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Portrait of an Artist Framed by Time

Performance pioneer Jared Bark's forgotten past is remembered in restaged pieces at a Whitney Museum show

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By **ANDY BATTAGLIA**

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Actors performed Jared Bark's 'Krishna Concrete' at the Whitney Museum on Jan. 18. *Claudio Papapietro for The Wall Street Journal*

Jared Bark has been a constant in the New York art world for more than 40 years, no matter how his story is framed.

For starters, he is the founder and president of Bark Frameworks, one of the premier framers of fine art in the city. Then there is a forgotten part of his story for which he is currently having a moment, in honor of work that can never be framed: the tradition of downtown performance art he helped pioneer in the 1970s.

"I thought about it often over the years," Mr. Bark said of his secret past, rescued from obscure historical lore and put on display in the Whitney Museum of American Art's survey "Rituals of Rented Island: Object Theater, Loft Performance, and the New Psychodrama—Manhattan, 1970-1980."

When he was new to the city, with a bargain loft on West Broadway, Mr. Bark, now 69 years old, helped establish SoHo as a postindustrial art hub. In that freewheeling era, aspects of theater, dance, cinema, stand-up comedy and physical larks of all kinds colluded in what would come to be known as performance art. His peers included the musician Laurie Anderson, filmmaker Jack Smith, dancer Yvonne Rainer and theater directors Robert Wilson and Richard Foreman—all celebrated in the Whitney exhibit.

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Mr. Bark, for his part, enacted performances in the '70s that merged poetic storytelling with theatrical playacting and primitive multimedia spectacles. "In the show is stuff I had or stuff I rebuilt," he said of old props on view at the Whitney, all of which featured in his stints on stage. "I opened a box and there was the suit with light bulbs on it, but the trousers had disappeared. The chair with the outboard motor [from a boat] I had to reconstruct, because I had given the motor away and lost the chair. I had to replace the rat traps."

Though his work proved influential in its time, Mr. Bark turned his energies early on to his framing business. Some of his first work was for his friend Donald Judd, framing some of the artist's own prints and pieces from his collection by Rembrandt, Andy Warhol, Yayoi Kusama and Claes Oldenburg.

"I approached framing as an artist more than as a businessman," Mr. Bark said at his 27,000-square-foot Bark Frameworks operation in Long Island City, in a building that was once a Christie's warehouse. "I was focused on frame design and the preservation of art, and I was just trying to do that the best that I could. It's a similar impulse but a different activity."

Over the years, he framed artworks by van Gogh, Degas, Jasper Johns and numerous contemporary artists showing in the city's blue-chip galleries.

"I once pulled up in a cab outside his studio, and he was sitting in the sun in front of different grades of Plexiglas, looking to see how the light changes the color of the matte board," said James Martin, executive director of the Richard Avedon Foundation, who met Mr. Bark while he was working on frames for the famed photographer. "He was looking at Plexiglas that was new versus Plexiglas that had aged, just to make sure that decisions he made 10 or 20 years ago were holding up."

While his framing business thrived, Mr. Bark's history as a performance artist grew more distant—until his work found its way into the Whitney show.

"You can go back in time and find these moments and practices that offer different configurations for how art can operate and how artists can generate themselves as cultural participants," said Jay Sanders, curator of the Whitney exhibit. "I feel like this was a missing moment, with a missing set of working methods and ideas."

Mr. Bark said the show, which closes Sunday, captures the era. "I like the sense that you're in a bazaar or some sort of hurly-burly town square," he said. "You can turn in any direction and there is something lively and exciting and perhaps disquieting going on."

He also returned to his roots, with a restaging of an old piece, "Krishna Concrete," recently performed at the museum. It featured recordings of Mr. Bark's voice telling stories of a spiritual journey through India, with video screens, an interlude for live flute and an actor wheeling a neon light below umbrellas made to look like eyes. At one point, Mr. Bark lit a matchstick house that went up in flames.

"One of the things that is most exciting about performing is that I can draw from all parts of my life and interests and fascinations, and find a place for everything," he said. "It certainly awakened that force."

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