DOUBLE DARE

A tribute to Fred Ho

Sculpture by
LEAH POLLER

“A work that aspires, however humbly, to the condition of art should carry its justification in every line. And art itself may be defined as a single-minded attempt to render the highest kind of justice to the visible universe, by bringing to light the truth, manifold and one, underlying its every aspect. It is an attempt to find in its forms, in its colors, in its light, in its shadows, in the aspects of matter and in the facts of life, what is enduring and essential - their one illuminating and convincing quality – the very truth of their existence…It is, before all, to make you see.”

Joseph Conrad
The Condition of Art

“I only want to do what no one else dares.”

Fred Ho
New York, 2013

DOUBLE DARE

A PORTRAIT OF FRED HO

saxophonist • scholar • teacher • humanist • political activist

By LEAH POLLER
Sculptor

FRED HO FOR LEAH POLLER

I asked Leah Poller what she thought of the term *flaneur*. A few days prior to our first meeting, I was giving a talk at the Berklee College of Music in Boston and met a young Korean American man who had graduated from Columbia University in the area of jazz improvisation-cultural studies. I asked him, as I provocatively often do, what he saw himself doing in the world with that kind of elite and esoteric academic background, and the young man said that he was an aspiring *flaneur*. As I understand it, a *flaneur* is someone without any real expertise in any art form, a self-acclaimed dilettante who cruises by and around the art world. She answered my query in her typical dry humor: "You mean a bluff-eur?" Her answer cracked me up. For years, both she and I in our respective artistic disciplines have encountered the poseurs, fakers, posturers … you name them. Some manifest as gatekeepers, some as academics, some as journalists and critics, some as fans, and some as artists themselves.

Our ability to be frank, honest and candid with one another has started a deep, shared and mutually respectful friendship. I could trust Leah to do a sculpture of me, sitting for the many hours, and not be annoyed, bored or worse, waste my precious time left on earth.

As someone highly self-conscious about my legacy due to the reality of stage 4b metastatic cancer, I have been thrilled with Leah's imagination and desire to imbue and radiate my spirit and energy as the subject of her sculpture. The sittings at her studio townhouse in Harlem have been fun, engaging and challenging.

She quickly introduced me to curator and Harlem good citizen Charles Knox. As soon as I met Charles Knox, I asked him to try on one of my kimono dusters that I had worn to Leah's place. The duster immediately synergized with Charles, and I could tell I was meeting a Harlem superhero (whose alter-ego identity is as real estate developer and visual art curator)! I took a gamble with Charles the Curator and expressed my desire to feature my Mau-Mao couture as part of this exhibition, and he was more than amenable. This is a historic first; as I've made a reputation in the music, performing arts and radical activist fields, but not as a clothing designer, even though I've been doing radical couture designs for twenty-two years, often blending African and Asian styles and fabrics, brazen with color.

It is my honor to share myself with Leah and Charles and everyone interested in our unique joint exhibition. On the occasion of "Mirrors of the Soul", Leah Poller exhibition at the Knox Gallery, Harlem, 2013.

All Love,
Fred Ho
New York, 2013

DOUBLE DARE
A TRIBUTE TO FRED HO

Fred Ho spent a lifetime of daring – never accepting any limitation, never considering safety as an option. Nor comfort. Nor discomfort. He is one to always have "his skin in the game". And so we commenced his first sitting for his portrait with our reciprocal commitment to be about truth bared to the bones, the kind of truth that spares no one in his/her modesty, desires, dreams or illusions…and for this trust-filled willingness to go straight to the marrow, I am honored and humbled.

My portraits always begin with conversations, soft-circling a person's intimate self in order to uncover the deeper meanings of the life they personify, willingly or not. With Fred, I was immediately invited into his circle of fire, his battle with mortality, his need to finish the tasks before him. A portrait in bronze was swiftly inserted into his must-do list, taking greedily of precious time and limited energies. From the first instant together, his clock began ticking equally in my consciousness, in which every minute together would be reduced to pure essence.

Most amazingly, while he dared me to reach his core without delicacy, peeling back layer after layer of being, he gracefully supported my artistic need to search him out, to find where he goes when no one is at his side. I dared to go looking for his soul; he was willing to bare it, but not without earning the right to its capture.

To our great advantage, we shared "experience in living". Neither of us lack in legendary stories to tell, great people we have frequented, extraordinary places we have visited, knowledge and wisdom acquired through our separate lifetimes. This equality formed a foundation, but it was not at the crux of our exchanges. What mattered was being real. Being present. In the moment. Instantly. Being competent. Knowing one's craft. Trusting each other implicitly. Hard work. Honest work. Daring to be friends for life…however long or short it would be. In a heartbeat.

What we learned about each other, from each other, and working with each other has resulted in a double dare – as the artist sculpts the subject, can the subject transform the artist? As the artist transforms the subject, can the subject sculpt the artist? The result: Fred Ho in bronze has become immutable. And for myself, I will be forever transformed in the mirror of Fred's soul.

On seeing his bust in clay almost finished, Fred exclaimed, "I can be friends with him". May he accompany you in your new journey. I honor you, dear friend, Fred.

Leah Poller,
New York, 2014

Double Dare
Bronze
2013

Photography by Francois Bonneau

Double Dare is a transcendental work that interacts with the viewer who dares to look inside. The first time I saw this inspired portrayal I felt it breathe and it left me breathless; a miracle in bronze that allowed me to revisit some of the most intimate moments I had shared with Fred Ho: our instant and deep connection the moment we met; the gladiator passion of our collaborations; his indefatigable dolphin muscularity while swimming in Costa Rica as hundreds watched, awestruck; the serpentine abdominal wound of the first cancer surgery which he trusted me to clean and dress several times a day - a landscape that deepened our friendship; his unabated laughter as we made talking puppets of fish bones in an Astoria restaurant; his childlike wonder in moments of pure truth and beauty; the joy and lust on his face when eating ambrosial food; his percipient gaze that missed nothing; the vulnerable boy shielded by the fierce and formidable man; a heart that forgave more than it would ever admit, whose rage was self-defense for the endless disappointments of human imperfections; his alchemical ability to fuse like-minded spirits for purposes of love and art; the trusting innocent who was often betrayed by his prophetic ability to see people not as who they were, but who they could be. Fred Ho, the accidental mystic and worthy opponent of Death, continues to defy the impossible: Leah Poller's work holds the power of memory and solace, inspiration and empathic embrace. I have no doubt it is and will be a comfort for countless people, who will find their own stories of Fred represented. Friend and stranger alike, will experience a part of this legendary man. Leah Poller's authentic rendering reassures me that regardless of any cruelty of memory or tricks of revisionist history the future might unleash, my beloved friend will live forever.

Magdalena Gómez, Co-founder and Artistic Director
Teatro V!da

Fred Ho in bronze? Would it be possible to chip through the potential gaudiness and only surface - esque aspects of such a material - musician combination? How could one decipher Fred's unequivocal emphasis on the intuitive, the unknown, the as-yet-unimagined, in his afro-asian future-funk musical formulations, within the medium of a sculptural depiction? Somehow, Leah Poller did the impossible, and more, and gave fresh life to this master of revolutionary political and musical fervor through her masterpiece *Double Dare.* The creative use of real saxophone keys, the sharp kinetic angles that denote both fury and grace during an apocalyptic cancer war, the soulful and serious smile, all makes me shout, "Long live Double Dare!"...and long live its inspiration, and its subject, Fred Ho.

Ben Barson, Saxophonist

Fred Ho's Last Year follows Fred Ho on an unbelievable year as he fights cancer, leads orchestras, holds talks, leads protests, publishes books, and even produces his magnum opus: an elaborate, manga-inspired samurai opera on a New York stage.

Fred had many talents, but he was against seeing his gifts in a compartmentalized way. He insisted on combining his musical skills, his physical sufferings, and his political convictions in a well defined aesthetic and philosophy of action. Leah Poller's sculpture captures Fred's fusion of the artistic and political informed by what's painful. In that sense, it shares an affinity with Frida Kahlo's self portraits, which fuse the art with the pain seen in the social context.

Steven De Castro, Filmmaker

Eulogy for the Living

The one whose grace in times of loss
exceeds the grace of winning
will leave no shrine, no tear
to that most hideously malignant
redundantly obsessed
thief of souls, assassin of joy: regret

The one who knows how to live
is well prepared to die
don't mistake ready for willing
when it comes to juicing time
Fred's not squeezing
he's drilling

when the worms
come to feast
or the gale to blow
the final dust away
they will be left unsatisfied
the life well-lived
incorruptible remains

multiverse
not universe
that place there's
no word for
that we sometimes feel
pass so fast
we almost miss it
can't explain it

most times arrives
in the guise of love, but infinite

first time
I saw him I knew
that's how I
know it's true
the algorithm
creates itself
then credits
the human mind
and the human
never minds
taking all the credit
we looked into
each other's eyes
flicker, flash
friends for life

multiverse
not universe
Quantum Physics
I love you

there as here
there will be music
asynchronous
defiant lightening bolt
through the throat
of empty prayer
rote and sagging
through the plantation
music halls of 4/4 time

there as here
there will be mermaids
dolphins and whales
for the one who dares
to prophecy the possible
during most impossible times
who despises the coward
and the weak
then loves them with equal flame
contradiction has no better friend
to bear the fullness of its name

allow me while I live
to be a ship for your gunwale
as you aim the scope
to graze with light
the flesh of those
who mistake fear
for faith, lunacy for love
your laser burns sweet
and most times, just enough

you embrace Death
bitter sweet companion
tutor of your ways
in art, in love and sex
in laughter and food
in the perfect shoe
that fits, looks good
that you found for a dollar, used
in tenderness and ferocity
with occasional visits to the
chronicles of ego
and the school of cruelty
every atom, every cell
alive with the knowing of Death
while it was still a noun

attempting to keep pace
with your giant steps
leaves me breathless

too soon we will hoist
the absentee pennant
even as we celebrate your birth
I will never mourn your death
and I will laugh when I hear anyone say
you have *passed away*
beast of a man
you will kick the bucket
kick it hard again and again
it will bang against
the imbecile
who would mispronounce you dead
every sound will congregate
into one final suite
blasted around the world
by a choir of your progeny
Code Fred, Code Fred
your life, a legacy
your legend vampyr
you can never, ever
pass away
you will kick that bucket
kick it hard
again and again
it will bang against
the imbecile
who would mispronounce you dead

the greatest of all revolutions:
to live the life that prepares us to die

No holding onto the past
No hoarding of time
When the horn blows
of its own accord
you will let go and fly…

Magdalena Gómez
Author, *Shameless Woman*

Written for the occasion
of Fred Ho's Birthday
August 10th, 2013
Engelman Recital Hall, NYC

"I must live my life guided by imagination and transcendence..." He did, didn't he?! Among the many layers of Fred that Leah Poller's stunning sculpture captures, it is this aspect of Fred Ho that speaks to me the loudest. It's powerful and beautiful. I love it."
Melanie West, Educator and IT Manager

"The moment Fred Ho walked into a room, everyone understood they were in the presence of a larger-than-life, massively creative, incredibly passionate individual. Fred's exuberant personality combined with his musical talent and on stage persona truly made him a quintessential BAM performer. The sculpture honors his fight against the cancer that took his life and shows him as the warrior and artist he was."
Karen Brooks Hopkins, President, Brooklyn Academy of Music

"When I saw Leah Poller's *Double Dare*, the bust of Fred Ho she sculpted in 2013, I thought right away, "Here is a person who, Bodhisattva-like, reduces the sufferings of others, postponing his own nirvana." He did this through his music and his activism. Such is Leah's skill as an artist; she gave to Fred's compassion an embodiment in bronze that became a presence in its own right."
Siba Das, Art critic

"To see Leah Poller's *Double Dare* is to experience Fred Ho as he was in his life - musical and political through and through, with great humility and revolution in his eyes."
Marie Incontrera, composition/conducting protégé, and the conductor of the Green Monster and Eco-Music Big Bands

"With graceful detail and remarkable depth, Leah Poller creates an honor to the great revolutionary warrior Fred Ho. Her use of bronze to capture his implacable spirit is a display of her brazen vision, talent, and strength. Leah's bronze bust is a celebration of life, music, revolutionary style and endless laughter, a glimpse into the essence of the Green Dragon, a true mirror of the soul."
Jamie Yancovitz, Ho's martial arts student

"Inspired by Fred Ho to develop A New Black Arts Movement, with a focus on revolutionizing oppressed nationality youth to continue Fred's legacy in prefiguring a new society, this sculpture for me represents the resilience, dedication, cadre, focus and core needed to accomplish such a mission."
Spiritchild of Scientific Soul Sessions

"In my experience working with Fred, he was a warrior, both as an artist and social activist. The sculpture honors that man and artist. I will always remember how loving he was in his work with his artistic collaborators and with the staff at BAM."
Joseph V. Melillo, Executive Producer, BAM

"Integrating the ferocious sound of Fred Ho's baritone saxophone with body and soul, Leah Poller's stunning bronze sculpture reveals the textual essence of his warrior spirit materializing through his scarred body as an instrument of transcendence and liberation."
Rene Valdez, Student of Fred Ho

"The statue of the warrior dares the world to look at his rigid bronze armor. Yet inside, his soul embraces an ardent hope."
Yuon Jung Kim, Singer

"Intertwined, inseparable; soul and substance. The girded warrior, the tool, the instrument, the weapon.The light, the radiance. Captured. Timeless."
Michael Surdej, Friend of Fred Ho

"Fred was always bursting at the seams with energy. Even when he was physically weak, to be near Fred was to feel his vibration; to be shaken, often uncomfortably so. Leah Poller captures Fred's vibe, and reminds us--through her interplays of the beautiful and the disturbing--of his complexity and relentless beaming."
Ziedah Diata, Artist, A New Black Arts Movement

"Leah Poller's sculpture really makes you feel like you're still connected with Fred. Her sculpture makes you remember how connected Fred was to his music and baritone saxophone."
Kai Diata Giovanni, Age 8, Artist & Poet,
A New Black Arts Movement

Upon Seeing Fred in Bronze

It was the spring of year four
By then Fred was out of the luxury digs of Mt. Sinai.
We were back on Lorimer St.
He reclining
Me, as I was often during those years
Leaning in leaning over listening for news
From his body.

Aah, Fred, I said, as I counted the stitches down his torso
And brushed the medallion of skin made by his port.
Aah Fred, look at what the surgeons have gifted you
A way out, a way forward.
But not for his soul
for his waste.
Aah Fred and I leaned in closer
because now it was my turn to come to terms
with the positive and negative space of him.
Fred I said
You got you one hell of a crater.
And we laughed as we crossed that bridge.

Years later Bronze Fred stood before me:
I know you I said, how I know you.
Of course it made all the sense in the world to me that
Fred was decked out in saxophone keys
With good luck where the port used to be
Only partially clothed in splendor
Which was true during the days when wounds needed air.
The professorial specs
The eyes joined by his troublemaking grin.
I looked at Bronze Fred.
He looked at me.
We laughed.

Ann T. Greene
Friend & Collaborator

DOUBLE DARE
A tribute to Fred Ho

LEAH POLLER, Sculptor

www.leahpoller.com
e: leahpoller@aol.com

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BAMcafé Live
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