

The verb "depict" has its origins in late Middle English, from the Latin verb "depingere," from "de-," "completely" and "pingere," "to paint."

"Yes. Depict. To Paint Completely. That's it. That is what this musicWitness® is trying to do." A mission in words easier said than done, but artist Jeff Schlanger has successfully created an altogether unique form of personal expression, what he appropriately has labeled the musicWitness® Project. The musicWitness® ceaselessly pays tribute to many of New York's and the world's greatest music improvisers, as it has done regularly since the mid-'70s. In essence, and in Schlanger's own words, it's "a form of applause done with both hands. I'm not making any noise, but basically applauding as hard as I can, or as delicately as I can in all varieties of touch in between, throughout the entire performance in color."

For years, Schlanger has been omnipresent at New York's improvisational high watermark events, including every one of the twelve annual Vision Festivals thus far, as well as international affairs such as Interplay!Berlin (Germany), the Guelph Jazz Festival (Canada) and five years running at the Tampere Jazz Happening (Finland). And his output has been diligently prolific: in Tampere, between a dozen and 15 paintings in three days; at the Vision Festival, which appropriately strives to bring all the arts together, closer to 30 over 5 days. One year he created more than 50 when the Vision Festival was a 13 day affair.

His two primary mediums over the decades have been ceramics and paint. Of the former, his involvement with the medium goes back to 1953. His first national exhibition took place while he was at the Music & Art High School in New York as a ceramics major. He studied with the great Maija Grotell at Cranbrook Academy of Art in Detroit, a life-altering meeting and apprenticeship that served as his vocation realization. He since has dedicated himself as a full-time artist. "The medium of high temperature glazed ceramics is my primary belief system," he says, "a universal timeless communications medium. That includes the timelessness of the intense colors that it's capable of projecting."

Schlanger speaks of these intense colors, specifically the "Blues," referring directly to something he began to learn when he first became involved with Grotell, "a great master of the Blues," touts Schlanger. "I have been learning over these last years to work with my glazes and mineral pigments while the clay is wet, to keep the spontaneity, which is a very challenging way to do this... The Blues in ceramics come primarily from mineral oxides of cobalt and copper... I've been working and studying and experimenting with them like a scientist along with everything else for a long time."

He considers one of his greatest ceramic achievements to be "JOE 1," which served as a welcoming statue (67" in height, and over 300 lbs.) at Schlanger's highly celebrated gallery showing at the CUE Art Foundation in New York in 2005. It also graces the cover of the *SPIRITWORLD* DVD which documents the exhibition, and the music that was performed in conjunction with it.

"As you can see in this sculpture, these hot mineral browns, and oranges and rust colors from iron oxides are developed, at the same time as cooler colors from cobalt and copper to set up deep, indelible color polarity feel-

THE OTHER DIMENSION OF SOUND

Visual artist **Jeff Schlanger** documents ecstatic contemporary jazz through his musicWitness® project. Story by **Laurence Donohue-Greene**

"Prana" (detail)
(William Parker Solo)
27.5 x 40"
live at studio Spirale
recording "Lifting the Sanctions" CD
29 November 2007.





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Jeff Schlanger

Curated by Ree Schonlau Kaneko

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FRONT GALLERY



"JOE 1"
(Joe McPhee)
Thrown & glazed ceramic stoneware
Guardian figure
67 x 24 x 21"
fired out of Maija PEACE Shrine 2005.

ings that I absorb from the music all the time," explains Schlanger. The sculpture was fired in January 2005, during which time he worked with the music of saxophonist/trumpeter Joe McPhee accompanying him every step of the way: "It was his musical vibration in the studio space, and in the pictures of his performances on the walls, but mainly I was paying attention to the way the clay wanted to be in this surrounding that I had to build in order to concentrate this spirit while I was involved in this project." Schlanger is quick to point out that it's not McPhee's physical features that he's attempted to depict; rather the sculpture (one in a long line of such tributes) is an attempt to make a sculpture of his musical spirit. "Often photographers make portraits of individual musicians, which show the essence of their characters in a moment, but I try to express a longer time frame."

Born in New York City in 1937 and raised on East 96th Street, Schlanger began to sketch jazz musicians like Sonny Rollins, Miles Davis and John Coltrane during performances at Philadelphia clubs such as Pep's and the Showboat as far back as 1957.

"My commitment to depict an extended series of whole performances began at Studio Infinity," he remembers, "a musician's loft over the Tin Palace in New York in July 1975. Musicians at that first jam session included Julius Hemphill, Oliver Lake, David Murray, Hamiet Bluiett, Arthur Blythe, Henry Threadgill, Leo Smith, Fred Hopkins, Phillip Wilson. This effort continued through loft movement events at Studio Rivbea, the Ladies' Fort and the Brook, where the focus was on live, creative music and dance. Often there were no photographers, sound-recorders, videographers or chairs for the audience. But what was happening was truly fresh and important so somebody had to try to get it down. I used my hands, first with two pencils, later augmenting the arsenal of marking instruments."

Schlanger just recently came upon his first written statement of purpose in an early notebook. "Music Witness 1976-1980," he reads, "The cutting edge of art in this country is still powered by music stemming from the jazz tradition. As an artist, I draw from the music as a way of learning to listen. Listening, in gratitude, I receive news of life right now and courage to go on. Drawings are the documents of this process, hand-dancing at the edge of time."

Bassist William Parker recently offered this comment to me: "Jeff is very passionate about life and all of its branches. Art, music, color, shape, movement, sound and texture... He is showing us the other dimension of sound, he is looking inside the souls of the musicians, perhaps giving us a view of soul, the colors of the sound as guided by a spontaneous improvisation with ink and paper."

Schlanger has been close to Parker since the mid-'70s, and he regards him as "a master organizer of people and sound." Parker helped bring all the musicians together for the music portion of the CUE Art concert which included McPhee, vocalist Lisa Sokolov and bass clarinetist/multi-instrumentalist Oluyemi Thomas. "Four people (who) had never played together," Schlanger recalls. "But William's infinite flexibility in going with the possibilities... I'm more amazed with each viewing (of the *SPIRITWORLD* DVD) how William in addition to his playing is operating

as a musical director in the most generous and subtle way of passing this musical energy around among all these people in the space, in this populated environment with sculpture and pictures."

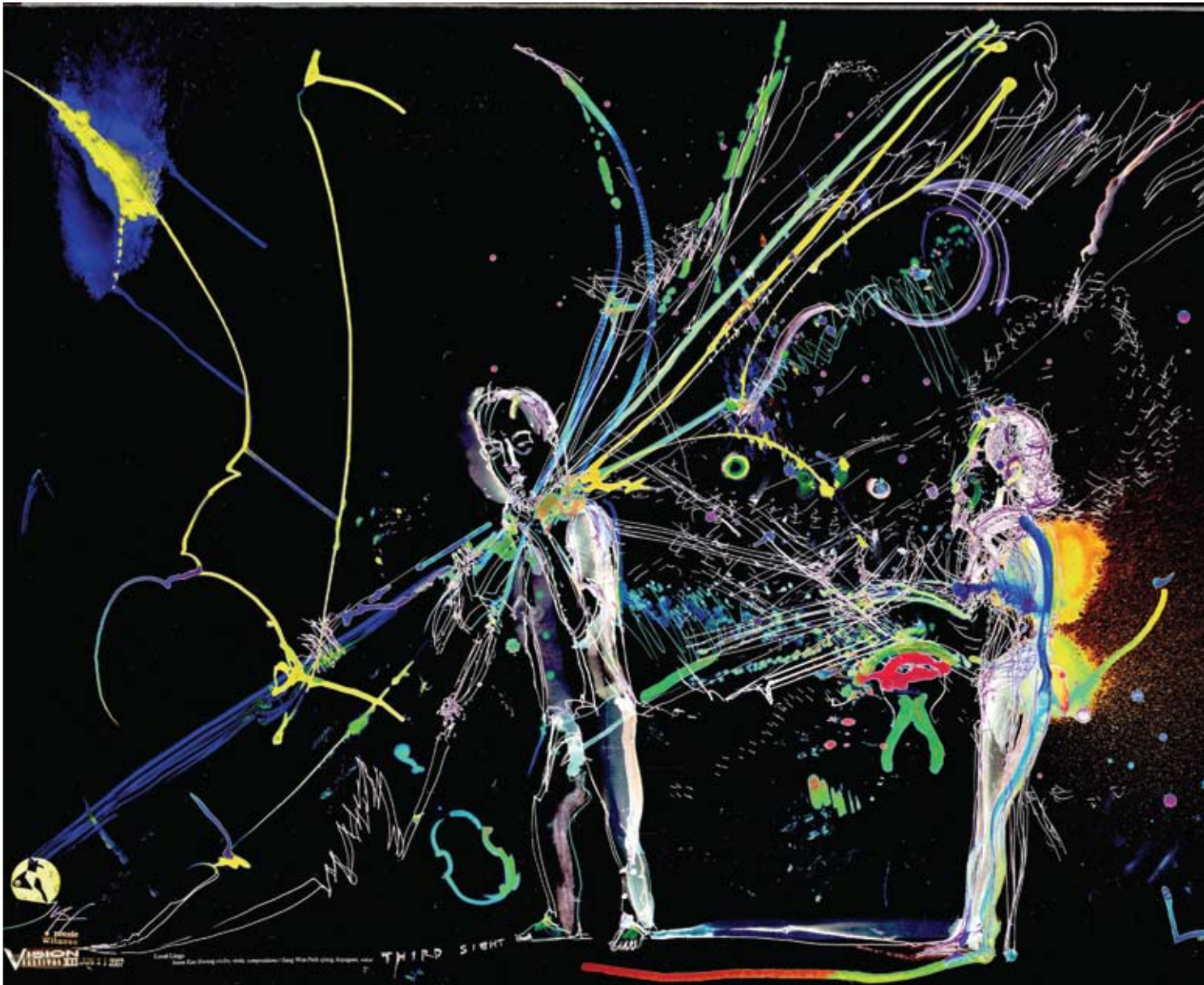
Another of Schlanger's inspirations and early musicWitness® champions and subjects was the great reedman, composer, and World Saxophone Quartet co-founder, Julius Hemphill. To Schlanger and others, Hemphill was "another visionary artist who saw—who perceived—all the arts as being totally connected and capable of doing things together that were beyond what any one of them could do alone. He saw things that way on a daily basis." Hemphill's deep connection to Schlanger's work is unquestionable and on the mark when he himself once said that mW®'s five covers for his recordings represent the music's "appropriate visual component". With CUE showing approximately 60 paintings and near a dozen sculptures in addition to the musical aspect and subsequent *SPIRITWORLD* document (not to mention the pieces made during those very performances), we see that Hemphill was indeed not far off.

"This gets into a deep subject about the visual art and its whole history and how it operates," said Schlanger. "Music has been a subject for visual artists since the beginning of human time. This particular project is my take on that, now, in my lifetime... You can also look at each of these pictures as an abstract composition of colors, and lines and rhythms, which corresponds to the basic language of music." With a grounding in abstract art, Schlanger feels a connection both to the Western tradition and to Asian ink painting, in which spontaneity and not altering the results of an inspired action are prerequisites.

Of course the chemistry of ceramic colors is quite different than that of paints. In the pictures Schlanger creates, he primarily uses acrylics, often organic pigments mixed with an organic plastic base that dries fast enough for him to be able to get it out of the concert space before the venue's doors are closed and locked up for the night. His unique position at the Vision Festival allows him to hang each piece up between sets, creating an intriguing continuum and connection from one to the next, which indeed is in line with mW®'s ultimate ongoing mission: "From the beginning, the mW® vision is that all the individual performance pictures are conceived as connected sections of a continuous scroll, a long-term annotated seismographic record of live, improvised creative musical energy." To that end, it is interesting to note that two of the image pairings selected for this feature ("Listen" and "Baba Fred") were painted within days of one another at the most recent Vision Festival in June 2007.

"Prana" partially recreates William Parker's second self-produced solo recording (*Lifting the Sanctions*, No More Records), an especially personal experience for Schlanger as it was recorded in his studio. Schlanger created five separate pictures corresponding to compositions Parker played that fall day in 1997, all of which were displayed at CUE. "Prana" was the cover image and final component to that series—the other four make up the liner notes within the CD's insert.

"Like the sculpture of Joe McPhee," says Schlanger, "this is a picture of the spirit of William Parker in the midst of the music... it was just him and his bass and the music, and that's



above:
 "Listen"
 Jason Kao Hwang & Sang Won Park
 live @ Vision-12, New York
 21 June 2007.

left:
 Jeff Schlanger photographed by
 Jack Vartoogian / Front Row Photos

below:
 "Prana" juxtaposed with "Listen"





what you see there—how he stands with his bass and how the music unfolds out of that stance.”

“Listen” portrays violinist Jason Kao Hwang with Korean musician Sang Won Park (who plays the kayagum and ajeng, which are traditional Korean string instruments resembling the zither) at last year’s Vision Festival in what was reported by many to be one of the festival highlights. “It was extraordinary... sometimes a performance just becomes—for want of a better word—perfect,” recalls Schlanger fondly. “I was conscious of this quality while it was going on because every mark on this paper is directly connected to a musical event, a sequence of sounds... And as soon as it was over, I had this feeling that there was nothing superfluous, and no mistakes were made. By ‘mistakes’ I mean clumsiness in terms of response to the sound.”

Reproduced here is the negative color version (black instead of white background), a technology Schlanger has been working with since the mid ‘80s, to great effect. His exploration of printing from the transparencies he was making to document paintings (instead of from the negatives), and working with reverse colors, using film technology, opened up a whole other realm of possibilities. Juxtaposed with the positive white background of “Prana,” it suggests a single intended work. Additionally, the continuity through the lines moving from the center to left of “Prana” compliment the similar lengthy strokes jutting out from the center to the right and left of “Listen.”

One common aspect of every mW@ document is the energy generated by Schlanger’s textural two-handed approach of paints and pens that cover a rainbow of possibilities. Indeed, Schlanger admits, “There is a velocity with which the sounds seem to fly off the high strings of the violin, which is not like anything else,” referring to the felt movement of “Listen”. And one can sense the heat source coming from Park in the sun-bright yellows and oranges. Yet another of surely countless significant threads between these two pieces is that Schlanger had first heard and met Hwang when the violinist was a member of Parker’s first group called Commitment. Without hesitation, Schlanger affirms of the two images, which when facing one another seem to participate in the same musical and spiritual conversation, “It’s one picture. For the purposes of presenting an initial view of my graphic work... this is a way of saying something through visual art about the resonance of the coordinated streaming power of music. It’s deep in time, and it’s deep in space, and it’s deep in connectedness over decades.”

“Ayer Unity” documents a November 2006 performance by the Albert Ayler repertoire group Spiritual Unity, comprising (from L to R): bassist Henry Grimes (who celebrated his 71st birthday that evening and of course is a veteran of Ayler’s groups), drummer Chad Taylor, trumpeter Roy Campbell and guitarist and nominal leader Marc Ribot. This piece captures them on a special evening at the Tampere Jazz Happening in Finland, during a tour where they were playing practically a different country every night.. They performed in a beautiful old brick-walled Customs House building in the center of the city, and these very large bricks (twice the size of bricks we’re accustomed to here in America)



are prominently utilized to border the work. Since Finland was where Schlanger’s ceramics teacher came from, his frame selection was an obvious choice—“This is deep with me, so I needed to have those bricks visible.” And of Campbell’s performance in particular, Schlanger vividly remembers him “reaching an extraordinary place. I’ve been listening to him since back in the late 1970s, (and) that particular evening he was carrying the spirit of Albert Ayler into Finland and beyond with tremendous courage and tremendous strength.”

Reciprocating Schlanger’s appreciation, Campbell recently commented to me, “Every one of his paintings is unique to the concerts he attends... He has his own well-defined style, just like certain greats of the music. Jeff captures the moment, he is attuned and sensitive, and is very spiritually attuned to the music and the musicians.” In essence, Schlanger is like an added contributor to the ensemble he witnesses and documents in the moment, equally as much an improviser as anyone on stage.

Of “Ayer Unity,” he points out that, “The rhythm is through the whole piece.” And he’s obviously not just referring to Taylor behind the kit, but also to the sounds jumping forth at their own pace from Campbell’s brass multi-extensions that reach beyond his bell, Grimes’ stormy bass and Ribot’s jagged guitar, all elements communicated through the mW@’s ambidextrous approach.

“Fred’s DCs” similarly comes with a border, though this time it’s a thick black one. Pianist Eri Yamamoto, trumpeter Lewis Flip Barnes, saxophonist Daniel Carter, bassist William Parker and drummer Hamid Drake played two consecutive sets one night at John Zorn’s small space on the Lower East Side in New York known as The Stone. The mW@ was there for both sets, a rare opportunity to “just dig in and explore,” as Schlanger puts it, “one long performance with a short break.” I don’t think I’ve heard a more accurate description of The Stone’s nightly listening experiences than Schlanger’s recollection from this evening in particular: “You can just feel a vacuum as the ears of the audience suck the sound out of the musicians’ instruments!”

“Fred,” right in the middle of the picture, is the name of Parker’s bass. And “Fred’s DCs” refers to the several significant DC’s Parker and his bass have worked with over the years: trumpeter/leader Don Cherry, saxophonist/trumpeter Daniel Carter and drummer Denis Charles—the three DCs to whom this night’s performance was dedicated.

In addition to the aesthetically mirroring thick borders to each, Schlanger also comments on the obvious musical connection: “William and Roy Campbell are musical brothers from the Bronx. They represent something vital. They both travel the world now, but they also represent the heart and soul of New York, the real New York, not the high rise New York, not the high-end condominium New York—but the New York of the people, working people, who are making the city function and who I grew up with on the East Side at a time when working people could find an apartment in Manhattan.... So, the connection between Roy Campbell and William Parker is so deep and so multi-faceted in both the cosmic, the spiritual, and intensely practical and physical terms. And they have shared so much, and they are so close—that this is all one statement.”



"Ayer Unity"
 Roy Campbell with Henry Grimes,
 Chad Taylor, Marc Ribot
 30 x 45"
 live at Tampere, Finland Jazz Happening
 3 November 2006.



"Fred's DCs"
 William Parker with
 Eri Yamamoto, Lewis "Flip" Barnes,
 Rob Brown & Hamid Drake
 live at the Stone, New York
 24 January 2006.

“I’m not making any noise, but basically I’m applauding as hard as I can,

“Move with the Years” represents one of many mW© documents of pianist/composer/leader Muhal Richard Abrams and the AACM (Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians). Done at the Community Church of New York in late 2005, it, like “Fred’s DCs,” spans the course of two sets, the first part of the evening being a solo performance, the following one a premiere of a series of compositions with an orchestra of fine New York-based players. From reedmen Marty Ehrlich and Howard Johnson, brass men Eddie Allen and Alfred Patterson, to vibist Bryan Carrott and drummer Andrew Cyrille (drums), amongst many others—though “their specific physiognomy isn’t there,” as Schlanger puts it, “the sound of the orchestra is.” Schlanger’s visual message of music has always placed the sound as paramount, and

here is no exception. Muhal Richard Abrams and Schlanger share a mutual admiration and level of respect for one another. “(He) is someone who, like Julius Hemphill and William Parker, sees all the arts as one,” Schlanger says of Muhal. “He is tremendously, vitally connected to the visual arts and can see their connection to music... I never expected any response from a viewer of my work to be as complete and communicative as many times Muhal has offered... he can see the whole thing and experiences its connection to what he’s trying to do. This tremendous arsenal of expressive means he has encourages me to keep going.” “Baba Fred” came into being last June at the Vision Festival in New York at the Orensanz Foundation. It features (from L to R) three Chicagoans—Fred Anderson, drummer/per-

cussionist Hamid Drake and bassist Harrison Bankhead. Schlanger shared this thought on the significance of this very special set tributed through this work: “This picture to me is a demonstration of the kind of cohesion and unified energy that is possible when three creative people are really coordinated.” Anderson was a recipient of the Lifetime Recognition Award at the 2005 Vision, and Schlanger concedes, “I’m not the one who can explain in words what Fred Anderson means as soon as he stands up there with his tenor horn.” You can certainly get a good idea, though, by having a look at what excitement in sound Mr. Anderson created onstage via the dotted rainbow curvature that flows to and from Drake with no distinct beginning or end. Schlanger’s admiration for the drummer is also enormous: “There is no way that

"Move with the Years"
Muhai Richard Abrams & Orchestra
27.5 x 40"
live at Community Church, New York
11 November 2005.



"Baba Fred"
Fred Anderson, Hamid Drake,
Harrison Bankhead
30 x 45"
live at Vision-12, New York
22 June 2007.



or as delicately as I can, throughout the entire performance, in color.”

anybody can say in words what Hamid Drake does with the drums, the life he brings to any situation... this large man is someone who is put on this earth to make everybody feel good... Everybody loves Hamid!" Drake was actually responsible for naming this piece. His first comments to Schlanger after the music from the trio's set ended, "Wow! Baba Fred, the teacher—our teacher!"

The subtitle to this piece (which you will notice written along the bottom portion) is "All Creation = Open Space", a fundamental enough concept that came directly out of that set in those words. "Because that's what it is," states Schlanger. "If you open up a place in which people can enter with their best spirit, it's amazing what can happen. But you see and I see the tremendous struggle, over literal physical open space, in

which people can meet and do this thing. It's brutal in New York, and it's brutal in so many places."

Of the immediate and obvious shared geography of "Move with the Years" and "Baba Fred," Schlanger explains, "To me, this double picture represents the sustained creative contribution of this magnificent group of musicians that have connected Chicago and New York in the most vital creative way."

Put succinctly, Schlanger's musicWitness@ project makes visible a hidden dimension of the live musical experience. He has frequently said, "I see these pictures first as abstract transcriptions of music; they are maps of listening to me." His ability to translate that which cannot be spoken but only experienced is a miraculous achievement in itself.

Describing his pieces individually or on the whole is no easy task, but Schlanger philosophically correlates their collective function as "a vast spectrum of human communication. We need to help each other be aware of this rainbow of ways. We [should] encourage especially our young people to learn to use whichever aspects of this rainbow of expressive media that feel natural to them in order to communicate how they feel, and to express the kind of world they believe we can live in together." *

Laurence Donohue-Greene is the editor of All About Jazz New York. This is his first feature for SIGNAL to NOISE