

A surreal landscape featuring a large, vibrant pink flower with many petals growing from a dark stem on a rocky, white shoreline. The background shows a blue ocean with white foam and distant blue mountains under a clear blue sky. In the upper center, there is a graphic of concentric white circles forming a heart shape.

ETHEL
DOCMERICA

THE PROJECT

In 1971, the newly created Environmental Protection Agency set out to capture the state of America's endangered natural resources in *Project Documerica*. More than 100 photographers were eventually hired to chronicle the effects of 20th century industrialization and urban expansion on the nation's majestic land and its people. By 1978, the photographers had captured tens of thousands of stirring images of fragile beaches, junkyards, mining, logging and traffic jams, contrasted with equally poignant photographs of Americans playing ball, gathering for worship, fishing, dancing, and just living life. This enormous project was largely forgotten until the E.P.A. digitized 15,000 photos around the time of the agency's 40th anniversary.

The members of ETHEL found *Project Documerica* to be a fertile ground for a multi-media program – *ETHEL's Documerica*. "It is such powerfully inspiring material, this archive. To see revealed the parallels – from 40 short years ago – to one's own contemporary American experience, is absolutely fascinating," says ETHEL co-founder and violist Ralph Farris. For co-founder and cellist Dorothy Lawson, "it seemed likely that larger human themes would emerge, and that every audience member would participate in bringing relevance and meaning to the shared experience."

ETHEL's Documerica began to take shape in 2012, while ETHEL was artist in residence at the Park Avenue Armory in Manhattan. Music was commissioned from the members of ETHEL, and from four other uniquely American artists – for a total of eight composers of different cultural backgrounds and ethnicities, each with a distinctive voice to comment on these very American images. At the recommendation of the Armory's Artistic Director Kristy Edmunds, the quartet then sought out a collaboration with projection artist Deborah Johnson, who sliced, diced and manipulated thousands of photos, building pieces to pair with the new music.



A workshop performance of *ETHEL's Documerica* was presented by the Armory on its "Under Construction" program in December 2012. That performance moved Joe Melillo of the Brooklyn Academy of Music to present the show on BAM's Next Wave Festival. Obie Award-winning director Steve Cosson joined the team, and the finished production debuted at BAM in the fall of 2013.

ETHEL's Documerica is a playful, thoughtful and emotional production that mesmerizes audiences. Just as the show's images offer incredibly diverse scenes of American life — from mundane waterfront activities to the pollution of smokestacks and hazy cityscapes — the music is sometimes joyful, sometimes mournful, sometimes angry. It recalls regional sounds and themes, ranging from hints of bluegrass to jazz rhythms and lush swells of patriotism. The New York Times called it, "a stylistic continuum from Dvořák to Steve Reich by way of Copland, with sidelong nods toward the blues, funk and Radiohead." It all adds up to a portrait of a country in flux, one that's wrestling with how to hold onto elements of its past that are worth saving, while embracing a potentially destructive future.

ETHEL's Documerica may have been inspired by a project from the 1970s, but in every way it is a work for our time. It invites audiences to contemplate how we still enjoy our natural resources, thanks to preservation efforts of the EPA and the environmentalist movement, while simultaneously considering their survival — and our own — now that the environmental threats of the 1970s have only magnified. This distinctly American archive, and this show, ask us to rise to the challenge through the power of art and music.



THE MUSIC

Mary Ellen Childs

Ephemeral Geometry

Childs gravitated to the archive's more abstract photos – a tall electrical tower with lines in geometric patterns, a bird silhouetted against the big red ball of the setting sun, an extreme close-up of a puffy dandelion. "Our sense of reality is altered just enough for us to see something unexpected," she says. Each of the three movements of *Ephemeral Geometry* has a different flavor.

- *Arcs*, which opens and closes in almost static space, reveals a gentle ostinato supporting the passing of melodic fragments.
- *Points*, drawing inspiration from an extreme close-up of a puffy dandelion, utilizes pizzicati and juxtaposes quirkier, ever-changing patterns with free improvisational lines.
- By contrast, the driving folky spirit of *Lines* (colored by the quartet's raucous vocalizing) rings bright, yet closes ultimately in a space of introspection.

Ralph Farris

Factions

As a child in the 70s, ETHEL's co-founder and violist Farris's idyllic suburban youth was (at least to his awareness) unsullied by the difficulties of the day. As such, as a way to re-connect to a past from which he had been sheltered, he was drawn to the archive's images highlighting those very difficulties, inspiring him to create this angular, driving work. The piece has a tone-poem feel to it, especially when paired with Deborah Johnson's use of energy crisis imagery. "So much anger, so much frustration," says Farris, "how exactly does my generation relate to the challenges of our parents? And what can we learn from those challenges?"

Kip Jones

Shout-out

In writing *Shout-out*, ETHEL violinist Jones nods to three of his favorite composers: Steve Reich, Avishai Cohen and Pat Metheny. This was to be the opening piece for ETHEL's *Documerica* and Jones wanted to channel the feeling of "Track 01" on some of his own most-loved records. "There's no thematic undercurrent, other than an effort to frame suspensions creatively," he says. "Just kick back, put down these notes, and enjoy the record!"



Dorothy Lawson

Epic Soda

Set to images of pageantry, community and festivals, this hard-grooving romp by ETHEL's co-founder and cellist interweaves fragments of pieces the quartet has performed over the years, with classic blues form. Lawson included references from Julia Wolfe's "Early that summer," Nizhoni Spencer's "Write the Wrong Not the Right," and Kevin James' "Ainu Inuma." Along the way, she signals popular hits from the 70's: Herbie Hancock's "Chameleon," and "Play That Funky Music, White Boy" by Wild Cherry. "My aim is to showcase ETHEL's members individually, while evoking the joy and energy of our shared experience," says Lawson.

Ulysses Owens, Jr.

The Simplicity of Life

Owens calls this series of pieces "a musical journey," and it's one that focuses very much on human experiences from these times.

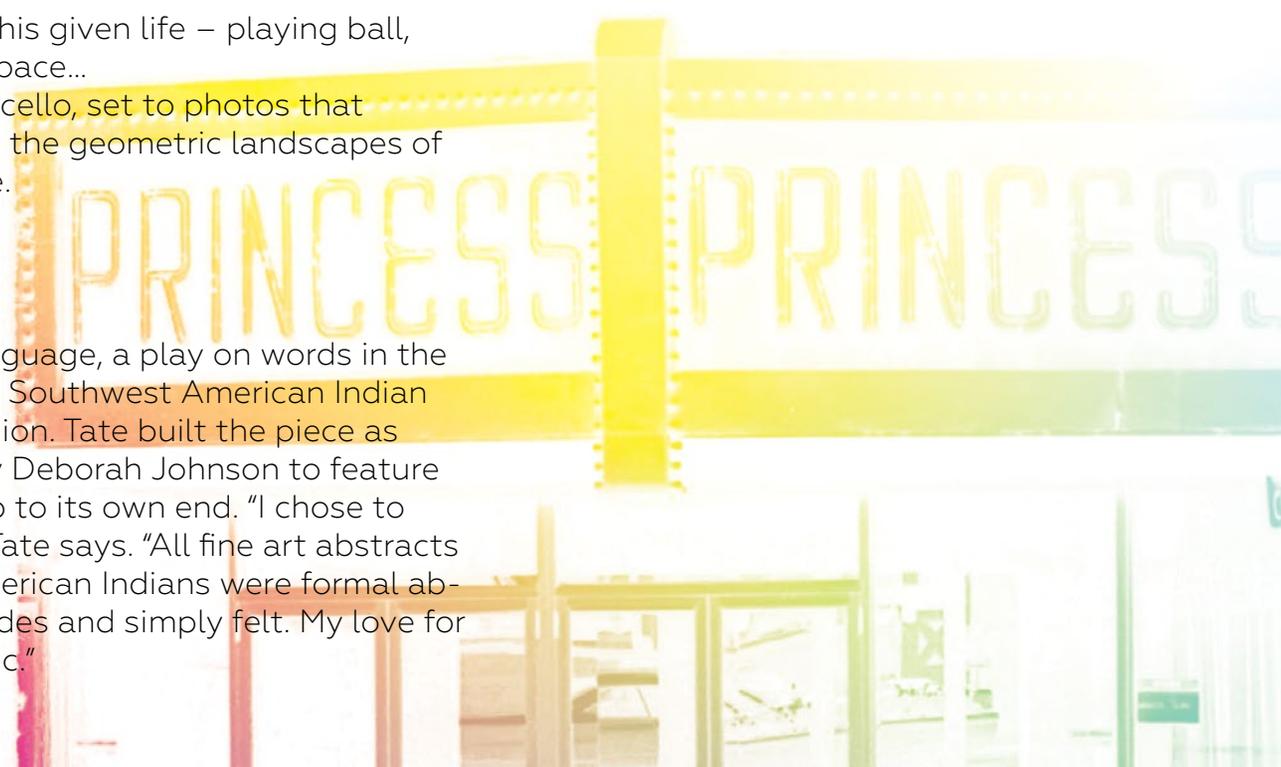
- A jazz waltz accompanies images of trees in their majesty, and the very human challenges of the logging industry, in *Swaying of the Trees*.
- *Revival Crusade* recalls the spirit and traditions of the church-going experience in the American South.
- *The Simple Things* celebrates the joy of this given life – playing ball, hanging out by the water, finding quiet space...
- *The Magical Quilt* is a duet for violin and cello, set to photos that juxtapose scenes of women quilting with the geometric landscapes of massive farms photographed from above.

Jerod Impichchaachaaha' Tate

Pisachi (Reveal)

Six Epitomes for String Quartet

"Pisachi" means "reveal" in the Chickasaw language, a play on words in the context of this show. The piece is inspired by Southwest American Indian culture, based on photographs from that region. Tate built the piece as six snapshots ("epitomes"), each designed by Deborah Johnson to feature a completely different character and develop to its own end. "I chose to base my composition in Pueblo folk music," Tate says. "All fine art abstracts reality. Even the early ledger drawings of American Indians were formal abstractions of Indian reality. I looked at the slides and simply felt. My love for my Southwest Indian cousins drove the music."



Tema Watstein

interludes i & ii

ETHEL violinist Tema Watstein and projection artist Deborah Johnson worked in concert to build these pieces. Upon seeing the kaleidoscopic photos of mangroves and exaggerated fish-eye shots of landscapes from above, Watstein says she wanted “to create something distant, transitional and transient - a little celestial and a little lonely.” To emphasize the transitory nature, she wrote these interludes as exercises in improvisatory mood-play. Each piece utilizes two members of the quartet as a melodic duo while the others play an ethereal bariolage pattern underneath. The composite sounds both delicate and organic - like shimmering waves. The melody is intentionally different with each performance, which gives the quartet freedom to tap into the spirit specific to each day.

James “Kimo” Williams

Into the Liquid

Williams’ contribution is personal and reflective, a themed work inspired by his personal journeys - from Long Island to Hawaii, the Gulf of Mexico, West Coast, Chicago, and the Black China Sea during his tour of duty in Vietnam. “As I contemplated this and viewed the photographs, I thought about my life and realized how many significant memories I have of my childhood and how they seem to be connected to an ocean, lake or river (liquid),” he explains, of the photos that paired with his music. “With this I was inspired to create a work that might show this ‘thread’ in my life experiences.” Williams’ piece culminates with “A Veteran’s Lament” – a powerful dirge in memoriam for his fellow veterans who did not make it back from the battlefield and the camaraderie he shares with all our military veterans who have contributed to life that we live.

- Beth Fertig
New York City, June 15, 2015





MOHS ʒHL

Original BAM Production

ETHEL: Documerica

Created and performed by
ETHEL

Directed by Steve Cosson

Projection Design by
Deborah Johnson

ETHEL

Viola **Ralph Farris**

Cello **Dorothy Lawson**

Violin **Kip Jones**

Violin **Tema Watstein**

Music by Mary Ellen Childs, Ralph Farris,
Kip Jones, Dorothy Lawson,
Ulysses Owens, Jr.,
Jerod Impichchaachaaha' Tate,
Tema Watstein and James "Kimo" Williams

Set Designer Adrian W. Jones

Lighting Designer Christopher Kuhl

Sound Designer Dave Cook

Executive Producer Karen Jenkins

Concept by MZ Smith

Production Manager Lisa Moran

Production Stage Manager Chad Zadrow

Projections Assistant Paul Piekarz

THE RECORDING

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Engineered by: Kyle Pyke and Jesse Lewis

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Art direction and design: Mark Kingsley @ Malcontent.com

Photography: Selects from *Project Documerica*, courtesy of the Environmental Protection Agency and The United States National Archives



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- 1 Epic Soda – Dorothy Lawson (4:58)
- 2 The Simplicity of Life: Swaying of the Trees – Ulysses Owens, Jr. (3:32)
- 3 Shout-out – Kip Jones (5:50)
- 4 Into The Liquid – James “Kimo” Williams (12:16)
- 5 interlude i – Tema Watstein (1:31)
- 6 The Simplicity of Life: Revival Crusade – Ulysses Owens, Jr. (2:18)
- 7 The Simplicity of Life: The Simple Things – Ulysses Owens, Jr. (2:38)
- 8 Factions – Ralph Farris (10:36)
- 9 Pisachi (Reveal) – Jerod Impichchaachaaha’ Tate (12:30)
Six Epitomes for String Quartet
- 10 interlude ii – Tema Watstein (1:54)
- 11 The Simplicity of Life: The Magical Quilt – Ulysses Owens, Jr. (2:28)
- 12 Ephemeral Geometry: Arcs – Mary Ellen Childs (2:59)
- 13 Ephemeral Geometry: Points – Mary Ellen Childs (6:01)
- 14 Ephemeral Geometry: Lines – Mary Ellen Childs (3:13)

The four versions of physical packaging for this album reflect the four regions of the United States as described by the US Census Bureau: Northeast, Midwest, South and West.

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