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The Impossible Blue Rose: Lisa Lipton's Road Show

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As any rambler knows, the road is a place where one's journey is too often over before it has really begun. You arrive before you have found what you are looking for and, after all, isn't arriving irrelevant? As too many bumper stickers attest, the journey is more important than the destination. Despite the cliché, there is a hard truth in that sentiment—we never get “there” because we are always already “here.” A philosopher might say that the journey consists of understanding where here is.

If you agree that the journey is the point of the trip—and it certainly is for Lisa Lipton—then isn't how you go, and who you meet along the way, more important than where you end up?

For now, Lipton is in Halifax, her hometown and the place where she first went to art school—she graduated from NSCAD University in 2003—but how long she remains is always in question.

Lipton's art reveals a penchant for moving on and hitting the road. After graduate school at the University of Windsor, where she graduated from in 2006, she travelled across Canada, doing artist residencies and other short-term gigs, with Halifax as a base. She played in bands, was included in exhibitions, made her work and she evolved her distinctive and heartfelt approach to storytelling.

Her practice is interdisciplinary, multi-genre and collaborative. She combines sculpture with performance, painting and textiles with writing and singing. She writes music and she commissions it. She hires poets and playwrights. She works with actors, singers, dancers and musicians—sometime professionals, but often amateurs. Sculptures become costumes and props. Props and costumes become installations. All of this is recorded and then transformed into yet more means of storytelling, into videos that are integrated into other performances and into stand-alone “films.”

In her words: “My work is heavily devoted to site-specificity and localizing collaboration, time spent within a community in order to build a body of work that resonates within the environment in which it was created.”

The road, and the spots along it where she stops, is one tool she uses in her construction of narratives. Others are the very communities in which she alights. Her work is collaborative and collective in nature; she is as much an organizer as she is a creator. And like the traveller searching for America in Simon and Garfunkel's pop song, she has “some real estate here in my bag.” Lipton makes herself at home wherever she finds herself, and finds communities to tell stories in. And then, she packs up her bag (or her Buick) and gets back on the road, on to the next place, the next event, the next chapter in the story.

Her work is event-based, with every event feeding the next project—as stated, the performance includes props and sets she has made, the performers are in costumes that become components of installations and the performance is recorded and edited into new artworks that are incorporated into yet more performances and events. Lipton's work does not proceed from bodies to series, but rather seems to blur around the edges—the work does not stop and start so much as

it pauses, replays and rewinds. It is the boundless nature of her practice that is the most startling aspect of Lipton's work—for her there seems to be no distinction between “art” and “life”; there is just life, lived as an artwork. Whether searching for a grave in Death Valley; tap dancing in the dark in Los Angeles; having a drink in a seedy bar in Windsor, Ontario, with the universe; or looking for love in all the wrong places (like Middle Sackville, Nova Scotia, or Fairfield, Iowa), nothing in Lipton's fictional worlds is as expected. Disjointed, although connected fitfully through recurring characters, objects and symbols, Lipton's narrative proceeds with its own inner logic, although it is the logic of a dream. However, as Lipton is quick to point out, “It might feel like a dream, but it is based off reality.”

These dreams manifest themselves in different ways—the costumes and props from her 2008 performance and video *Isles and Ice Mates* transform into sculptures, hockey memorabilia that become part of the nationally touring exhibition *Arena: The Art of Hockey* (which I curated for the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia). Costumes and props from her music video *You Can Take My Bicycle* become the core of her exhibition *Stop@forever* (also at the AGNS, curated by Sarah Fillmore in 2012). It is never clear with Lipton's work where one piece stops and another begins. As with any journey, the steps blur together. It's all one road.

Since 2013, Lipton has been working on a multipart project called *The Impossible Blue Rose*. Comprised of nine “chapters,” the feature-length video, which is still in progress, represents the most ambitious phase of Lipton's work to date. A work of “docu-fiction,” Lipton describes the project as “a narrative told through the eyes of eight separate selves or characters.” Each chapter was conceived and performed in different parts of North America: Los Angeles, Death Valley, Fairfield, Vancouver, Windsor, Middle Sackville, Winnipeg and Woody Point, Newfoundland. A ninth and final chapter, planned by the artist to be feature-length, was recently filmed in Hawaii, and is currently being edited.

The work evolved from a previous project, a series of performances and installations called *Blast Beats*, which centred on the technique of responsive drumming between two or more musicians, sustained until an almost trance-like state was achieved. These performances, akin to jazz improvisation seen (or heard) through the prism of heavy metal, fascinated Lipton, and she set herself the challenge of becoming a proficient enough drummer to be taken seriously in this very specific sub-set of musicianship. Practicing for hours a day for months on end, she succeeded, and began to create a network of drummers, mostly female, who joined her in performances. The first chapter of what is becoming *The Impossible Blue Rose* was originally envisioned as the end of the *Blast Beats* project. The planned *Blast Beats Phase III* became *ROOM 95*, although whether it is an ending or a beginning is probably beside the point. What is pertinent is how it sets the stage for the chapters to follow.

Lipton writes: “ROOM 95 is a product of and response to a moment of rest, a stopping point within a journey that carried me from the Maritime seaboard, down the eastern coast, across the south, the desert & westward towards California. Along the path, various personal histories of drummers or rhythmic characters have been collected & documented—all in consideration for contribution to a greater whole.”

The eight chapters that will make up the finished project of *The Impossible Blue Rose* had their genesis in a 2013 road trip Lipton took. Los Angeles, the site of *ROOM 95*, was the mid-point of her journey—there and back again. Another work, *trans DEATH*, documents a search for a previous artwork: the artist's grave in Death Valley. She didn't find it, but a new installation was created. In Fairfield, she worked with a group of artists to create a rave, a subject she

returned to in Vancouver for Harana, the fourth chapter. A residency in Windsor resulted in Paradise City, a conversation between a bartender, a customer and the universe. The most ambitious chapter to date, Greysville, follows a character named Joey as he searches for the meaning of true love. SIRENS takes place around a campfire in Winnipeg, with thoughtful discussion on “the psychologies of destruction, chaos and fear.” The eighth chapter is still in the editing phase at this writing, but was performed and recorded at Woody Point as part of the Gros Morne artist residency.

The Impossible Blue Rose is constructed episodically, punctuated by new performances and events that feed into the next chapter. Each video segment is launched with a performance or performances, which in turn are documented and used to create aspects of the subsequent chapter. Props recur, storylines blur and characters, or their doppelgängers, repeat from chapter to chapter, although lacking in any conventional sense of continuity. The audience for a screening becomes co-opted into the event itself, becoming her collaborators as she creates a new work. For the launch of Greysville, the fifth chapter, for instance, Lipton set up three distinct yet interrelated performances. The first was a performance of a video launch called Greysville meets Paradise, with actors in the audience and on the stage, a video link to a character playing Lipton’s alter-ego Frankie (a male actor—gender switching is a staple of Lipton’s work) and another character reprising the character of the universe from chapter four. There was a commencement address, which I read in the character of the “Principal,” and, finally, there were characters from Greysville (the parents) in the front row of the launch, and the main character, Joey, also made an appearance as a performer. The fictional video launch was overlaid over the actual one, the audience becoming characters themselves in Lipton’s docu-fiction film in progress. The lobby of the theatre featured a recreation of the bar from Paradise City, with a female bartender dressed as the male character from the earlier chapter, serving the same blue cocktails that seem to fuel so much of the story, along with the lone woman sitting at the bar. Off-site, a third component was playing out: a basketball game between the Bayside Jaguars and Deep Chaos. At the end of the screening, the victorious Jaguars rushed the stage and everyone was invited to Paradise for a drink.

Lipton’s story of *The Impossible Blue Rose* is rooted in each of its locations, but is connected by narrative threads that entangle each chapter in a net of allusion, reference and shared props and characters. The eight “selves” that inhabit the story are all, of course, parts of Lipton, whether that character is The Other, Frankie or Joey or some other aspect of the universe. As the traveller, as the ultimate storyteller, she gives shape to this fictional world and adds the base of reality that makes these dreams so compelling.

Curator David Diviney, who nominated Lipton for the Shortlist - 2015 Sobey Art Award, identifies in her work a reflection of suburban culture, a setting where utopian dreams meet dystopic realities and rebellion is played out with skateboards and spray cans, drum kits and fashion. In the 2015 Sobey Art Award exhibition catalogue he writes that Lipton’s production is “a highly original practice that also combines elements of sculpture, video, craft, performance, theatre and dance, not to mention the roles of conductor, choreographer and director she quite often assumes. Aside of the sometimes romantic and nostalgic undercurrents, what surfaces is a carefully considered, multilayered framework that aims to locate via process a forum for collaboration, partnership and exchange.”

The notion of exchange is central to how Lipton talks about her practice. Site-specificity, in her mind, includes not just the place but also the culture, or the community, of the place. She travels, yes, but she also settles, and in that settling she tries

to fit into a new community: “My process begins by taking up residence in a community, observing and immersing myself within it. The narrative of a specific piece develops by translating personal interactions (sights and sounds) into imagery, altering spaces into installation, creating costumes and characters that become the content.”

The journey is a record, with the destination less important than the stops along the way. Lipton’s feature-length video remains in process. When the seventh and eight chapters are released next year, their release will also become a performance, which in turn will feed a final stage: the release of the entire feature – Chapter IX, at some date to be determined. In her restless mixing of music, dance, sculpture, craft, poetry, film and video, performance and more, Lipton reflects the culture in which we find ourselves, distorted and muted perhaps, but nonetheless true for all of that.

Her low-budget, DIY aesthetic creates something that is truer than the film and television aesthetic it mimics, as it presents a dream based in reality. There is often no fourth wall in Lipton’s work—the viewer is always liable to become part of the action, part of the search, part of the journey. That is what is so compelling about this practice, of course: its all-encompassing nature that refuses to settle into one genre or story arc. The work resonates, echoing in our shared space of pop-culture memories and reference points. Its reverberations are like sound waves that despite bouncing and being muffled by walls and windows, still reach us, faintly humming like the sound of wheels in the distance.

Is there truth out there, or true love? There is only one way to find out.