

Elizabeth Johnson, Curator's talk, at Arts Community of Easton (ACE) monthly meeting, January 14, 2020, Williams Center for the Arts.

####

First, I want to thank Michiko Okaya for inviting me to be a Guest Curator. It was her idea to curate a show about Ross Gay's *The Book of Delights*.

I've enjoyed working with **Michiko, Wendy Sterling, Erica Hutchins, and Steve Gamler.**

As for making the catalogue: **Matthew Crain** was content editor and **Stevie Daniels** was line editor.

Ross Gay read on campus while I was: thinking of a title for the show, choosing artists and writing the curator's statement. I asked him if he was still writing delights and was impressed to hear him **emphatically say that he was not.** He has moved on to other projects.

In one 'delight' called "**Stacking Delights,**" Gay rails against his tendency to hoard them. He forces himself to wipe the slate clean and approach each day anew.

He writes about the joys of loitering, and taking your time, and not being efficient because **these** were things that black people were punished for. He likes his mom's word **lollygagging.** Loafing creates opportunity for delight, or what he calls the 'fruits of laziness.' And "**Delight does not truck with Ought or Should.**"

His writing pushes back against **Puritanism** and white privilege.

He quotes a friend who says: “**You’d have to be crazy NOT TO be paranoid as a black person in this country.**”

He’s for freeing himself of Consuming and Producing or being a dupe of Capitalism.

As for the artworld mainstream: He was left cold by visiting the Rothko Chapel in Houston. Yet, while playing **basketball**, he sees a Mark Rothko in a weathered **backboard**.

Ross Gay is a charismatic pacifist. He’s keenly aware of how he affects others and the **golden rule** is central to his book. He is kind to family, friends, animals, plants and strangers. He acts on his impulse to share and overshare.

Endings are always present in this book: Death is ever-present. His last delight gives us the poetic image of the aftermath of a typhoon in the Philippines: salvaged doors that survived the typhoon are stacked in a gazebo. Gay trusts that being in a state of delight naturally leads to the next thing.

Coming up with a title for the show, I followed Gay’s aesthetic: **Passing** refers to the temporary and **Bittersweet** refers to good and bad mixed together.

Regarding Layout of the show:

a. The plan reflects the imbalance of life since some artists have one piece in the show and others several. I did not treat everyone the same. I responded to each artist differently and allowed myself to be inconsistent in choosing which and how many works.

b. I designed a layout that placed large work high on the wall and smaller work low or in organic clusters. I wanted heavy and large things to loom over the show, and work against gravity. I aimed for an airy feeling that holds potential energy.

c. Artists are billed only with their names and websites in the catalogue, I didn't want to have a lot of bios and CVs and career baggage. We made the catalogue and list of works as simple as possible.

d. I wanted to focus attention on the specific pieces of art that were chosen, and I put very different work together on purpose.

e. As for who I chose to be in the show: I chose artists who mix the positive and the negative, where the positive is more dominant.

f. Michiko and I agreed that artists should not illustrate specific delights. Yet each artist fits **Passing Bittersweet** in the same way that Gay's favorite topics overlap. Each artist dovetails in two or three ways with Gay's aesthetic and each other.

In his Preface Gay says:

“My mother is often on my mind. Racism is often on my mind. Kindness is often on my mind. Pop Music. Books. Dreams. Public Space. My garden is often on my mind.”

a. The first two artists I picked were filmmakers:
Ghen Dennis filmed an encounter with *Gustavo* in Puerto Rico after Hurricane Maria, while they share a brief, poignant, but uncomfortable conversation.

Flutter by Mark Street assembles and reshuffles images much in the way Gay writes. A wanderer like Gay, he chronicles visual beauty and chance while traveling.

b. I invited Lafayette College Faculty to exhibit, since Ross Gay attended Lafayette. Seven faculty members were able to participate.

c. I sought strong African American artists: **Anthony Smith, Jr's** piece celebrates John Charles Robinson's contribution to early aviation in the 1930s and 40s, and his support of other black flyers. **Femi J. Johnson's** paintings share his playful, imaginary realm of authoritative, morphing color. Lafayette's **Chawne Kimber** makes quilts that speak to racism with two voices. And **Berrisford Boothe** is an intellectual painter.

d. the **Surprise Choice** is **Fritz Van Orden**: a non-artist Artist. He has no interest in pursuing a career, keeping a bio, CV or building a resume. Like Gay, he's a diarist, but he wouldn't trust me with his diaries, so he chose to painstakingly copy the originals. He used repurposed frames because being cheap is integral to his aesthetic.

e. As an outsider, Gay writes from the **Periphery**, the place **Kate Teale** inhabits pondering the horror of losing a home. She creates an evocative, longing, external point of view—looking into a strangers' lit windows. **Scott Sherk** humorously records his cellar's point of view during a dinner party. He says being afraid to go down there was one of the reasons to make the sculpture.

f. **Rebellious**, especially in his garden, Gay would appreciate **Rachael Gorchov's** reassignment of shadows.

g. **Karina Skvirsky** gives doomed laborers the last laugh in the landscape where they worked and died: **in step with** Gay's delight

“Loitering,” that sees an ecstatic black worker in a Carrie Mae Weems photo and can’t help but to anticipate the Boss.

h. **Alex Paik’s** work starts and finishes in dissolve.

He calls his work a metaphor for self and community, a central topic for Gay.

i. **Lisa Stephanelli’s** piece deals with **Public Space** and 9/11, recalling Gay’s delight “Public Lying Down,” about the deviance of napping on the sidewalk.

j. Gay is a sucker for pop music, ‘his’ bands or **Nostalgia**. Likewise, Luke Wynne’s Hollywood photographs recall film and tv stars that he worked with personally, and the era he made them.

k. **Tom McGlynn**, like Gay, aims for extreme **Brevity**, though McGlynn calibrates where Gay prevaricates.

l. **Tenesh Webber** fuses drawing and thinking, much like the way Gay joins the body and thinking in the delight “Writing by Hand.”

m. **Kim Bello’s** small but robust works champion **Fragility**.

n. Gay’s **Found Things** make him say Whoa! Yes! **Pat Badt’s** found wood scraps made her think of two Classical Greek figures.

o. What Ross calls: **“The Jenky”** –innovative, barely held together, slipshod fixing, Half-broken and Half-fixed– definitely applies to sculptor **Eileen Weitzman**.

p. As **Medicine**, **Enrico Gomez** explores New Age and Native American magic, referencing the Story of Crow. Gay observes the same noisy birds, as they dispel his cranky mood in **“The Crow’s Ablutions.”**

q. The endurance test, the over-sized weight of **Parenting** is explored by **A Taller Workshop/ Nestor Gil** performance.

r. Gay's unembarrassed musings on **Bodily Functions** fit with **Jase Clark's** video about parasites.

s. **Jim Toia's** Mondrian-style birdfeeders and **Greta Bergstresser's** blunt photos about farm life reflect Gay's constant re-appraisal of **People Interfacing with Nature**.

t. And Gay's delight in discovering **Unexpected Things** matches **Pedro Barbeito's** wonky, genial take on machine logic.

To wrap it up;

I ask you to read Ross's book, absorb the show, read the catalogue, and invent your own categories of delight.

I ask you to pay attention to the the **peripheral** instead of the **status quo**, and see **power** in what's **vulnerable**.