

REVIEWS

PATRICIA SMITH AND JUAN FELIPE HERRERA

Lannan Foundation, "Readings in the Poetry Garden"
Sunday, July 9

Performance Review by Charles Ellik

Did anyone say, "Money?" Yes, the Lannan has plenty, "...dedicated to the support and presentation of contemporary visual art and literature." They do it well — glossy mailers, event programs, hors d'oeuvres, crystal clear sound — professional. Outside, the grey walled compound could be mistaken for a bomb factory in their industrial neighborhood, but behind imposing steel gates lies a delightful garden. Itself designed around a poem, the garden's center is fenced with book-shaped pedestals for visitors' leisure reading. One book holder served as a podium for the day's readers, while the garden was filled with folding wooden chairs, tasteful occupants, and abundant sunshine.

Juan has the kind of warm personality you could hug. As a speaker he is charming, clear-headed, and intelligent. Everybody's favorite quirky professor uncle shuffling books. His insightful socially conscious works, although phrased in common language, have a formal vigor based on the written page. It was the stories and informal anecdotes between poems which made him enjoyable as a performer.

Patricia walked to the podium without books, hands filled only with energy. "I guess I should start with the body," begins one of her poems in typical graphic style. All of her work is filled with this visceral energy best described in the MC's own words as "a force of Nature." The work recited makes no effort toward innovation in medium, yet the force of her personal presence, the vivid portraits painted, and their flawless execution elevated them to extraordinary. I am certain her delivery was toned down for this audience, but she still ranks as one of the best I've seen.

While waiting in line to meet her, I overheard one new fan gush: "Don't move from back East, Patricia. L.A. has nothing like you!" She replied: "Honey, L.A. doesn't have anything on Chicago!" Now, I don't know about you, dear reader, but that got my hackles up! A moment's reflection, however, reveals this is not arrogance. This is a three-time National Slam champion speaking. She is a fighter. The Gauntlet has been thrown.

Who among us will answer the challenge? I was told many of L.A.'s finest followed her to open mic's but did not read — was it fear? Will it remain the only extraordinary talents featured at our elite institutions are from out of town?



Patricia Smith, Michael Brown and Elyn Maybe at Living Planet

Photo by Jackson Sun

ELLYN MAYBE B-DAY BASH

Iguana, North Hollywood; Monday, July 10

Performance Review by Tom Carter

At center of Iguana's July 10th reading was Elyn Maybe, celebrating her birthday. She read from her surrealistic poems and emceed an open mike session. Maybe delighted the audience with her sharp, funny and wisecracking poems and entertained with school-girl lightheartedness.

Although a favorite with the crowd, Maybe's poems do not give the sense of being well-crafted, completed works. They left me wondering if after the first writing she ever returns to the poem with a critical eye. Laced between some of her amazing Orphic utterances were many awkward and tedious phrases, which, amongst the better lines, stood out like unwelcomed guests. This gave the poems an unevenness and served to undercut the unity which the imagination intended.

I thought the best poem was "Ranting Gidget Social Contract Navel." When the poem stayed its course, it was a wild ranting pastiche of every possible social ill in America. Maybe's ability to lift just the right image to accommodate her intended meaning was impressive, and her piercing sense of humor turned against the causes of society's injustices added a powerful dimension to her rapid fire, jazz intoned lines. She reminded me a bit of a young Diane Wakowski, although less focused or formal. This was her major weakness — she sacrificed form, synthesis, and unity at the heavy hand of spontaneity. Neither biting humor nor an acute surrealistic mirror can save Maybe's poems from slow disintegration when structure and technique are absent.

A recent letter in *NEXT*... called for "a higher level of magic" in local poetry, and made a convincing case for the need of a poetry which is "full of powerful symbolism and imagery that leads you through the poem and ties together beautifully in the end." Only two participants at the night's gathering met this basic requisite of art. First, a lady named Carly read two poems, one a sad, moving account of homelessness and another piece titled, "Why I Go Shopping." Both poems exhibited interlocking and resonating elements which gave them a feeling of harmony and solidity. Her delivery was at times effected and a little loose, but the poems were strong enough to overcome these distractions.

Yet the evening belonged to Katherine Williams whose greatest sin was to withhold the titles of her poems. These works were read and performed entirely by memory. They were not only performed with a lot of skill and feeling, but the poems per se seemed to be compacted pieces in which the objects, feelings, syntax, rhythm etc. were equally measured and harmonized,

making them all well-formed wholes. Although she demonstrated that jazzy Howlesque, beat generation locution which is so popular in America today, she did it with such aplomb and panache, using precise, fruity and electrifying metaphors, as to lift me out of the ho-hum quotidianness that this incessant rhythm produces. Even though some of the lines were as celestial gibberish, the imagination clearly knew her meaning, and blessed it. One only hopes to see more of her and the type of integrity inherent in her poetry soon enough.