For the Sake of the Song, and So Much More

By Josef Woodard, News-Press Correspondent

Soprano Julia Bullock made a strong impact in her local recital debut at Hahn Hall, Santa Barbara on April 3, 2018.

When it comes to the operatic arts, Santa Barbara has been blessed as a destination zone for some of the world's finest singers, in recital mode, thanks to the strong presenting bodies of CAMA and UCSB Arts & Lectures, and the imprimatur of the Marilyn Horne-directed Music Academy of the West. This Sunday, that notable list expands to include currently superlative-bearer mezzo Joyce DiDonato, with her local debut at The Granada Theatre.

But something especially distinctive within that musical sphere landed at Hahn Hall last week with the arrival of Julia Bullock, an expressive, subtle, intellectually probing, socially conscious and organically charismatic artist who happens to be black and isn't shy about exploring racial and gender-related issues.

Just as a quick snapshot of this compelling artist's expansive musical purview, the program which opened with the motherlode of art song foundations — Schubert — closed with heartfelt nods to the work and spirit of the great American singer-activist Nina Simone, following up songs linked to Albert Hunter and Billie Holiday. Whereas tradition holds that serious singers often spice up (or water down) their recitals with a few show tunes to show their street cred, Ms. Bullock instead gets the blues and related soul/gospel tunes, seriously. You could say it was that kind of an art song recital, except "that kind of recital" scarcely exists in the contemporary concert music world.

Ms. Bullock is uniquely suited to both celebrate and revere historic art song and opera tradition and shake the yolk of the past, in the best, most liberating way. This powerful evening of song, presented in the Arts & Lectures’ “Up Close and Musical” series (which once featured a then-emerging superstar-to-be Yuja Wang), was officially her Santa Barbara recital debut. Broadening the geo-cultural boundary lines a bit, though, she made her 805 debut in stunning fashion at the 2016 Ojai Music Festival, handily rising to the challenge of both Katja Saariaho’s “La Passion de Simone” and Tyshawn Sorey’s workshop piece “Josephine Baker: A Portrait.” Some of us became instant Julia Bullock fans that weekend.

Her rendezvous with Hahn Hall both validated the flexibility and strength of her way with song, and a fresh intelligence and personal stamp on the programming aspect of the recital art. Opening with four Schubert songs — beautifully

Linda Foster, Life in Shadow

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For Linda Ekstrom, her book strategy often entails cutting up book pages or twirling them into ropes and other forms. Her “steroidal Bible” pieces “Chained” and “Tendrils” transform into jumbled artworks, readable to suit the beholder and his/her religious inclinations. For the artist, the art is made to “serve as visual symbols against fundamentalism, defying a singular, literal read by rearranging the order into myriad possibilities.”

Mary Pric’s oddly seductive “Unto everyone that hath” involves a minutely-scribbled-upon old foreign currency (the taboo of money defacement, a delicious sin) in presumably telling a sordid tale of an email scam, but in an undiscernible scrawl.

Several artists long involved in the still-ambig-uous but enticing world of book art are in the mix, including letter press artists/their published works Harry and Sandra Elena Reese, and Mary Hiebner, long engaged in the malleable juncture where words and images meet. Her treatment of Pablo Neruda’s poem “The Old Woman of the Shore” supplies a sensuous, semi-figurative/semi-abstract image flanked by panels with love poet supreme Neruda’s words.

Elena Stiff, a veteran collagist/ assemblage artist with a steady though idiosyncratic approach and new ways to give small works a big presence, shows a few tasty items in the show. “The Love Book” is an unfolding series of love-based postcard stanzas with tiny poetic quotes (“Love is the triumph of imagination over intelligence”—H.L. Mencken), “On the Road,” and the itty-bitty adage-salved “Tao Towers.”

The in-house variety factor continues. One wall of the Elverhoj gallery space is larded over by a tall, loudly-colored and wordy scroll of a piece, by numerous artists from the Santa Barbara Book Art Alliance. But just across the way, printmaker Monica Wiesblott’s miniscule book art variations exert a soft-voiced, Asian-influenced quietude. Nearby, Linda Foster’s “Life in Shadow” uses light through glass planes etched with letters and pictorial touches to cast evanescent shadows, seemingly the antithesis of the language delivery of objects as such.

And there then is Beverly Decker’s sequential arc of a work, “Here’s a Story,” which dispenses with words or semblance of bookishness altogether, telling a non-linear cosmological story of spheres in the heavens. It also doubles as a pretty set of pictures, at a loss for — or need for — words.

Beverly Decker, Here’s a Story

BULLOCK

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April 13, 2018 - April 19, 2018
CURRENT ART EXHIBITS

Bloom Projects Exchange Series: “Midori Hirose, Of the Unicorn (and the Slaughtered Kids)”

In Midori Hirose’s first solo museum exhibition, this room-sized installation of newly-commissioned sculptures traces her explorations into the mythologies, historical accounts, ecologies and communities of Santa Barbara. Through June 3.

Open Wed., Fri. and Sat. 11 a.m.-5 p.m.; Thurs. 11 a.m.-8 p.m.; Sun. 12-5 p.m.

Santa Barbara Museum of Art, 1130 State St., 883-4654, sbma.net

“Colin Campbell Cooper: Resolution”

Celebrated American impressionist. Through April 29.

Open 10 a.m.-5 p.m., Sullivan Goss, 7 E. Anapamu St., 730-1460, sullivanGoss.com

“Crosscurrents: American and European Portrait Photographs, 1840-1900”

Assembling many striking and rarely seen works, this exhibition showcases how photography portraiture blossomed in an array of media and formats over the course of the century. Through May 27.

Open Mon.-Sat. 11 a.m.-5 p.m.; Sun. 12-5 p.m.

Santa Barbara Museum of Art, 1130 State St., 883-4654, sbma.net

“Crosscurrents: The Painted Portrait in America, Britain, and France, 1750-1850”

This exhibition, drawn exclusively from the permanent collection, explores the dynamic dialogue that took place over the course of the century between American, British and French portraitists through the Colonial period through the Industrial Revolution. Through May 27.

Open Tues.-Sun. 11 a.m.-5 p.m.; Thurs. 11 a.m.-8 p.m.

Santa Barbara Museum of Art, 1130 State St., 883-4654, sbma.net

“Departures of Separation: Westmont Graduates”

Fourteen paintings by 14 graduating art majors offer their capstone art projects, which span painting, drawing, printmaking, fiber sculpture, digital prints, welding, assemblage and a charcoal animation. Through May 5.

Open Mon.-Fri. 10 a.m.-4 p.m.; Sat. 11 a.m.-5 p.m.

Ridley-Tree Museum of Art at Westmont College, 955 La Paz Rd., 565-8162, westmontmuseum.org

Chiura Obata, An American Modern

One of the most significant Japanese-American artists working on the West Coast in the last century. This exhibition presents an unprecedented survey of Obata’s rich and varied body of work that includes over 150 superb paintings and personal effects, many of which have never been on public display. Through April 29.

Open Wed.-Sun. 12-5 p.m.

The Art, Design & Architecture Museum, UC Santa Barbara, 893-2951, museum.ucsb.edu

“Group 164: Legacy & Influence”

In two partnered exhibitions heritage photographers who are rarely seen together will be in focus. A distinctive collection of platinum and silver prints from world-renowned photographers including Edward Weston, Ansel Adams, Imogen Cunningham and Roland Partridge. By appointment only.

Open May 31.

Kyle Invign Design, 39 E. De La Guerra St.

Jane Gottlieb Photographs France

Jane Gottlieb’s vision of France is not like anyone else’s. It is riotous in color, hyper-vibrant in energy, and deeply Californian, shot through with a purely Mexican palette. Through April 29.

Open Wed.-Sun. 11 a.m.-5 p.m.

The Art, Design & Architecture Museum, UC Santa Barbara, 893-2951, museum.ucsb.edu

“Joys of Nature”

The watercolors of Jo-Nel Bell with colorful paintings of California Underwood and jewelry by Patricia Watkins. Through April 30.

Open 10 a.m.-5 p.m.

Gallery Los Olivos, 2920 Grand Ave., Los Olivos, 688-7517, gallerylosolivos.com

“Kaganoff Returns”


Open 10 a.m.-5 p.m.

Closed Tuesdays.

10 West Gallery, 10 W. Anapamu St. 770-7711.

“Letty Paints Plants!”

New work by the long-time local artist. Through April 30.

Open 10 a.m.-5 p.m.

Closed Tuesdays.

Santa Claus Lane, Carpinteria, 684-0300

“The Loyal League: Images from Japan’s Enduring Tale of Samurai Honor and Revenge”

The exhibition examines the wide-ranging pictorial representations of the classic Shögun kyujo (floating-world) woodblock prints, illustrated books, and paintings from the late 1700’s through the early 1800’s. Through June 10.

Open Tues.-Sun. 11 a.m.-5 p.m.

Santa Barbara Museum of Art, 1130 State St., 893-4654, sbma.net

“Marine Megatropolis 1974-1981”

Exhibit includes 28 spectacular images selected from expeditions by Bob Evans and Andrew J. McMullen of the Marine Biology Laboratory. Through March 12.

Open Wed.-Sun. 11 a.m.-5 p.m.

Santa Barbara Museum of Art, 1130 State St., 893-4654, sbma.net

“The Feathered Friends of the Tri-Counties”

Three artists, Jim Hodgson, Renda Connolly, and Ginni Rice, present a group exhibition of current artistic creations by Israeli artists. Through May 3.

Open Mon.-Thurs. 9 a.m.-5 p.m.; Fri. 9 a.m.-3 p.m. Sat. and Sun. 10 a.m.-5 p.m.

Wildlife Museum and Art, 1511-B Mission Dr., Solvang, 688-1092, wildlife museum.org

“Phoebe Brunner: Breathe”

Every inch of Phoebe Brunner’s paintings is vibrant and in motion. This latest body of work connects the earth around us as it regenerates from a long lack of rain. Through June 3.

Open 10 a.m.-5 p.m.

7 E. Anapamu St., 730-1460, sullivanGoss.com

Richard Schlos: “The Miracle of Atmosphere”

Through April 29.

Open 10 a.m.-6 p.m.

Palm Loft Gallery, 410 Palm Ave. Loft A-1, Carpinteria, 684-9700

“The River’s Journey: One Year, Six Artists, Ninety-two Miles”

Six local women artists explore the journey of the Santa Ynez River over one year, all 92 miles of it, along with its watershed, from Jameson Lake to Surf Beach. Through July.

Open 11 a.m.-5 p.m.

118 Gray Ave., slo118.com

Submit events for consideration two weeks in advance to scene@newspress.com