists and work.

“CounterCurrent is based at UH, but is a publicly-oriented program that brings in visiting artists from the outside. We do work with Houston artists, but we work with a lot more artists

<http://www.outsmartmagazine.com/2017/04/the-confines-of-creativity-counter-current-revives-ten-tiny-dances-features-queer-texas-artists/>

from all over the world,” says Karen Farber, executive director of the University of Houston Cynthia Woods Mitchell Center for the Arts. “We ask them what work they would either make or show in Houston that makes sense for this place. We ask them to spend time here and get to know the place. If they are making new work, we commission that work and help them develop it.”

This year, the festival is confronting gender issues with pieces like *Farmhouse/Whorehouse*, an artist lecture by Suzanne Bocangera, and *Snow White*, a play by experimental novelist and playwright Donald Barthelme produced at The Catastrophic Theatre. But *Ten Tiny Dances*, which is a series of dance pieces confined to a 4×4 platform, features three LGBT-identified artists.

While CounterCurrent features new pieces each year, the festival has consistently produced *Ten Tiny Dances* (a format that originated in Portland, Oregon) with a different overarching theme each year. In this year’s case, it’s not only the emphasis on identity politics, but also the commissioning of pieces from Texas artists.

“We’re interested in the set structure that requires artists to work in a very confined environment,” says Farber. “[*Ten Tiny Dances*] also breaks down elitism and allows dance to create a closer relationship with the audience.”

For this year’s *Dances*, the three dancers who identify as gay are all choreographing and/or performing pieces that require a certain level of vulnerability as they confront controversial material. And for some of them, performing on a tiny platform in a huge space has inspired a new level of intimacy in their work.

“I want my work to be seen in more intimate spaces, because I think it’s easier to connect to something that way. Some of the really delicate, sensitive, human things are more accessible in an intimate space,” says Joshua L. Peugh, artistic director of Dark Circles Contemporary Dance in Dallas. “I don’t care much for the proscenium stage anyway.”

Peugh, a New Mexico native who studied dance at Southern Methodist University, originally co-founded Dark Circles Contemporary Dance while he was living and performing in South Korea. When he returned to Texas, he brought a branch of that company to Dallas.

“Right now, I’m preparing for a world premiere in May that deals with gay boys and sex education, and how the lack of sex education that we get as kids leads to adult men feeling confused, shameful, and lonely,” says Peugh. “[The ‘tiny dance’ format] will be a part of that, and a nice platform [to communicate the] isolation and exposure.”

From Austin, Charles O. Anderson, the current head of the dance department at the University of Texas, is choreographing a piece that features two dancers on the platform. Similar to Peugh, Anderson will feature a segment related to a larger work he’s crafting entitled *(Re)Current Unrest*.

“(Re)Current Unrest came out of my interest with Steve Reich’s early compositions and how they’re related to the civil-rights era and the Cuban Missile Crisis,” says Anderson. “It’s a system of movement based around the concept of unrest and being ‘woke.’”

Anderson’s choreography, as he describes it, is greatly informed by African-diaspora dance forms as well as black, queer contemporary dance styles. And while Anderson insists this piece is not overtly political, his work is certainly socially conscious.

“Because of the particular time we’re in right now, I feel moved to make space and move in performances that allow us to keep considering the human implications in our current sociopolitical situation,” adds Anderson. “And I’m interested to see how people respond to this movement vocabulary.”

Finally, Sixto Wagan, the director of UH’s Center for Art and Social Engagement, will perform a piece that looks at queerness, immigration, and his experience as an Asian American.

“I’m the least formally trained person of the evening, so my work is not specifically choreography,” says Wagan, who is not a professional dancer but grew up performing Filipino folk dance in his family and community. “I have approached this piece thinking about identity, particularly in light of current politics and understanding how the environment is affecting me.

“I’m excited to be able to perform again and rethink how important art is in every stage of my life,” he adds.

In keeping with CounterCurrent’s overall vision, each of these three queer dancers are approaching issues and establishing an intimate relationship with the audience. As Farber says, “The festival is exploring that question of how artists can come at a problem. I hope that what people come away with is at least some sense of how artists grapple with problems.

“And the festival is more than a collection of shows. [Audiences should also attend our] parties and artist talks,” adds Farber. “I feel like many *OutSmart* readers may enjoy that alternative, and I want people to have a great time and experience art. There will be lots of little receptions and chances to meet the artists. Plus, it’s free! So you can really take a chance on something.”

**What:** CounterCurrent 2017

**When:** April 18–23

**Where:** Various Houston locations

**Details:** [countercurrentfestival.org](http://countercurrentfestival.org)

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