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'Welcome Mat' at the Nasher Celebrated Freedom of Religious Expression

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by Alaena Hostetter

It's doubtful that the Nasher Sculpture Center had ever been the site of a multi-religious prayer ceremony prior to Monday night, but the world renowned institution is thankfully taking chances on a lot of things that might not be typical museum fare with its recent Artist Circle installments.



Participants of Welcome Mat were invited to grab a prayer rug on their way into Nasher Hall, and an Islamic call to prayer kicked off the event.

The Artist Circle is a special membership group that's open to practicing visual artists and students studying that career path. In addition to providing free membership, the \$25 registration fee grants access to exclusive programmed events like "Welcome Mat" by Lee Escobedo on Monday evening.

For a year, the Nasher has given two artists, Escobedo and Karen Weiner, the chance to program events in the space. It's been an experiment to bring in more artists and performers who wouldn't ordinarily have the chance to show work or perform in an established venue.

For Escobedo's first event in October, he brought in DIY artists to perform stand-up comedy routines of their own devising. Most were riotous, filled with sex and salty language, and some made fun of the very institution they were performing in.

In Act 2, well-known Dallas DIY musical acts, rapper Lord Byron and techno punk artist Teen Slut, enacted a duel that mimicked an election debate, in response to the Kathryn Andrews' Run for President exhibit upstairs. They writhed around on the floor and climbed on audience members. It was raucous and the whole evening wasn't appropriate for a museum, which made it even more delectable, as with anything contraband.

This time, there was much more gravity to Escobedo's programming. Sensitive to outsiders, Escobedo envisioned an event that would be a safe space free from religious, social or ethnic discrimination. Participants were invited to grab a prayer rug on their way into Nasher Hall, and an Islamic call to prayer kicked off the event.

"It's a time for reflection on the current political climate; to be aware and also to enjoy silence," he says. "We as human beings surround ourselves in the echo chamber of our own beliefs and don't really get the opportunity to reflect."

The event was meant to play off the 2017 Nasher Prize winner Pierre Huyghe's work. He's known for creating ecosystems with people, animals and sculptural objects and seeing how they interact with each other.

"Pierre Huyghe, who is European, privileged and white, is probably already on the short list for prizes such as the Nasher Prize, so I wanted to have an opportunity for people who would never be in that type of conversation to be in conversation with his work, and be on equal footing in Nasher Hall and have the opportunity to speak their mind in a museum context," Escobedo says. "I'm doing a similar thing here; dropping poets, performance artists and audience members into Nasher Hall in a controlled setting and seeing what happens."

Escobedo partnered with the performance troupe Artstillery, which asked members of its group as well as outside religious organizations to participate in the prayer. Two Muslim youths, Aiya Almazayen and Soufiane Soudani, led the Islamic prayers from the front of the room, while Francky V. Xavier, a congregant of the Jewish Temple Emanuel, recited Torah scripture. A guitarist and bongo drum player provided meditative music in the background.

Later on in the prayer service, more performers chimed in, including mother and daughter Jennifer and Catharine Culver who recited a Pagan song called "We All Come From the Goddess." There was a Buddhist and Pentecostal also reciting tenets of their faiths, while yogis went through vinyasa.

The effect of all of the different faiths filling Nasher Hall simultaneously with their holy words was powerful and surprisingly emotional, although the entire evening was heavy with the burden of fear and persecution that many of these people had lived through.



Francine Thirteen closed out the night with a chills-inducing set that was layered with ritual. Photo: Alaena Hostetter

Before leading the Islamic prayer, Almzayen, 17, told her story of fleeing Syria on foot with her family after the war broke out six years ago. Her father, a dentist, was captured by the government-controlled rebel army because it needed people in the medical field to treat the soldiers. He was beaten, tortured, electrocuted and left barely alive, while his family had been held at gunpoint in their home. After reuniting, the family decided they would leave the country, and so they walked from the capitol city, Damascus, to Lebanon where they could hop a plane to the U.S.

After the mediation and prayer part of the evening, audience members were invited to the microphone to share anything that they felt compelled to share. Poets, including Rage Almighty, Reivin Alexandria, Isaac Davies and Princess McDowell, emotionally and beautifully related their first-hand experiences with oppression.

McDowell, a resident of the predominately poverty-stricken immigrant and refugee community of Vickery Meadow introduced her poem by saying she wanted to pay homage to her neighborhood.

“There’s an energy there that feels very much like love, very much like god, and I wanted to honor it.”

In a city that looks at Vickery Meadow with disdain, or with pity, or maybe charity from benevolent individuals, it was moving and refreshing to hear a resident speak of it so lovingly.

“We make a home from one bedroom split between three generations. Our cathedral shrinks from gentrification even though we build foundations under our feet,” she said.

The powerhouse vocalist Francine Thirteen closed out the night with a chills-inducing set that was layered with ritual. She was a perfect fit for the theme of the evening, as Thirteen's music deals with powerful female figures who buck patriarchy and typical religious mores.

"Just because we're nice, doesn't mean we're weak. Just because we're cool, doesn't mean we're at peace. Just because we live in these four walls, doesn't mean we're not free," she sang.

After Escobedo's first event, museum director Jeremy Strick was shocked, awed and overjoyed; he'd never seen such a diverse crowd at the Nasher and hoped that they would come back, related Lucia Simek, manager of communications. The next Artist Circle programmers haven't been announced yet, but it's most likely a guarantee that Dallas' underground visionaries will keep filling Nasher Hall, if the programmers create events with the ingenuity of Escobedo.

"My main goal in all of this was to create a sense of inclusion, and to bring my background, which is heavily involved in the DIY scene in Dallas over the last six or seven years; to bring the people I've encountered as some of the best and most progressive-thinking artists this opportunity to present and express themselves," says Escobedo, whose tenure as Artist Circle programmer ended on Monday night. "These events have allowed me to contrast the traditional with the profane, and that's been a really beautiful experience."