

Dance

What's old is new

A 99-year-old man from Mississippi gives an NYC artist some inspiration.

By **Gia Kourlas**

Failure isn't an option in Ralph Lemon's class at the New School's Eugene Lang College because in his invigorating world, no such thing exists.

"When we do this stuff, does it seem like we're dicking around?" he asks a group of students studying how to explore new relationships between memory and history via their own bodies, video, text and sound. They look slightly confused until Lemon adds with a laugh, "It's all I want to do."

One of the most adventurous artists working today, Lemon famously disbanded his successful dance company in 1995. Back then, he recalls, his major question was, "Why do I have to make a dance every year? Is it for me, is it for the audience, or is it for the demands of the funding system?" He embarked upon a project called *The Geography Trilogy* and, during trips to Africa, Asia and the American South, delved into how cultural, political and racial differences both clash and intersect with his aesthetics. So far, his research has produced multiple works of art, including 2004's shimmering *Come home Charley Patton* and a new solo exhibition, "*(the efflorescence of) Walter*," opening at the Kitchen Friday 11.



The show is inspired by research from *Come home*, in which Lemon performed ritual "countermemorials" at lynching sites and danced in the living rooms of relatives of blues musicians from the Mississippi Delta. Through drawings, paintings, video work and a model of a spaceship, the artist draws on his relationship with Walter Carter, a 99-year-old resident of Little Yazoo, Mississippi, to explore memory, memorialization and transcendence.

Lemon met Carter in 2002 while at a juke joint in neighboring Yazoo. "The owner asked if I wanted to meet the oldest man in town, and I said, 'Of course!'" Lemon recalls. "I interviewed Walter, and at one point, he just got up and did these old juke-joint dances on the spot that he hadn't done in 80-plus years. It was remarkable for me: I was watching someone remembering and doing at the same time, and watching the body—an old body—disseminate that unreliable experience of remembering. It was just perfect."

Ever since, Lemon has traveled regularly to Mississippi to spend time with Carter. "I'm fond of saying the whole of *The Geography Trilogy* has been reduced and expanded to this one 99-year-old body," he says. "It's me, and it's him, and then it's beyond—because his time on this earth is really limited. I never know when I leave if that's the last time we work together."

The exhibition also shows Carter's relationship to the creative process. "I go down with a script and suggest some things for him to do that I can then document," Lemon says. "Walter takes them on and forgets about me. When Walter begins to work, he doesn't care if I'm there or not. I'll put the camera on him and sometimes just leave, and when I come back, he's still at it until he finishes and figures out when it's done for him. It's beautiful. And this man doesn't use the word art. He's a 99-year-old black man who's lived in this small town all his life."

Since one of the themes he and Carter have explored together is the concept of transcendence and the future, Lemon decided that a playful metaphor would be a spaceship: "I'm really interested in this idea of the temporal and an obliteration of the body, and here I am with a man in his late nineties whose time on this earth is—" Lemon pauses. "He's at the portal. So a nice way for me to keep it in a conceptual language that wasn't so terrifying was to use terms like outer space."

With the help of members of the Mississippi community, Lemon built the spaceship using materials found in Carter's backyard. "It's kind of a traditional country backyard—everything that they throw away is in there, including hubcaps and old toys and screens," he says. "Really beautiful, interesting stuff. But the project has expanded—all of a sudden, there's this community of artists. They're not calling themselves that, but that's what they are."

Following the exhibition, Lemon will bring the spaceship back to Mississippi in a truck and continue his narrative with Carter. "The work I'm doing with him and what you'll see at the Kitchen are ongoing chapters," he says. "We're creating a living novel."

"(the efflorescence of) Walter" is at the Kitchen Fri 11-Jun 23.