Felix Bernstein and Gabe Rubin

*Bieber Bathos Elegy*

Press
“It’s time for me to grow up,” Justin Bieber said in a recent interview. And growing up amidst the pressures of a complex world and a relentless public eye is the tricky, tenuous, entertaining theme of New York-based artist Felix Bernstein’s new musical spectacle, *Bieber Bathos Elegy*, which will debut at The Whitney Museum of American Art this month. During the performance, Bieber visits the stage as a prophetic angel to critique and parody the show inspired by events from Bernstein’s life and critically acclaimed writings, collected recently in *Burn Book* (Night-boat). This hybrid work of opera, poetry, cabaret drag (artist Shelley Hirsch leads a gay youth’s chorus in a rendition of “Tomorrow” from Annie) and deconstructive criticism features Bernstein as the thinking millennial’s poet trying to figure out where lieth the reality in the labyrinth of life.

Bernstein is the author of *Notes on Post-Conceptual Poetry* and *Burn Book*. Bernstein’s writings have appeared in BOMB, Hyperallergic, and Poetry Magazine among others. In my interview with Felix that follows, he discusses Bieber as icon, the meaning of Bathos and how a devastating personal tragedy gives his path purpose.

**Why Justin Bieber? Is he someone you are drawn to as an artist?**

Not usually, except as a muse of sorts. In his new album, he’s trying to reach his ex, Selena Gomez, but failing to. That’s typical of a pop album, but what got me was this interesting aesthetic maturity that comes when he realizes it’s not all about reaching her, or saying you are sorry, or being in pain. There is also a formal complexity, a craft, that’s for himself, not just for his fans, and not just for revenge.

I started making videos in high school and there is a lot of awkwardness about that now, as people either like me for that stuff, or dislike me for that stuff, or see me as childish, or not a serious artist, or a brat. But either way, it’s an image of myself that I can’t control, that I feel split off from, and yet I can’t cut off, like Bieber’s pressure to mature and to divorce himself from prior images, but also his addiction to the “hotness” of his self-image.
How did Bieber Bathos Elegy at The Whitney come about? What can the audience expect?

At the old Whitney, I performed for the artist’s band Red Krayola, and for the multimedia artist, Andrew Lampert. The new Whitney museum has a really awesome theater, and I was asked to think of something to do there. And they also have a performance curator, Jay Sanders, which is a fairly new thing for a museum to have. I used my background in poetry, criticism and music to create something that would be right for a theater. I wrote a libretto that mixed lots of personal stuff about my life, with fantasies of Justin Bieber, and musical spectacle, which became part of my book of poems, Burn Book. But I also show my thought process of how I get to the things I do, rather than it just being about theatrical spectacle.

In the show, I get to work with two visionary artists - the visual artist Thomas Lanigan-Schmidt, as well as the experimental vocalist Shelley Hirsch, both of whom are very influential to me. Thomas is a Stonewall veteran and has been in the city since then, so has a very interesting take on the way that gay art has transformed into what it is now, which we both agree, is far from visionary.

Bathos?

An extreme display of sadness that seems ridiculous or funny.
Who are some non-poets that directly influence your poetry? How do they inspire you?

I listen when I’m writing poetry to 30-second clips of songs that I repeat for hours, which inspire me to keep writing and writing. I listen to Dusty Springfield, Sweeney Todd, Cocteau Twins, Fiona Apple - I’ll pick a particularly resonant emotional crux of the songs to repeat, but it is not simply the emotion but the repetition that is crucial. If you simply confess how you feel in a given moment, you are sad and hurt, in a very transparent and generic way, but it fails to be moving. But to hear the repetition of phrases, you start to really see the formal constraints, the rigor, and the practice of the singer. If you’re able to represent how you feel in different ways, with differing objective correlatives (as T.S. Eliot put it), then in interesting ways you can maybe start to reach people. In a culture where there is so much confession, so many people trying to reach each other through sharing their feelings, like the Adele song “Hello,” it maxes out. It becomes a joke. Eliot is important to think of here, because the song “Memory,” from Cats, is based on his words but also based on the words of Robert Lowell, which are really important to my show and the book. One of the best things that Lowell wrote, at the end of his life, was “sometimes everything I write / with the threadbare art of my eye / seems a snapshot, / lurid, rapid, garish, grouped, / heightened from life, / yet paralyzed by fact.” I don’t want to be paralyzed by fact. But sometimes, of course, I am.

Are there any ideas or themes that recur throughout your work?

A recurrent theme is ugliness and annoying people. When I was making videos in high school, I was motivated by an attempt to annoy people, who had certain expectations around the process of “coming out of the closet,” and how one is supposed to perform being gay or being a serious artist. So I used a clown, childlike persona to annoy people who wanted me to be sad and serious. But when I left Bard College, and moved back to New York City, the expectation changed; it was for me to social network, and be very cosmopolitan and hip, to use academic jargon, and make work like everyone else, join a clique, and so on. I tried to make fun of that glamour and critique the scenes that surrounded me. And take on a humorous distance from my own life, friends, and family. So I lost some friends, and made some friends. In my new show, I try to “annoy” those coming in with an expectation of fashionable, ironic pop art that will reference hot museum topics and make the in-crowd feel safe.
Both your parents are successful artists. How has that affected you?

It’s impacted people’s judgments of me but it also gives an interesting perspective on lineage, intergenerational politics, and the ways that artists are canonized and judged at different points in their lives. And the way a child feels and thinks and is judged is something I return to all the time.

What is the importance of Elegy to the show?

In mid-December 2008, my sister, Emma Bee Bernstein, took her life, at the age of 23. And the book and show are happening in coincidence with my being 23 during this anniversary. Time is senseless, and this show and book serves as a dirge to remember her. But it’s also about the many variations on how to formally depict loss: pathos, bathos, humor, restraint, or opera? Still, all of this mourning is encased in a glass snowglobe. There’s frustrating propulsion to move on. In your early twenties, you have to go really fast otherwise you miss the boat. And I’m on the boat...but I’m not willing to merely look forward.

Original article: https://www.huffingtonpost.com/c-m-rubin/bieber-bathos-elegy-and-b_b_8911698.html
When Bieber Is Your Mirror

by Claire Voon
January 28, 2016

In a 2011 commercial for his fragrance “Someday,” Justin Bieber — then just 17-years-old — flies across sun-streaked heavens, a recently spritzed blond beauty in his arms. It’s hard to not feel some exhilaration (whether because of the heart-thumping music or the sheer cheesiness) from the video, which was just one of many clips projected successively on a screen as part of Bieber Bathos Elegy, a sold-out performance by Felix Bernstein and directed by Gabe Rubin that premiered this month at the Whitney Museum. That feeling of thrill, which characterizes Bieber at the start of his career as a newly discovered child pop star, was tinged with public trepidation as he matured into the inked young adult who accumulated a record of tomfoolery and criminality, eventually moving towards the solemnity found in his music today. Bernstein traces that path of emotion in Bieber Bathos Elegy, delivering it with a generous serving of absurdity but also a sincerity in reading the world of celebrity and identity.
As its name suggests, the three-act play/musical/opera/experimental theater — the entire show defies classic categorization — explores the modern phenomenon of Justin Bieber and stardom bred in the digital age through concepts established by the ancient Greeks: Alexander Pope’s concept of bathos, wrapped up in a poetic lament. In his artist’s note, Bernstein defines bathos as:

[T]he failure to achieve pathos — the failure to achieve catharsis and the ubiquitous sympathy associated with drama — bathos: to land in the ridiculous, to be ridiculed, or to ridicule oneself — to blame oneself, instead of finding relief or sympathy or blaming another or fate. Pathos is a kind of mutual pity: bathos is self-pity, since no audience member cares.

Bernstein plays with the psychological throughout, pulling the audience into an often bewildering but amusing rollercoaster of a mindset. At the start, he merges childhood trauma and levity as he alludes to Bieber’s ridiculous past. Donning a mask designed by Soren Roi that resembles sewn-together skin flaps, Bernstein appears as a frenzied adolescent seated in front of his laptop in the first act (dubbed “The Pervert’s Lair of Memories”), obsessively pulling up an array of YouTube videos and old clips — all viewable to the audience on a larger screen — at times speaking directly to us. Old Christmas sing-a-longs, a snippet of the theme song from “Blues Clues,” a girl on a China’s Got Talent-esque show singing “Memory” from “Cats” — these musical videos are among the amusing digital detritus Bernstein shows alongside gems like the “Someday” advertisement, a segment of teen Bieber playing “Would You Rather” on “The Talk,” and a three-year-old crying because she loves Justin Bieber and “knows he loves me back.” Bieber’s digital past is our comedy — evidenced by the laughter-filled theater — and thus his tragedy, and although it built his obsessed fanbase, it’s one from which he must distance himself to mature.
This performance through video reminds of Bernstein’s own creative background: for years, Bernstein has chosen YouTube as his preferred medium of representation, posting videos of himself seamlessly adopting an array of identities. As much as it concerns the Canadian crooner’s self-image, Bieber Bathos Elegy is also a diaristic work that reflects particularly on growing up in a media-saturated era. Like John Jesurun’s performances that inundate us with all varieties of digital content, Bernstein’s debut integrates references to home videos, Broadway hits, top 40 charts, and more. This sea of information collapses time and creates confusion, presenting a consumed self who’s searching for anchorage — as emphasized by Bernstein’s slipping into a number of characters as he does in his videos. In this sense, Bieber Bathos Elegy is also reminiscent of the chaotic and high-paced videos of Ryan Trecartin that explore indeterminate identities. And like Trecartin’s work, Bernstein unfolds bizarre scenes whose meanings aren’t always clear but remain riveting from their hyperactive spirit. Through this muddle presented in the frame of the celebrity, he examines his own personal purposes and perplexities, too.

A sudden emotional shift away, not unlike a jump cut, from the levity Bernstein sets at the start occurs in Act Two, when Bieber, played by immaculately coiffed and buffed Luke Smithers, makes his appearance as an expressionless angel, a figure of exemplary conduct but wholly colorless. Scaling an A-frame ladder as a choir kneels before him in reverence of an idol, he is far from the carefree Bieber with a case of perma-smile Bernstein showed in his video selection. He resembles the Bieber of today, kept in line by his awareness of constant scrutiny, knowing every move triggers YouTube view counts, Twitter retweets, Facebook shares that shape personal brand. Infamous for his slew of antics, as he attempts to demonstrate maturation, he is as critics have described the 21-year-old, now “joyless” and highly aware of his need to at least express remorse. As the New Yorker’s Carrie Battan wrote, “He has either retreated so deeply into a state of contrition that he has lost his taste for fun or, more likely, become so fatigued by the process that he can’t muster the energy required to have any.” Bernstein alludes to such media profiles with simple switches in mood augmented by musical lamentations.

The banger “Where Are Ü Now,” off Purpose, is one of Bieber’s most emotional, and it’s the plea Bernstein chooses to herald the angel-pop star’s arrival, sung by a choir of youths (millennials, if we must). Led by the dynamic Shelley Hirsch, the WHATEVER 21-clad group also sings a phenomenal rendition of “Tomorrow” from Annie in the ingenious style of a vocal warm-up that deconstructs the ditty into repetitive articulations. Although Bieber Bathos Elegy doesn’t feature many major characters, with Bernstein contributing the majority of its dialogue, the choir’s gripping performance shines as the most memorable. Reiteration tends to breed reassurance; the tune becomes a mantra of encouragement that ups the drama of Bieber Bathos Elegy as we, too, start to root for Bieber’s successful untethering from his IRL transgressions we witnessed through URLs. “Tomorrow,” along with “Memory,” recurs throughout the performance in various musical styles, weaving this hope for a better future — “The sun’ll come out tomorrow!” the chorus chants — with notions of nostalgia — “I was beautiful then,” Bernstein croons in one scene. He stands there as an image of lost glamor, dressed as a crone in a fur coat and glittering jewels, his vocals accompanied by Rubin’s innovative, sinister arrangement of colliding notes performed by a three-piece band. In these moments that conflate time, musical genre, and ideals of identity, Bieber Bathos Elegy surges in emotion in its examination of success and contemporary stardom.

But the performance already reveals its ending in its title — that this saturation of emotion, whether remorse or self-pity, will not lead to a true purging of character. By the end, Bernstein, still entranced with Bieber, faces his idol who floats as a projection against a cosmic sky. The result is ridiculous, made more so as digital Bieber ridicules Bernstein in a teasing spiel (again, reminiscent of quick-cut interchanges in Trecartin’s work) that he spits out in a monotonous, somewhat glitchy voice: “Transgression is meaningless”; “suck my dick, faggot”; “I’m not yours”; “believe it, bitch, slut” or “and I’m like...” While as an angel he has literally risen above his wrongdoing, his words reek of artificiality and adolescence. Bernstein uses the framework of poetry to deliver loathing, an ugliness of art that demonstrates Bieber’s failure to reach sublimity. All too self-aware, he is but a whiney dude with a nice bod.

We, too, experience a moment of self-awareness early in the performance. After “Someday” streams, Bernstein yells to his audience, “I’ll give you more! This is what you want, right?” His exclamation acknowledges that whether we idolize or loathe him, we expended our time to watch a performance that could be about only Bieber. We trekked to the Whitney because there’s some kind of delight in a Bieber-filled experience: we went for spectacle. The dramatic singing and exaggerated performance Bieber Bathos Elegy delivers is satisfying — although at times it is a little too over-the-top, making for easy comedy. In such moments, it feels like Bernstein is over-amplifying his antics for a setting where he is all too aware of having to perform — in comparison to the space of video-making, where although he is performing, his “audience” is mediated through a nonjudgmental camera. But in playing with the audience’s want for pleasure, Bernstein contemplates the purpose of artistic expression in relation to the pressures of an expectant public with a persistent gaze.

Original article: https://hyperallergic.com/269509/when-bieber-is-your-mirror/
Behind Felix Bernstein’s ‘Bieber Bathos Elegy’ at the Whitney Museum

by Yasmin Geurts
January 20, 2016

On Jan. 15 and 16, New York-based artist Felix Bernstein opened up his spectral subconscious to a sold-out audience at the Whitney Museum NYC, his performance ranging from satirical opera to perverse web voyeurism. With the intention of anticlimax, the viewer's gaze was provoked through emotive mythological and pop culture imagery, making time appear non-linear and nostalgically psychotic.

Bernstein presented an homage to childhood trauma within a developing genesis. His visions were of an angelically volatile Justin Bieber, sparking a feeling of abandonment in distant ideals, where catharsis online is laced with click-bait and celebrity disassociation. The show featured many characters that embodied a palpable IRL esprit, like the band and chorus, led by avant-garde vocal artist Shelley Hirsch.

Performers wore Whatever 21, featuring pieces from existing collections, as well as some made exclusively for the production. Playing off Bernstein’s sentimental aesthetic, garments responded in metamorphosis to fashion’s evolutionary nature. With the collaboration of an edifying styling team, scrupulous art direction and Bernstein’s long-time collaborator Gabe Rubin, the performance reflected an epoch where a post-new media adolescent breaches young adulthood and remains tethered to a place of mourning & uncertainty.
An Interview with Poet, Performer, and Critic Felix Bernstein

Felix Bernstein’s writing moves between the painfully autobiographical and the archly self-mocking. His latest work, Burn Book (Nightboat Press) is both joyous and hopeless—burnt out, but still full of an unquenchable flame.

As Bernstein prepares for his January show, Bieber Bathos Elegy at the Whitney Museum, which brings to life pages of his book, I talked to him about his relationship to evasion and oppositionality, and the implacable pornography of selfhood.

—Max Taylor-Milner

THE BELIEVER: Your books and performances move between the intensely personal and affective to ironic baroque melodrama through quick changes between mediums, characters, scenarios, and guises. You set up registers of emotion, and then disrupt them with quotation. Sometimes it seems as if you’re mocking the reader for following you into these maudlin places. Is this what you mean by bathos? What is the difference between pathos and bathos?

FELIX BERNSTEIN: For me, pathos is basic tragedy, which makes an appeal to the audience’s sentiment, raises your ecological and moral consciousness. Bathos is being trapped in pathos but not being able to appeal to the
audience, the performance doesn’t work. This has become that generic thing called “narcissistic,” masturbatory performance art. I still try to do this. Maybe I’m just trying to fit in.

BLVR: It feels like you’re role-playing as yourself, dressing up in affects and using concepts as props. Would you say the book, as a whole, is a kind of psychodrama?

FB: Or a spoof. I don’t disagree with Godard calling Douglas Sirk’s films black comedies, but they are of course, also, melodramas. Or Charles Ludlum saying the audience laughs but he cries, when he plays Camille. To do Queer Theory revisionist readings of these things, and erasing Brecht’s influence—seeing only “bodies and affect,” simplifies the art. Art shouldn’t be mere normalizing sublimation or queer desublimation, which amounts to the same thing, should actually make your problems worse. Only then can the fantasy of endless role-playing and analysis be traversed. Art is, in this way, less delusional than psychoanalysis.

BLVR: One of the things that impressed me most about your last book, Notes on Post-Conceptual Poetry is its coherency, both how clearly you identify the targets of your criticism, and the unity of voice you address them with. But Burn Book…it’s all over the place. How self-conscious were you in assembling these poems? Were they intuitive? Did they have an overall structure?

FB: What’s the actual question? Do I know what I’m doing?

BLVR: Yes, but I find it hard to believe you would write this way without a reason. What, if anything, were you trying to do by bringing all of these different styles and genres together in one book? Each piece is an expression of a different mode, and it’s hard to read the entire project as an example of poiesis because it feels fractured, so fragmented.

FB: It is definitely fragmented in comparison to my critical writing. But as for intent, often enough gay male bathos is deemed intentional, whereas female bathos is deemed “suicidal,” or troubling. Likewise, there is the difference between the intentional ridiculousness of Ludlum’s “Ridiculous Theater” and the mistaken ridiculousness of Samuel Barber’s “Anthony and Cleopatra.” More interesting is when you can’t tell. Ideally, people won’t be able to tell at the Whitney.

BLVR: When I was reading it, I kept wondering, as a thought experiment, what the thesis would be...

FB: The thesis was probably to develop something that I couldn’t develop a thesis from very easily.

BLVR: That’s what makes it so hard to read Burn Book in relation to Notes on Post-Conceptual Poetry.

FB: People who are insecure about their critical writing have a hard time making art that isn’t trying to overcompensate for that insecurity, especially if they’re in New York. How many poems reference theory and it’s just ‘cause they really want to seem like they “get it” and that they’re “hip.”

BLVR: This suspicion about theory-as-reference is interesting since it seems like a lot of your project is about how opposition is impotent.

FB: Well, I wager that playing by the rules aggressively can be a sort of opposition. Aggressively passive rather than passive aggressive. In the conversation with my dad’s character in the book, he says, “why aren’t you being more clearly oppositional? Why would you let people see you in this impotent way?” One reason is that I don’t want to produce obvious “experimental” art because I know it’ll be dismissed as “bloodline.” I try, not always successfully, to feel unpopular and annoying, not just cool and hip. Which I’ve noticed is the very wrong aesthetic for a young gay male at the moment. Which seems to be about mirroring Clueless style popularity... or being unpopular in a way that is sort of at the margins but fits in the Hollywood cliché of emo boy or melancholic girl. But what camp once was was a sort of unpopular inside joke. How now do you create an inside joke now when Joe’s Pub (etc.) is just another tourist trap in NYU’s bought up and renovated lower east side?
BLVR: So you’re sad about the normalization of gay identity?

FB: Actually it’s good because I need something to critique! I am sad about the normalization of the critique of the normalization of gay identity. What then is left for me to say?

BLVR: But is there nothing left of gay kinship?

FB: As a gay person I noticed that many people assume I have a similar structural and traumatic make-up but I don’t. People don’t kill themselves because they are gay. The worst feeling is when you can’t not be what you are. I don’t want to be a part of anything that traps me, but that in and of itself is a trap.

BLVR: You’re not really an upbeat guy, are you?

FB: That’s not very nice. People have said that some of my videos are upbeat, or funny, a lot people have told me they listen to Gabe (Rubin) and me singing Cats for four hours, while they work, and it’s enjoyable. But then there are Tinder boys who find my videos, and say they are “put off,” and I want to be like: I’m really not as gay and wacky as I seem in those videos! But what can I do? They’ve seen them.

BLVR: But there always seems to be a darker undercurrent in your videos, full of dissociation and paranoia.

FB: I’m very paranoid. And if I don’t feel alienated then I feel even more paranoid. That’s why I like there to be tension between what the audience wants and what the performer does. And the problem—always—with avant-garde or experimental art is that this tension gets lost because everyone is on the same team. And then the artist doesn’t get to feel alienated. That is scary.

BLVR: There’s that section in _Burn Book_ where you, or a version of you, is having depersonalization from marijuana, and there’s an effect of flipping through channels or leafing through case files. And yet despite this disassociation you’re always present in each poem.

FB: I made a self that’s visible!

BLVR: There’s also a persistent theme of adolescent or childhood sexuality running throughout _Burn Book_—your own, Justin Bieber’s, Eva Ionesco. On the one hand, there’s something free or emancipatory here, both in the ownership of sexuality in lines like “We were the world’s youngest pedophiles” or the nostalgic, Joe Brainard-style evocation of the joy of sexual self-awareness. But it also presents an erotic gaze cruelly attracted to the shamelessness of children, while adult sexuality is presented as confusing or even abject. Is there ever a pleasant resolution to adult-child tensions and violence?

FB: I think actually the children in this book, including me, are not children but movie stars. The “traumatic” memories in the book aren’t lies because I was always already fictional. I can’t remember not being sexually sarcastic. I did have a fleeting moment of erotic adolescent sublime, and it could not be enjoyed because I was already trying so desperately to milk and re-present it. I was always already child pornography, doomed to be confiscated. This was what I thought about as a kid. Not all joy is meant to be enjoyable. And shamelessness is always full of shame or performed and self-aware in this book. Outside of the book, well that’s my own private problem... I’m adjusting.

Original article: https://logger.believermag.com/post/2016/01/15/the-shame-of-shamelessness
Felix Bernstein Tackles His Most Ambitious Project Yet — a Justin Bieber Opera

Interview by Daniel Penny
January 13, 2016

The spirit of Justin Bieber loomed large over the rehearsal — projected onto a screen, standing amid a swirling galaxy of stars. Bieber (played by Luke Smithers) wore a pair of white angel wings, white boxer-briefs, and an air of blank derision. Occasionally, he interrupted the scene beneath him to insult the artist, Felix Bernstein. “Wanna suck my dick?” Bieber would ask. “Dream on.” Bernstein staggered across the stage in a hysterical frenzy and collapsed to the concrete floor, but this was intentional — his choreographer, Emily Skillings, was miming the movement for him as a cue. The musicians plucked along, led by composer Rron Karahoda. The Queer Youth Chorus sat behind a rack of costumes, making gargling sounds with their avant-garde choirmaster, Shelley Hirsch. So far, preparation for Bernstein’s opera Bieber Bathos Elegy (premiering at the Whitney on January 15) was running smoothly.

At 23, Bernstein is very young to be debuting anything at the Whitney, much less this grand a spectacle, of which he is both creator and star. YouTube sensation, child opera singer, performance artist, critic, Ph.D. student, scion of one of the biggest names in American poetry, Bernstein is many things — but above all he is ambitious. In 2015 he published a book of criticism that the New York Times called “blistering”; he will release a book of poetry in 2016. He has held a fellowship at the New Museum and currently holds an artist residency at Pioneer Works. Even so, the debut of this opera marks a turning point in the young artist’s career, after which it will be hard to dismiss him as merely precocious.
Bernstein began his ascent as a teenage YouTube performer, posting videos of himself—often in makeup and costumes—talking to the camera or playing demented versions of characters like Amy Winehouse and Minnie Mouse. “He could make a picture a week, like the Warhol Factory, and it was all him all the time,” says critic and Poets Theatre founder Kevin Killian. “I didn’t get everything he was doing, but I still think of him as one of the bright lights of the next generation.” Combining the sexual anarchy of the Cockettes and the deadpan zaniness of *Strangers With Candy*, these videos outline the queer themes, lo-fi aesthetic, and parodic approach Bernstein would develop in subsequent work. He brought his trademark style to an appearance at the 2012 Whitney Biennial and pushed it further in his film *Unchained Melody*, which filmmaker and California Institute of the Arts professor Lewis Klahr called “an epic coming-of-age story...in the house of Kuchar...while being completely of its own age and time.”

Though the old avant-garde has hailed Bernstein as the next big thing, he doesn’t think of his work as cutting-edge: “I’m very old-fashioned, with very campy tastes,” he says. But unlike his forerunners’, Bernstein’s tastes have been forged in the hot cauldron of the internet. *Bieber Bathos Elegy* stages the way our inner lives are increasingly experienced and represented through online detritus. The projections are not separate from the characters onstage; rather, they inhabit the same phantasmagoric universe in which hypertext reference and reality commingle.

“The whole time I’m working with projections, and today I felt, *Those are my objects. They’re like dolls,*” Bernstein explained. Rehearsal had wrapped for the day and now the artist was trying to unwind. “To some extent, it’s as if the computer has an unconscious and you’re discovering things in it.” He paused to take a bite of director Gabe Rubin’s banana bread. “I would say my major sexual relations, and my major relation to my dead sister, is all mediated by the computer.” Bernstein’s sister, Emma, died in 2008.
Bernstein during rehearsal: “I’m very old-fashioned, with very campy tastes.”

“He’s now the age she was when she died,” says Bernstein’s mother, painter Susan Bee. Adds his father, the poet Charles Bernstein: “There’s certainly a sense that he’s making her present after her death. In a way, that’s what an elegy is.”

Both parents are supportive of their son’s project, though they’ve remained hands-off. He lives in an apartment above theirs and has been holding rehearsals in their basement for over a year, but he won’t let them see the show until its premiere. “He keeps us on a need-to-know basis,” Charles says. “It’s so embarrassing, but I actually do not know who Justin Bieber is exactly. I couldn’t identify what he looks like, or his music.”

“We have to go to Lowe’s to buy a ladder – our role is very concrete,” his mother adds.

Asked whether their son might have advantages over other emerging artists, Charles Bernstein shrugs. “I’m in the center of a certain periphery of poetry,” he admits, referring to the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E movement he helped inaugurate. “But he’s a different generation. It’s not even clear that he’s even part of his own contemporary group that he writes about. Felix is certainly iconoclastic, whether he’s at the Whitney Museum or in the basement.”

At first blush Bernstein seems like the ultimate insider, but as a critic and artist he presents himself as a misunderstood outsider, and he suspects that his interdisciplinary style may leave some audiences confused. “[In] classes at Bard, they thought it was too campy,” he complains. “When I was in a drag club it was too angry. And in a poetry context it was not chill enough. So I felt very fucked over – and that’s good, but only if certain people can appreciate it.” Though he plays an enfant terrible, Bernstein is just as much an alter kocker.

Packing up his gear, the artist was hesitant to discuss what might come after Bieber. Bernstein looked exhausted and even thinner than usual, wearing a baggy shirt that read “DON’T SLEEP” across the chest; he still had days of rehearsal to slog through. The show had sold out, but Bernstein dismissed the idea of a big break. “I’m trying not to think about after,” he said. “I’ll feel a lot better when this is over.”

Original article: https://www.villagevoice.com/2016/01/13/felix-bernstein-tackles-his-most-ambitious-project-yet-a-justin-bieber-opera/