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Photography: Yassine El Mansouri

Monsieur Zohore's "The Last Supper" at the BMA

A performance protest featuring a cast of Baltimore-based artists and bright yellow paint

Cara Ober // 23 DEC 20

"Dealing with performance art in a pandemic is nerve-racking," admits Monsieur Zohore, a few days after organizing a guerrilla performance outside the Baltimore Museum of Art. On Sunday, November 28 at 4 p.m., Zohore, with twelve other artists in black robes, ate pizza and drank wine served on a long rectangular table while being dribbled in bright yellow paint. The performance was intended as a reenactment of Andy Warhol's "The Last Supper" (1986), a giant yellow recreation of Leonardo Da Vinci's famous fresco from 1498. The Warhol, a 35-foot-long double screen print of the Da Vinci on canvas, was listed for private sale by the museum for \$40 million in early October but pulled off the market on October 28, the date of the intended sale.

"This is the first time I have ever performed in plein air, specifically outside and also unsanctioned by an institution," says Zohore, a performance artist and recent MFA graduate of MICA's Mount Royal School of Art. Zohore has established a record of performing works inside institutional spaces, offering humorous critique and melodramatic spectacle, but in the past, these have always been enacted with explicit consent. This performance, titled "MZ.18 (Endowment for the Future; Last Supper for Baltimore)," marks the first time Zohore has created and performed a critical work outside of these boundaries.

"I came up with the piece the day of the radio show about the deaccessioning," says Zohore, referring to a WYPR segment where lawyer and former BMA Trustee Larry Eisenstein and I spoke to Tom Hall on Midday about the BMA's controversial decision to deaccession Warhol's "The Last Supper," as well as paintings by Clyfford Still and Brice Marden. "I was sitting in a Trader Joe's parking lot in a group chat with friends from Baltimore and we were all listening and, suddenly, I was just filled with passion and energy. I wanted to stand up for the artists in this community."

A complete vision of the performance appeared in the artist's mind, and he says this is how he typically works. He asked a few friends, casually, if they would mind being covered in yellow paint, and by the end of the day, Zohore had written a proposal and sent it out to a few trusted colleagues in the Baltimore, NY, and DC arts communities, both to gather critical feedback and to fund the project. "It was important to me to compensate the performers for their participation and time," he says. "By the end of the weekend, I was contacted by Paul Henkel from Palo Gallery, and he agreed to fully fund the work."

Over the next two weeks, Zohore worked out the plans, inviting twelve artist-colleagues to participate in the performance, securing a photographer to document, and scouting out the location at different times of day, all while keeping the project a secret. Citing the museum's desire to sell the Warhol in part to buy works by women and artists of color, Zohore says that he appreciates the museum's stated values of inclusivity. However, he believes that the chance for an artist like himself to exhibit or perform in context with Warhol's "The Last Supper" is the opportunity of a lifetime that could never exist if the painting had been sold, especially if it had gone into a private collection, outside of public access.

"I have had a long, deep relationship with Andy Warhol's work," explains Zohore. "I have always understood Warhol's practice as being larger than the material objects he made and seen Warhol's personality and practice as a kind of performance. For me, as a queer artist of color, Warhol's "The Last Supper," and its specific relationship to the AIDS epidemic when it was collected by the BMA in 1989, signifies the museum's ongoing commitment to diversity." Zohore says he was a little shocked when he learned about the museum's intended sale of the painting because he had no idea that the work was here in Baltimore. Although it had been on display at the center of the BMA's contemporary wing for close to twenty years, the painting was kept in storage during the two years that Zohore lived in Baltimore as a MICA student.

Zohore's "MZ.18 (Endowment for the Future; Last Supper for Baltimore)" performance, enacted across the street from the BMA's iconic marble steps, co-opts the literal subject of Da Vinci's "The Last Supper" and considers the museum's deaccessioning in the same way that Jesus was said to have sacrificed himself, breaking bread and sharing wine as symbols of his body and blood with his disciples. "For me, the deaccessioning became a kind of transfiguration of the body of Christ," Zohore says. "The painting is sold and the money is supposed to be used to feed the community that the painting is leaving, the same way Jesus's death consecrated our sins... or whatever." He laughs, acknowledging the influence of a now-lapsed Catholic upbringing that still impacts his ideas about the spectacle and ritual he cultivates in his art.

When he envisioned the performance, it was before the museum decided not to sell the piece, so originally it was intended to protest the sale that he assumed would occur. Although the museum decided not to sell the painting, Zohore believes that the meaning of the performance remains unchanged, based largely on the subject depicted.

"I was thinking about 'The Last Supper' as a form of protest in itself," he says. "By inviting all these Black and brown and queer performers who were willing to stand up with me to protest, it meant I was asking them to take a professional risk. Some people declined to participate because of their level of comfort or their fear of stepping on institutional toes and I totally respect that." Zohore says that he is touched that twelve significant Baltimore-based artists did decide to participate and recognizes that it could not have happened without their

trust and support.

Although he has only been in Baltimore for two years, Zohore has earned several opportunities to perform through various BMA platforms. The first one, “MZ.05 (Grâce)”, was performed during a BMA Art After Hours event organized to celebrate a decade of collaborative art-making by Wickerham & Lomax during the BMA’s Generations exhibition. Zohore was invited to present a collaborative, applause-based performance at the museum, a spectacle that included thirty volunteers dressed all in white who clapped enthusiastically for thirty minutes.

“I wanted to present applause in an uncontextualized state, and the way the sound impacted the way people navigated exhibitions that night. You could hear the applause throughout the entire museum.” Zohore says that, as a child of Catholic immigrants, it was important for him that the ideas of exaltation and grace were realized through ecstatic clapping as well as the color white, and for him, the site of the BMA offered validation for the performance.

The artist has also participated in the BMA Salon and Screening Room, two online platforms created during the COVID-19 pandemic to celebrate Baltimore-based galleries and curatorial projects. In the Salon, galleries each selected works by eight artists to share. (Disclosure: BmoreArt’s Connect+Collect was included). Zohore’s “MZ14 (Celestial Bodies)” was exhibited with ‘sindikit, a nomadic, experimental curatorial platform organized by artists Zoë Charlton and Tim Doud. “The work is a response, a decision to no longer feel helpless to the multitude of pandemics we are facing, and to alter reality for the better, despite my own frustrations and awareness of the danger the world places on my queer Black body,” says Zohore.

In “MZ14 (Celestial Bodies),” Zohore worked with a star naming registry, Cosmo Nova, to purchase the name of a star that appeared on the day that Freddie Gray was killed in Baltimore, in order to commemorate his life. Zohore has subsequently purchased additional stars for other individuals who have passed away due to racial or sexual violence, especially during the pandemic. Zohore is raising funds for the project through public donations, institutional grants, and the sale of an open-edition sculpture in the form of a brass telescope engraved with the Langston Hughes quote, “Reach up your hands, dark boy, and take a star.”

“The stars to be purchased are ones that were visible in the same area where and at the same time when the named person was killed so that the members of that community may look to the sky and metaphorically see their loved one as a celestial being,” Zohore explains. Each subsequently purchased star will be donated to a local institution that is devoted to the preservation of the lives and cultures of people of color.

In the BMA’s Screening Room, you can watch Zohore’s “MZ.11 (Comédien Ivoirien),” a video shot in front of a live studio audience, where the artist nimbly dodges plantains thrown at him. Zohore was flattered to be invited, although he notes the curatorial selection process and differences in pay were unclear to him at the time. A BMA spokesperson said that curators from the Contemporary department made selections based on “the excellence and merit of the work while also considering variety in experimental, narrative, documentary, and performance-based videos,” giving preference to female artists, queer artists, and artists of color. Individual artists were paid \$500 while collectives received \$750 for licensing fees. “I’m a young artist and just earned my MFA, so I didn’t feel like I was in a position to ask questions about this,” Zohore says. “I just felt grateful to be included and to accept what was being offered to me.”

When Zohore arrived in Baltimore in 2018 for graduate school, the BMA was in the process of deaccessioning six redundant works from the collection by white male artists, which raised \$12 million to purchase new works by women and artists of color. “It struck an exciting tone,” he recalls. “It seemed to be a statement that this museum cares about the people who are living and working here, that the arts ecosystem would be impacted for the better.”

However, when Zohore realized that almost all of the money raised was used to purchase works by artists who don’t live in Baltimore, he felt disappointed. “It’s a museum’s job to be aware of the cultural moment in their city,” he says. “If an artist is having a moment, a museum should support this by adding them to their collection. There are a number of artists living and working here who are being collected by museums outside of Baltimore, but not at our local museums.”

Zohore says that he knows a number of artists who have built relationships with the museum through

exhibitions and performances, bringing new audiences to the museum, but so far have been overlooked in the collection. “As a very new person in the Baltimore art community, I’m happy that my work has been shown at the museum, but there are so many other artists who are pillars of the Baltimore community and have built solid careers here and the museum is not collecting them,” he says.

“I have fallen in love with the Baltimore community because artists support each other, we are constantly spreading the wealth, recommending each other for teaching positions and lectures and exhibitions,” he says. “It’s exactly what we should be doing as artists, especially in the face of an institution that placates us in this sphere. I think it’s fine for the museum to continue a ‘vanity celebration’ of the work of local artists, but realizing that they’re not collecting it shows a disconnect. On one hand, it’s a testament that the artists are able to persevere and succeed without institutional support, but something has to change if we want to continue. We need entities with resources and access to provide us visibility and continue this work with us fully committing to Baltimore-based excellence and experimentation.”

Zohore is emphatic that his newest collaborative performance is not just about his own work or ideas. “It’s a greater statement asking the institution to hold itself accountable to the bodies of the artists who live in this city that it says it wants to support,” he says. “If you look at the makeup of the performance, the cast is predominantly Black and queer.” He says he is not convinced that Warhol himself would have approved the sale of his painting, but thinks he would have loved the drama around it, so this inspired Zohore to create a melodramatic performance.

Although the performance is based on Warhol’s “The Last Supper,” Zohore says he was most interested in highlighting a phenomenon he found in Baltimore, a stance on nontraditional art-making, which he sees as directly related to diversity and social justice. He says that he would like to see more risk-taking at the museum in the range of works they are willing to collect, especially evidenced in the work being made in Baltimore.

“I am hoping that the museum takes a bigger interest in experimental work and objects that fit outside of a traditional commercial art market,” says Zohore. “I fund my practice through grants because my work sits outside of commercialism, and so do many of the artists who participated in this performance. I would like to see the museum take up this challenge, not even for themselves, but for the patrons and visitors in the museum, challenging the viewers to look at what their city is providing them.”

Zohore says that, from his perspective, it seems like the museum is waiting for artists to be undeniably successful with external global validation before they will exhibit or collect. “How much support does an artist have to show an institution for them to collect the work?” he asks. “We are seeing institutional attention paid to artists based here, and it’s incredible to see the museum exhibit Jo Smail and Maren Hassinger and other locally-based artists. But why are these artists not collected and kept indefinitely, so that Baltimore has access to this work for the future?”

Now that Warhol’s “The Last Supper” is going to remain in the BMA’s collection, I ask Zohore about the opportunities that may exist for him to interact, perform, or make new works within the context of the history and legacy of this one work, as it evolves. Our conversation returns to the power of the giant physical object as it straddles the history of painting, as well as its symbolic meaning for a Baltimore-based artist.

“My original art practice was rooted in painting, so for me the yellow was important,” he says, explaining that he has a history of performance art wherein he poured paint on himself. “I often use my body as a substrate for a painting, or to transform the traditional gaze of the artist, so borrowing the exact yellow from the painting was my attempt to recreate it in a 21st-century context, updating the painting with bodies of performers that reflect the city from which it was made.” Zohore says that the yellow also directly references the color featured in Tom Marioni’s 2006 performance “The Act of Drinking Beer with Friends is the Highest Form of Art,” exhibited at the BMA as part of Helen Molesworth’s seminal exhibition *Work Ethic*. “I was handed a copy of that catalogue when I started trying to define my brand of performance art and that show remains one of my biggest inspirations to this day,” he says.

The “Last Supper” performance included a long table that was set with pizza and wine to symbolize the “blood and body” of Christ from communion, and also, Zohore says, to update the meal with an art studio vibe. Zohore printed out the photo of the original work for all the participants so that it could be used as a

starting point for their own poses. He ordered black choir robes for all the performers to mimic the black and white contrast of the screen printing and had custom-dyed button-down shirts made for each, in yellow and other colors, to mimic the colors and language in his own painting practice.

Each performer was instructed to stand behind the table with a blank expression while he poured paint on them first, then poured the paint over himself, and then they all struck poses from the painting. Zohore choreographed the performance to Mozart's "Lacrimosa," an unfinished part of his last Requiem Mass in D Minor, K. 626, a reference to the memento mori that follows a work of art made just before the subject's (or composer's) death. Zohore reimagined this as a reminder to celebrate the lives of these artists working in Baltimore, presenting living bodies in front of an institution that says it wants to support them.

"Everyone was gifted the shirt that they were wearing," he says, "commemorating and unifying us into this expression." Zohore says that he has always been interested in small-scale merchandise culture, such as a commemorative T-shirt from a Bar Mitzvah, and he says that Warhol was a master of selecting middle-class signifiers of consumer culture and transforming them into banal, funny, and poignant metaphors. He believes that Warhol doubled the image in "The Last Supper" in order to make the scene both queer and humorous, and says he wanted to match that energy in his performance.

"We broke bread together in front of the BMA's front steps, and this was a humbling experience for me," he says, admitting that it reminded him of his first performance at the BMA, part of the collaborative WDLY and Wickerham & Lomax Art After Hours Takeover event in October 2019. "That performance validated me as a member of the Baltimore community and I wanted to repay the artists who supported me, to represent a different work with the same group of people, and it was a true privilege."

"How many more prizes do these artists need to win before the museum properly values them?" Zohore asks, specifically about Wickerham & Lomax, a Baltimore-based collaborative who won the Sondheim Prize in 2015 after the annual Artscape exhibition at the BMA and won the Trawick Prize in 2020. "They were invited to throw a party at the museum, to invite friends and perform, but the institution has not attempted to collect their work. These artists are just one example of those who have gone the extra mile, participated in national and international exhibitions off the strength of their own networks, but without the institutional validation from the Baltimore museum."

Zohore believes that all museums can play a greater role by engaging seriously with the contemporary art community in which they are situated. In addition, he says that the museum's collection has been built over time, slowly and purposefully, so he would like to see them continue to add works by diverse, globally known artists, but to balance out these acquisitions with artists based locally. It is the museum's collection that will stand the test of time, as directors, curators, exhibits, and initiatives come and go. And it's essential that the Baltimore museum reflects the art being made here and now and that its collection reflects this for generations to come.

"Warhol's "The Last Supper" belongs to the citizens of Baltimore City," says Zohore. "It belongs to the artists of Baltimore. For me, it would be ideal to have my work seen in the context of that Warhol, rather than sacrificing it. Why isn't my work good enough to validate? Why does it have to be sacrificed by this monumental work?"

Zohore is looking forward to an upcoming two-person exhibit at Baltimore's Springsteen gallery in January 2021. He is currently living in Potomac, MD, and working independently. His plan is to move into a studio in Baltimore this winter, and he adds, "I would be happy to stay in Baltimore, but I am looking for an economic framework to support my practice."