

Maranda Elise Barry
“DREAMLIFE” - SMUSH Gallery
Curatorial Fellowship in Dance '20 – '21 - Interview
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Conducted by Iman Rose Louis-Jeune

**Crafting dreams through empathetic movement and film:
An interview with Maranda Elise Barry**

“Dreamlife” kicked off SMUSH Gallery’s first Curatorial Fellowship in Dance Program with an evening of virtual premieres of first-time and established dancer-filmmakers: Alaina Wilson, Tushrik Frederik, Kareem Woods, Maranda Barry, Jes Wittig, and Rosy Gentle with collaborators: Claire de Laszlo, Annie Murnighan, and Emma King.

Dance, film, and dreams all act as a body of motion for non-verbal expression. “Dreamlife” invites us to layered experiences of the senses. Utilizing the different environments, sounds, and editing techniques the audience is opened up to four distinct spaces framed by an opportunity to engage and share in the qualities that make dreaming inherently difficult to translate through time, space, memory, and energy.

Through the various phrases of this project, the artists and the Dreamlife community are able to relive the ethereal by recounting their own experiences with responses to questions like: “What’s a place you have visited, or returned to, in a dream?” or “Do you look to your dreams for truth?” and by virtue of sharing dance films we’re able to engage with memories and events that otherwise would have been lost, fragmented, or been a personally-lived experience.

Tushrik Frederik shared some insight to his personal process during the Q & A for “Dreamlife” back in February 2021: “Dreams that I remember the most are about specific loved ones or places I fell in love with. We dream in order to go forward in the night but personally, I feel I go backwards into time to try to relive an experience that was very impactful inside of my life and a specific time point.”

“Dreamlife” was truly a gift in a time where we needed to process our subconscious in our waking lives during a period where we’ve been forced to have a heightened attention to media and have changed our perspectives on how we communicate with society at large and with ourselves.

IRLJ: What have you learned about your dance/choreography and dream

practices since working on Dreamlife?

MEB: The number one thing I learned is when I set out to do the project, I knew that what I would be trying to capture in some ways would be futile to capture because I think everyone experiences dreaming very differently, but for me the dreams that matter a lot to me and have made an impact on my life—are often really hard to describe, but I get a lot out of trying to describe them to other people.

Sometimes, it's not until I vocalize something that I realize what was happening and how odd it was in fact, or how special it was, perhaps, significant or insignificant, and also, it's hard. I guess I like to try to talk about things that are hard to talk about accurately, like just my best. Almost just as a language exercise—a practice in translation and communication. Translating was a really big theme throughout all of the works and definitely in my process. My practice with my own piece, my own film that I made, was a lot of time to pull material from dreams and render it in a different way, through movement or even just taking a broad idea of a quality that appeared in the three of our dreams [Maranda, Jes Wittig, and Rosy Gentle] and then try to use a prop or a landscape to represent that.

It was hard, and I knew that it was going to be impossible to get out the original content from that, but that was really the point to me, it was more about trying to see what would happen in the attempt and with what everybody else did, the other choreographers did: Kareem Woods, and Tushrik Frederik, and Alaina Wilson, all had such different approaches. I wasn't privy to Tushrik and Kareem's internal working of their processes but at least from their application and the way that they described their dreams I feel like I was almost more focused on the elements and syntax of the dream and things about dreams that almost separate them from reality.

Tushrik was really interested in the idea of emotion and memories from the past going through dreams. Alaina was thinking a lot about the ambiguity of dreams and hitting that landscape. Kareem's work had to do a lot with lucid dreaming and control. Which are totally different aspects, which was pretty exciting to me.

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IRLJ: How did your undergrad education and professional dance experience shape this project?

MEB: In undergrad, I studied an interdisciplinary major called Cognitive Science which is basically a study of intelligence and study of the mind which incorporates many different models of the mind. For example, we studied some elementary robotics so that we could work with behavior that was intelligent via small robots and small agents. We did a lot of talking and thinking about neural networks and about artificial intelligence. Also, this was paired with a lot of animal intelligence and behavior, and different kinds of theories and then there was a lot of practical research methods attached with that to EET, brain scanning technology and a lot of ways it was like a modgepodge major, but it was really interesting.

I really liked the idea of coming at intelligence from all of these angles. Then within in the major you could choose a concentration, so I chose to be in dance and the theory of embodiment through an artistic lens. I feel like it's so many different little elements combined into one field but I'm pretty interested in how we perceive things and then how our perceptions of the world affect the way that our bodies feel and move and function so this project----dancing our subconscious and unconscious experiences out and kind of like channeling that throughout bodies is right in my wheelhouse and definitely at the intersection of all my areas of study and interest and I had been thinking about doing this since 2017 or earlier.

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IRLJ: Did you have a different interpretation of each dream when they were proposed vs once the films were completed?

MEB: The applications that I wrote and the open call that I put out didn't even ask them for a project proposal. It wasn't like *'what do you want to work on?'* It was more like *'what's something about a dream that has stuck with you or that you're curious about?'* So, Kareem said nothing about his project in his application. He wrote about a dream he had starring the girl from *The Ring*, the horror movie, and like there wasn't a proposal. For me that was important because I incredibly dislike writing proposals or I so dislike writing proposals because I wanted them to be able to have a process that unfolded naturally and not have to do it so I [was] definitely surprised by all of the works but I wasn't really expecting something specific.

IRLJ: What were some of the most impressionable moments for you either from the films or from curating this project?

MEB: My first thought from curating the project, moments from the films—I have specific moments that I love from each of the films, but I think probably my favorite thing about how they stood together as a collection was with how the tone of all of the films felt pretty different to me.

I love Tushrik bringing in this lightly raze-y energy for ...*sound waves*... and sort of like a sound collage and using some text. Kareem's work, *Lucidity*, really felt like an in-between space to me, which was interesting. I'm not sure if that was what he was intending to capture but I really felt kind of in this liminal little zone and I found that film really hard to predict, so it did give me a sense of a lack of control. Also, he's kind of fun, I liked that he picked popular music and music that was nostalgic to him and actually some of it was nostalgic to me too—so that was kind of a fun coincidence.

With Alaina's work, I actually worked more closely on that one, I had this system where it was important to me to be able to support the artists as much as they wanted but not more than they wanted and sometimes if I'm applying to something I kind of wish that I would be able to determine the level of support. This dancer friend of mine, Cookie Harrist, I was on the phone

with her before this process and she was talking about the idea she had to partner with someone on a solo and be a support to them in making a work that was theirs. I thought that sounded really fun and interesting so I made three tiers:

'Okay artists, you can state a preference for one, two, or three:

- One is do your thing, and I don't really contact you about this for the content of the work*
- Two is where it's your work but I'm kind of acting as a support to the degree you want*
- Three was do you want to be a part of my work and we're going to do something as a group'*

That was how I organized it and because of that for Alaina's project, she had chosen to do partnering with me [Maranda] to make a solo for herself and I got to be privy to that process and do rehearsals with her and stuff where I basically was just offering whatever she needed---saying:

'Okay, do you want outside eyes today? Here's a thought. What is it helpful that I do?'

Providing some accountability for showing up at rehearsal, having space ready, and just keeping the process unfolding. So, I looked at that work really differently when I got to see it in its final form because I could see the origin of the drawings and the camera work, I was there at the shoot, etc. I think for that piece, I truly just love the visuals. I love how much was done with such a limited color scale, and how much definition and different textures she accomplished with the movement and it feels like a really meditative piece that puts my mind into a very hyper slowed down---almost hyperthermically slowed place. It makes me feel very attentive and makes me feel like in between sleeping and waking as I view it, I love that about *Wisteria*.

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IRLJ: I was going to ask if you had known any of the other artists prior to the making of this project? Dreams are very personal and I think it's interesting how you built these relationships with the other artists. Can you speak to that?

MEB: Yeah, they are personal. I was a little afraid to be working with something so personal because I feel pretty comfortable sharing my dreams, I was aware that for some people their dreams are where their drama is replayed or exists or gets worked out; for some people they might have dreams about people that they've lost, I don't know, it's a really fraught topic and I want to be really thoughtful like who wanted to explore that type of stuff alone and who wanted to explore it with guidance or another person around to bounce off of, so as of the artists, I actually knew two of them, I knew Alaina and I knew Kareem but I had never met Tushrik, and I have never met Jes and Rosy who I ultimately collaborated with as my dancers for *Siftings*.

It was kind of cool because the two dancers that two of the ones I have never met before that time but just really resonated with their application they ending up being the people who were my closest confidants where we were sharing and journaling and talking about—we had some really dreams up come up that definitely were personal so I'm really like, I feel really grateful that they were able to trust me and the filmmaker and production master/art director and the composer with that material. It was heavy at times, I think we tried to keep our rehearsals really lighthearted because of that, kind of like step forward and step back when it was appropriate.

IRLJ: Can you talk more about your rehearsal process?

MEB: Yeah, I'll speak to *Siftings* and *Wisteria* because those were the rehearsal processes that I was privy to. So, for *Siftings*, man it was funny, I was basically just trying to dredge up as much material and form a collage. I wasn't sure how I was going to work, but I usually like to start by generating a lot and then see if there are any things that we've generated that are actually trending toward one another and sort of fuse fragments to create a little

more context for the next thing we generate and keep building organically. I'm pretty cool with cutting stuff or changing stuff. There were a lot of revisions but for instance, one of the early days where we did this thing where we wrote down, each, on a piece of journal paper: *'recount a dream from any time in your life.'* I think I recounted a dream about something I dreamed in second grade, a dream where my two close friends and I became mermaids and found a secret swimming pool, and we just passed the pages to the right. Literally in ten minutes, *create a page of your gut reaction, create something*, it doesn't have to be perfect from this dream of the person that was sitting on your left and then we ended up stringing all of these phrases into one sort of longer and dynamic phrase and then it changed completely when we shot it because the filmmaker was like *'let's try doing these different directions'* and *'let's try like you can speed up and slow down'* it totally didn't resemble the original material whatsoever which was what I thought would happen.

Some other things we did in rehearsal, I asked them to create, we did a lot of things like that, we would write down imagery or just a single image from our dreams and then put them all on paper and then rip up the papers, so you had one paper left that had one thing on it and then you kind of scramble our pieces together to create tableaus from that and then create transitions between the tableaus and a lot of that ended up getting cut, but it was really fun and created a lot of inside jokes on our second rehearsal that glued us together as a cast a lot more and then those actually ended up being these little short tableau sections we did while wearing masks which was the prop person's idea (Emma King), she said *'I really see this masked'* and we tried it and it changed it so much and I love it.

It was a lot of game playing and a lot of improv then we would set material, edit, and change it, cut it, so then we would try and experiment and come back to it like 5 rehearsals later. Jes and I, when Rosy was out of town, we did a rehearsal where we did a lot of contact and sort of created a little phrase and we were comfortable by then sharing about our dreams, so whenever Jes would think of something, she would weave it in. She would be like *'this is kind of witchy, I had this witchy dream'* *"Oh, that's cool"* *'and, what about this?'* The idea that held it together, was really more about, it wasn't so much about specific images from dreams as it was about the concept about what it would be like to meet someone in a dream and whether that encounter could be considered real or not real.

So, we started a contact improv with the notion of me and Jes both dreaming in our separate worlds, and kind of our dreams meeting and merging briefly and then us going in and out of the awareness of the other. Then we made this phrase, it was totally not working, we were like *'so then we said 'let's table*

it' and then like literally the second to last rehearsal or maybe in the last one before we had to shoot our little film on the beach. We were like *'let's revisit that and fix it'* *'Rosy, can you help us fix it'* and Rosy directed us and we sort of directed ourselves and made a lot of executive decisions that were not precious about, *'let's cut this, this sucks'* *'okay, let's add this, it's easier.'* We made this really great contact to us that felt very natural and felt like it captured the idea of the prompt but only because we had to wait and let it cool off and then like reapproach it with a sharpened pair of scissors. That was kind of the process for *Siftings* in terms of rehearsing and develop the material.

Then with *Wisteria*, the first day, Alaina was like *'I have these ideas about charcoal drawings'* and I knew Alaina in college, we danced together then, and we have been collaborating a little bit in the years after—she had this idea about charcoal drawings and we sort of started talking about something else, she started telling me about a dream that she had recently, I think the night before, and she didn't even want to use it and she wasn't even like *'let me emulate this dream'*, she just was like *'it was so exceptionally vivid'*, I just want to share it. I actually wrote the whole thing down and then we went about talking about other ideas that had nothing to do with it and after working over the weeks it became sort of clear to her that the landscape that she was trying to make without realizing it was kind of in line with this tundra landscape that had been part of the original dream. I mean I don't know what she would say about that, if she'd agree or not but we discussed that once in a rehearsal.

It's kind of funny, I think Alaina's process was a lot more ultimately about creating a mood and we rarely set specific movement, she rarely wanted specific movement, I think we only wanted set movement for that one rehearsal, and a lot time was spent testing camera angles and testing what it would look like to view movement right next to an image held very close to the camera and just seeing sort of what that did. A lot strategizing about the style of movement, knowing that the movement would be improvised, a lot of testing, and it was fun! Ultimately, I think we needed that testing because we were working inside of SMUSH and that based on a lot of limited angles and we wanted so much ambiguity, we felt the need to block off a lot of things that would identify it as a room or as a place or a you know, she wanted it to feel less pin downable.

IRLJ: Yeah, like it could be anywhere.

MEB: Yeah, exactly, so that was kind of how that rehearsal process went.

IRLJ: **With the journaling, or any of the other techniques that you used**

throughout rehearsal, do you personally use that when you record and analyze your own dreams? Or is that process completely different?

MEB: Well, probably the number one way that I think about my dreams is not writing them down—it's telling them to others. I tell my parents about my dreams a lot, that was something that was pretty common in my household growing up. My mom is a psychologist and I think—it's funny because sometimes she has a little bit more of a psychological analysis than I would agree with and we have different interpretations of a dream. I'm a lot less likely to draw a set conclusion from it and a lot less likely to say *'I think that was about work'* or *'I think that dream is about moving anxiety or whatever'* but she sometimes has opinions like that.

So, I'm really in the habit of telling my dreams aloud and some friends who are interested in hearing them and friends who are not really, so I know who to tell and those people usually hit me with their dreams. I love hearing about people's dreams a lot and I do tend to journal sometimes or if something's really important that it sticks with me from a dream then I will draw it, [although] my words are a lot better at capturing than my drawings and I never tried to express dreams with movement before this process. I would say that my dreams create moods that were unique to the dreams that would probably inform my movement without me realizing it. I would never go into the studio and say *'let's dance about that dream'* So that's why I was curious to try.

IRLJ: And do you think you'll continue to do this and incorporate it into your practice moving forward?

MEB: Maybe, I mean, I want to develop a better practice of improvising in general because I don't feel like I do it enough. I sometimes kind of slack on my personal practice because I'm trying to do other things that are more external and I really want to have a more regular personal practice. I'm positive that if I was improvising every day and was in a space that was conducive to a wide range of movement, I'm positive that my dreams would be working themselves out in there—actually, sometimes after an intense dream I will really feel an increased need to try to dispel it through movement if it was scary or anxious or disturbing or gross. I think then, my body wants to shake that off and out, and actually often, I'll have to get up in the middle of the night and sort of move and shake a bit.

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to try to dispel it through movement if it was scary or anxious or disturbing or gross. I think then, my body wants to shake that off and out, and actually often, I'll have to get up in the middle of the night and sort of move and shake a bit."

IRLJ: Is there something you have dreamed that you wish would happen in your waking life?

(One of the questions that Maranda created as she crafted her program for Dreamlife, utilizing answers from friends, family, and prospective audience attendees.)

MEB: Yeah, totally. I have a lot, let me pick one. Oh my god. Yeah, it's funny, like I didn't think about those questions for myself that much. The questions were mine, but the answers were audience generated. It was great, I really liked going through those. I wish more people did it, but the people who did do it, sent such interesting stuff, it was cool. That dream that I was explaining about my friends and I going down, my friends Sarah and Isabelle are going down to the rock, basically it was like we sneaked out of school and it was raining and we were in these little primary colored rain jackets and we sort of started digging under this rock and it opened out to a tunnel and the tunnel became a cavern, the cavern was a beautifully lit with a silky kind of light blue pool of warm water and the actual place was amazing but it was the actual feeling that we knew we had this secret place and we would be spending the entire time in while everyone else was at school in this hideaway.

It was such a feeling of secrecy and joy. I wish that would happen. I have a lot of others that I would like to see but it would be scary. Well, I actually just had a dream that my grandmother who passed away in the winter, she passed away during this project, she was really important to me but a strange person and I wasn't exactly sad, I was a bit sad, I think it was her time to go. Thinking about her, it definitely came up and I just recently in the past couple of weeks, dreamed about seeing her again for the first time since she had died and it was really cool because she had this typewriter that brought in dust and debris from the floor into the bottom of the device and then the typewriter turned it into these spiders of all different sizes, like beautiful and cool ones that floated up into the air, that formed what she was writing up and out the side into the air then they would die and fall back down to ground and then swept up again into the typewriters---so trippy and weird. I

would love to see that in real life, that sounds wild.

And I would like to talk with her again because she really had the exact same manner in my dream as she would have in life. [In the dream,] I was going to be late for my flight or something back home and she just was like pattering around the house and like 'oh, do you want to make some food or...' she didn't have much to say at all but she was just existing but in a funny overly casual and really neutral way. She was a woman who really lacked warmth, really honest, really authentic, and funny. Very dry and down-to-earth, casual chatter with what's happening with her. It's cool, it was an accurate representation I think, which is not always true within a dream. It was nice to see her again.

IRLJ: Was there any correlation between the music from the films and external stimuli that we might experience as a disruption in our everyday dreaming?

MEB: I think that the answers that Tushrik and Kareem would give would probably be really different from the ones that Alaina and I would give because we actually had a composer score, I reached out to my friend Annie Murnighan and she makes electronic music and she was down to do my piece. And Alaina was like '*I like her work; can she do my piece?*' so she actually hired her for it. That was not an experience that I ever had before and it went amazing! I did send Annie a moodboard of sounds and songs that were inspiring me or that had a quality I was looking for. It was really hard for me to put into words what I liked about them. I would say from '*.009 to .51 I like because of this crunchy thing in the background or whatever*' or I'd be like '*I think this because it sounds like it's underwater*' and I guess from all of my little audio samples she pulled out five and then we went through three rounds of editing the tracks, she's an amazing composer to work with.

I loved and asked her to keep a lot of pedestrian sounds, there was a sound of something falling over and someone crashing through a room, a sound of sucking through a straw and a couple of other life sounds. I think that dreams often have a texture informed by the events around us while we're sleeping, so I didn't make the choice to include anything like an alarm or a person talking as if they were trying to speak to you while you're asleep. I think having some element of noise pollution in there, helps it feel more surreal and less pure.

I never feel like my dreams are pure, I always feel like they're cut with random debris from my brain and I think Kareem really used music he was nostalgic about. I don't think I remember specific sound effects, but I know that Tushrik

had a sound collage and had a really interesting track---his choice of music was so interesting to me. I wish that, that question could be posed to him because I was wondering like what's going on with these sounds that you chose? Some of them were carousel and merry-go-round sounds which I think that was a reference to the quote at the beginning of his music.

IRLJ: Do you think that empathy and dreams are related? How do you think empathy plays into dream making versus when you wake up and you're trying to recall what you just spent eight hours or however much time making up?

MEB: That's an interesting question, I definitely think that speaking about our dreams helps us be empathetic to others not just in that you know dreams can be emotional and we can learn about what someone's going through by what they're dreaming, maybe a bit, more because I'm kind of obsessed with what other people's minds are like and internal experiences are like and I find my own to be quite interesting and surprising, even to me, as someone who should know it the best and I think other people are surprised by their minds also sometimes too.

Taking the time to listen to someone else's dream and really imagine what it would be like or feel like. Even if they're describing something that like is not attainable to you and to your mind. I think, one, it's a good practice in deep listening because in some ways, it's like why should anyone give a fuck about each other's dreams.

It's a secret that will never be revealed ever and even when you speak it you're not able to really show it. A lot of people I think tap out and they're like *'okay, shut up.'* If someone has an experience that really matters to them and they take the time to tell you, I think you should really try to listen them. Dreams are vulnerable and if someone shares one with you, I would really try to receive it as a gift because it's a gift to them to have dreamed it and remembered it, and a gift to you for them to share it—even if it's mundane, it's a slice of their mind, I mean, what's cooler than that?

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mind, I mean, what's cooler than that?"

IRLJ: I also would be interested to know if any of the audience members reached out to you after the show? Do you think the connection between empathy and dreams affected the audience in any sort of way, especially because it of how it was shown through film?

MEB: Dude, yeah, it's cool you asked that because I actually had this one friend, she was viewing from Turkey, her name is Pirilti Onukar and she left me a voice memo the next day explaining what her dreams were like that night and how she felt they were influenced by the experience of seeing four dreamy films in a virtual portal. My biggest hope that I could have was not that people would love the work but was that people would feel like their minds were attuned by the work and they were made present by the works that were shown, so if people had epic dreams after the show that would have been so satisfying to me. To know a couple of folks did, and she also said her friends did too. Then they were getting coffee the next day and discussing the weird dreams inspired after watching Dreamlife set. I feel like all of my goals were realized which is really cool.

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