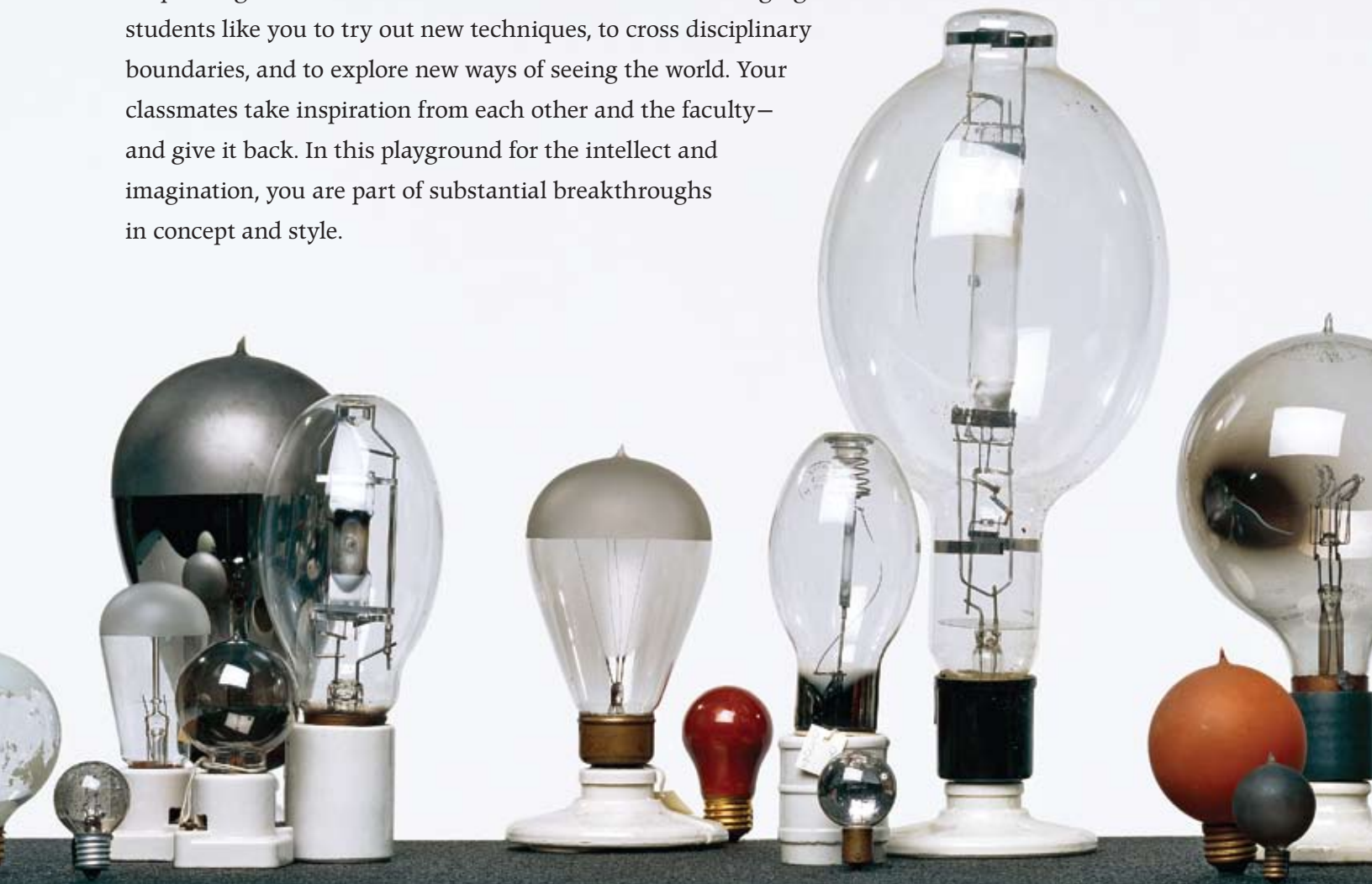


Bright Ideas

Arts faculty
make a tradition of innovation

If you've ever taken a class in studio art, music, or dance at Mills, you know what it means to be part of a creative laboratory. It means your teachers gain worldwide attention for pushing the boundaries of their art forms while encouraging students like you to try out new techniques, to cross disciplinary boundaries, and to explore new ways of seeing the world. Your classmates take inspiration from each other and the faculty—and give it back. In this playground for the intellect and imagination, you are part of substantial breakthroughs in concept and style.



In the following pages, the *Quarterly* features three of the 16 full-time faculty whose work defines Mills as one of the nation's preeminent creative institutions: artist Catherine Wagner, composer Roscoe Mitchell, and choreographer Molissa Fenley '75. These artists, like their colleagues at Mills, are pursuing new projects that engage the mind as well as the senses.

Mills' reputation for incubating cutting-edge art in an interdisciplinary, liberal arts setting has been built by generations of faculty over the course of the past century. In the 1940s, visual artists Fernand Leger, a major figure in the development of Cubism, and Bauhaus school professor László Moholy-Nagy taught Mills summer session courses. The Mills College Ceramics Guild, which became an important experimental base for artists like Peter Voulikos and Robert Arneson, was founded in 1940. Since then, notable instructors have included Antonio Prieto and Ron Nagle.

In 1940, French-Jewish composer Darius Milhaud joined the Mills faculty and established the College's status as a world leader in experimental music, a reputation strengthened in 1967 with the founding of the Center for Contemporary

Music, previously the San Francisco Tape Music Center (see sidebar on page 17). As recounted in *Oakland Magazine's* recent feature, "The Evolution Starts Now: Mills College Pushes the Limits of Contemporary Sound" (October 2007), Mills' music faculty has nurtured such outstanding talents as jazz legend Dave Brubeck, Hon. MFA '46; Grammy Award recipient Steve Reich, MA '63; and cult folk music star Joanna Newsom '06.

When Marian van Tuyl founded the Department of Dance in 1938, Mills was one of only two institutions of higher learning in the United States to provide a degree in the subject, and in 1941, it offered the nation's first degree in modern dance. The College has hosted residencies by such luminaries as Merce Cunningham, who had previously studied at Mills, and a summer session course

taught by Martha Graham. Strong and lasting connections across the departments of dance and music were forged on the Mills campus. Composers John Cage and Lou Harrison, for example, worked as accompanists for Mills dance classes and recitals.

Mills' continued vitality in the arts—and its ability to attract and retain talented faculty and students—depends on the quality and availability of performance and exhibition spaces, studios, and classrooms. But many of the spaces that helped establish Mills' reputation in the past century need renovation or expansion to keep up with the activity within. Mills has made it a top priority to invest in improvements to these facilities. The Concert Hall and west wing classrooms in the 1928 Music Building designed by Walter Ratcliffe are currently undergoing major renovation, to be completed in August 2008. Planning is underway for improvements to the Art Museum, designed by Ratcliffe in 1925. Mills is seeking funding for all its arts facility initiatives and welcomes the support of alumnae and friends. To discuss ways you can help, contact Barbara Goodson, associate director of major gifts, by phone at 510.430.2242 or by email at bgoodson@mills.edu.



"Utopia" 2006 by Catherine Wagner from *A Narrative History of the Light Bulb*. A lambda print of this image was donated by Trustees Roselyne Chroman Swig and Maryellen Cattani Herring to the Mills College Art Museum in May 2007.

Catherine Wagner:

Illuminating Culture

By Glen Helfand

THE LIGHT BULB IS A UBIQUITOUS, everyday object. Its commonness, however, obscures the fact that the light bulb is a technical innovation that has become an indispensable fixture of modern life and that this mundane thing is a symbol of ideas—of the spark that ignites adventurous and innovative thinking. Light bulbs help us to see; rarely, however, are they viewed as objects of artistic contemplation themselves.

Catherine Wagner is an artist whose interests lead her to focus on just such overlooked but necessary objects and ideas. In a recent series of elegant color photos, *A Narrative History of the Light Bulb*, she depicted the subject with a formal elegance from which layers of meaning emanate. “The light bulb is a metaphor for how ideas are generated, but they’re also formally interesting objects,” the Mills professor of art explains. The series emerged from a two-year residency at the Baltimore Museum of Industry, which houses a collection of some 50,000 vintage and recent bulbs—a collection Wagner explored in depth, pulling fascinating examples of the evolving form. The pictures allude to artistic lineage, shifting technology (the light bulb, as we know it, may soon be obsolete), and global warming. The series is but one example of how Wagner has expressed her continuing interest in making art that explores the foundations of contemporary culture.

“I’m really interested in how culture works, how it moves and is formed,” she says. “I’ve examined all these things—home, science, Disneyland—and I’m always looking at the major building blocks of how we live.”

During her formidable and constantly evolving artistic career, Wagner has pursued this inquiry with a keen eye and

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intellectual rigor. With photographic projects including *American Classroom* (1988), *Home and Other Stories* (1993), *Art & Science: Investigating Matter* (1997), and *Cross Sections* (2001)—which are included in the collections of New York’s Museum of Modern Art, the Whitney Museum of American Art, SFMOMA, and the Victoria and Albert Museum, London—she has looked deeply and artfully at infrastructures that are often taken for granted. In addition to the light bulbs, she has created elegantly composed pictures of such things as construction sites, museum display hardware, and sub-zero laboratory freezers filled with DNA samples.

These interests make her an ideal candidate for work in collaboration with research facilities, archives, universities, and institutions, and she has been awarded numerous esteemed fellowships, awards, grants, public commissions, and residencies. The scale and dimension of these endeavors continue to grow in importance, public visibility, and artistic intent.

She has three such projects currently in the proposal stage: works for a major new Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) building, a public/private hous-

ing development in Santa Monica, and a prestigious two-year artist-in-residency fellowship at the California Academy of Sciences in San Francisco, whose new “green” building in Golden Gate Park will open in late 2008. These afford Wagner the opportunity to rigorously engage with cultural themes such as justice, the use of public space, and scientific thought while expanding her own artistic practice. None of the resulting art is likely to be photographic in the traditional sense. Wagner’s proposals involve revealing aspects of architecture and installing outdoor magnifying lenses or configurations of security mirrors.

“It’s sculpture, but it comes from my ideas about framing sites within the social and physical contexts,” she says. Research is an integral part of her methodology. “What I am most interested in is the element of process, which can provide a platform for discovery,” she says. Recently, she has been looking at LAPD photo files and sound recordings of notable “voices of justice” that have been converted with a tool called the spectrograph into a visual graphic similar to a charted heart rate, which may become a primary feature of an exterior mural for the police department building.



William Mercer McLeod

Smart art: Catherine Wagner in her San Francisco studio with her dog Bishonen; her print “Right Brain, Left Brain” (2000) hangs behind her.

Working with cutting-edge technologies and nontraditional tools is nothing new for Wagner. In 2001, she was named one of *Time* magazine’s Fine Arts Innovators of the Year, an honor that speaks to the expansiveness of her vision, which challenges the confines of the photographic medium. For the *Cross Sections* show that year at the San Jose Museum of Art, she exhibited velvety black and white images created with magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) and a scanning electron microscope (SEM). She employed various digital devices to produce the images, including the dazzling “Pomegranate Wall,” a 40- by 8-foot curved arc displaying a backlit transparency of interior views of a piece of fruit.

While there’s an almost celestial quality to that glowing wall, Wagner’s use of a simple object to address complex ideas goes back 20 years to her *American Classroom*, a series that includes a photograph of apples used in a sixth grade biology experiment. The photo points to experimentation as a pedagogical tool—

something Wagner knows much about, as she’s been a key figure in the Mills College Studio Art Department since 1977.

“Those pictures are documents, but they are also conceptual meditations on these sites of knowledge,” she explains. “The classroom is an arena that reminds me why I became an artist,” she continues. “The conversation that takes place there is an exciting complement to my own studio practice in the way that it provides a sense of community. I like the interaction with the students and getting them to think of greater culture.” In symbolic terms, it’s a lot like watching those light bulbs go on.

Glen Helfand is a freelance writer, curator, and educator. His work appears regularly in Artforum and other publications and exhibition catalogs. He also teaches contemporary art in Mills’ Studio Art Program and, in 2006, organized the exhibition Particulate Matter for the Mills College Art Museum.

GOING PUBLIC

Mills faculty and alumnae in the studio arts work in an incredible array of formats—from painting to electronic media, from sculpture and ceramics to fiber and book arts. Their work can be seen in galleries and museums all over the world. But great works are also found as centerpieces of grand public spaces, shaping the way people interact with their environment.

Besides Catherine Wagner, who is currently engaged in three public commissions, two other Mills professors of studio art have gained national attention for their public installations.

Anna Valentina Murch has created a dozen public artworks around the country. Last year she was commissioned by Miami-Dade Art in Public Places to create *Water Scores*, a series of wave ramps and benches surrounding the entry plaza of the Carnival Center for Performing Arts in Miami. And thousands of harried travelers may have experienced a moment of calm watching *Skydance*, her light sculpture at the Denver Airport that evokes the Colorado sky by projecting soft-colored light and swirling cloud formations onto the fabric of the ceiling.

A little closer to campus, Hung Liu recently installed a painted glass mural of red-crowned cranes in flight at the Oakland Airport. *Going Away, Coming Home* was inspired by a 12th-century Chinese scroll painting. “These 80 birds are blessing our journey,” Liu told the *Oakland Tribune* when the piece was unveiled. “It’s not a day-to-day kind of chicken,” she laughed. “It’s a heavenly bird.”

Liu’s Oakland installation and Murch’s *Water Scores* were selected by Americans for the Arts for inclusion in its 2007 *Year in Review* CD, which features 40 “innovative and exciting examples of American public art.”



Roscoe Mitchell:

Exploring the Unknown

By Linda Schmidt and Barbara Goodson
Photos by Dana Davis

those willing to lend an ear will be drawn along on Mitchell's daring acoustic adventures.

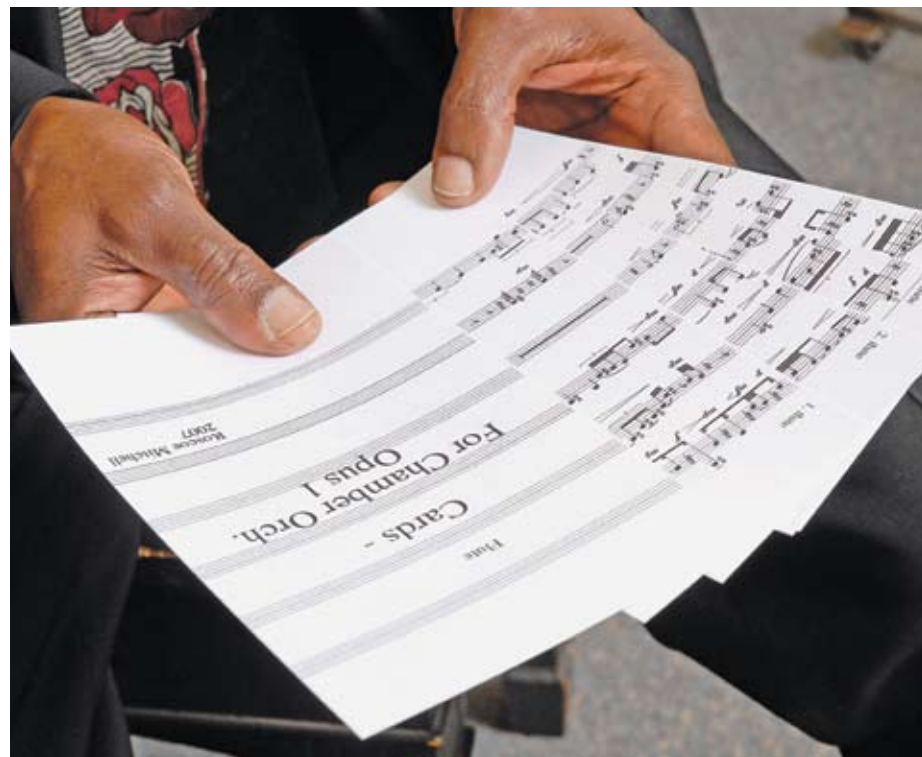
Born in Chicago in 1940, the environment of his youth was ideal for stimulating a young ear. "Music was all around me when I was growing up," Mitchell says. "I listened to the music my mother and father were listening to. My older brother, Norman, played lots of different records. We went to theaters that featured not only movies but also live performances by musicians like Count Basie's big band, Duke Ellington's big band, Charlie Parker, and Ella Fitzgerald." He learned saxophone and clarinet as a teenager and continued his musical education after joining the army in the 1950s. While stationed in Germany, he

studied with the first clarinetist of the Heidelberg Symphony and played with other enlisted musicians, like saxophone innovator Albert Ayler, who went on to make their careers in the jazz world.

Shortly after returning to the States in 1961, Mitchell joined up with other like-minded musicians in the Chicago area to explore contemporary alternatives to conventional jazz improvisation and composition. In 1965, this group formed the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM), a collective whose members have been recognized among the most important jazz innovators of the '60s and '70s.

Over the years, Mitchell has appeared with AACM members in a variety of configurations, seeing the change in per-

Take note: Roscoe Mitchell's "scored improvisations" guide and focus students learning the art of improvisation.



AHORN WAILS, RATTLES SHAKE, and whistles toot. Unidentified objects creak and clang and crash. You're listening to Roscoe Mitchell's "The Little Suite," a 1966 recording that challenges the listener to re-examine concepts of sound, music, and melody.

"The Little Suite" allows a variety of nontraditional noisemakers—what have become known as "little instruments"—to interject themselves into the more familiar jazz instrumentation. The title track of the album on which it appears, *Sound*, forces silence to be considered as an integral presence in the composition. These pieces, and the works found on nearly 90 albums released over the past 40 years, demonstrate Mitchell's pioneering approach to jazz composition and improvisation. His 2007 release, *Composition / Improvisation Nos. 1, 2, & 3*, was recorded by Mitchell and 13 other musicians at a symposium for improvised music in Munich, curated by the Munich Kulturreferat and the musicology department of Ludwig Maximilian University. It's not easy listening, but

sonnel as an opportunity. "I've always thought: You do music with who's there. And that's not a bad thing—because it stretches the mind and helps you to think of different orchestrations and different things that you can use," he says.

Whether performing in a quartet, ensemble, with a partner, or on his own, Mitchell's creative leadership is always apparent. His many honors include the International Jazz Critics Poll, *Down Beat* magazine's Talent Deserving Wider Recognition and Record of the Year (for *Nonaah*), and the NAACP's Image Award. He has been recognized by the National Association of Jazz Educators and has received numerous composition and performance grants from the National Endowment for the Arts, as well as the John Cage Award for Music from the Foundation for Contemporary Arts.

But Mitchell has perhaps made his greatest impact in the realm of improvisation, and he is incredibly versatile: In addition to his main horns, he plays flute, piccolo, oboe, baritone and bass saxophones, piano, and numerous percussion instruments. This variety is essential in his approach. "It's the study of sound in general," he explains. "That's why I play instruments that are high-register and low-register—it gives me a better understanding of how the whole music works. But I don't see instruments in any particular role, especially in an improvisation. Any instrument can be the lead, and any note can be the root."

This open-minded philosophy has now brought Mitchell to Mills College as the Darius Milhaud Chair of Composition. "We are honored to have a creative artist on our faculty who not only once performed with John Coltrane but also initiated revolutionary changes in improvisation, composition, and performance of his own," says David Bernstein, head of the Music Department. "Mills has an incredible musical legacy. Roscoe Mitchell's appointment demonstrates that we continue to play a leading role at the forefront of contemporary music."

Mitchell is equally pleased. "I was drawn to Mills because—well, just look at the faculty," he says. "A lot of people here are improvisers, and this is one of my main interests in music."

He is adamant, however, that good improvisation requires a great deal of study and practice. "I'm a firm believer that to be a good improviser, you need to study composition," he says. The interaction between the two is essential, and each technique strengthens the other. "For instance, I may play something as an improvisation and, later on, decide to write that down as a completely notated composition."

Similarly, Mitchell says, written materials can serve as a reference for expansion and improvisation—a sort of map for the journey—a method that will benefit the students he works with over the three years of his appointment at Mills. "A lot of beginning improvisation students make the same mistakes. I've tried to devise different methods of scored improvisation that address some of these problems, allowing the inexperienced improviser to function within the

improvisation for a longer period of time and to develop skills of concentration," he says. "But it's a constant study, for me too."

Yet the deliberate act of composing a piece can be as filled with discovery and surprise as a free improvisation session, Mitchell explains. "One of the things I've learned from improvisation is that every day and every minute is different, so if you block that off then you're not open to what's happening with that instant. So a lot of times I won't even know what I want to write. Sometimes it will be in my head, and I'll sit down and write it out, and eventually it will start to reveal itself."

"You never know what you're going to hear out there," he continues. "The thing I find most exciting is to explore and study music. Music is kind of like a mystery, and that's what excites me about it."

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40 YEARS OF THE CENTER FOR CONTEMPORARY MUSIC

The Center for Contemporary Music (CCM), housed in Mills' Music Department, is celebrating its 40th birthday this year. CCM's roots lie in the San Francisco Tape Music Center, founded in 1961. The Tape Music Center moved to the Mills campus in 1966–67 under the directorship of Pauline Oliveros, who has since returned to the College to serve variously as visiting professor and composer-in-residence.

From its inception, CCM has been at the forefront of experimental practice, presenting groundbreaking works by such internationally renowned composers as Oliveros, Morton Subotnick, Karlheinz Stockhausen, and others. Robert Ashley, director of CCM from 1969 through 1981, created a new genre of opera that included video, electronic music, and improvisation. Co-director David Behrman, along with Ashley and others, helped change the aesthetic of electronic music from playing back music recorded on tape to live performance.

Today, CCM is directed by Maggi Payne, a composer, interdisciplinary artist, and recording engineer, and Chris Brown, an instrument builder, pianist, and composer. John Bischoff, pioneer of live computer music, serves as studio director. Works by all three were performed at October 2007 concerts at Mills and at Los Angeles' REDCAT Theater that celebrated CCM's role in shaping electronic music over the past 40 years.

David Bernstein, head of the Music Department, has written *The San Francisco Tape Music Center: 1960s Counterculture and the Avant-Garde*, due from University of California Press in July 2008.

Molissa Fenley:

By Barbara Goodson

SO YOU'D LIKE TO BECOME A world-famous choreographer? First, make sure you start dance lessons at an early age so you are well prepared to audition for dance school. Do your very best in school so you can get into the right company as a member of the corps. Dance your heart out for several years, learning all you can from the choreographers you work with. Then, perhaps, when you've started creating your own works, you will break into the big time. That's how to do it... unless you're Molissa Fenley '75, now a renowned choreographer and part-time associate professor of dance at Mills College.

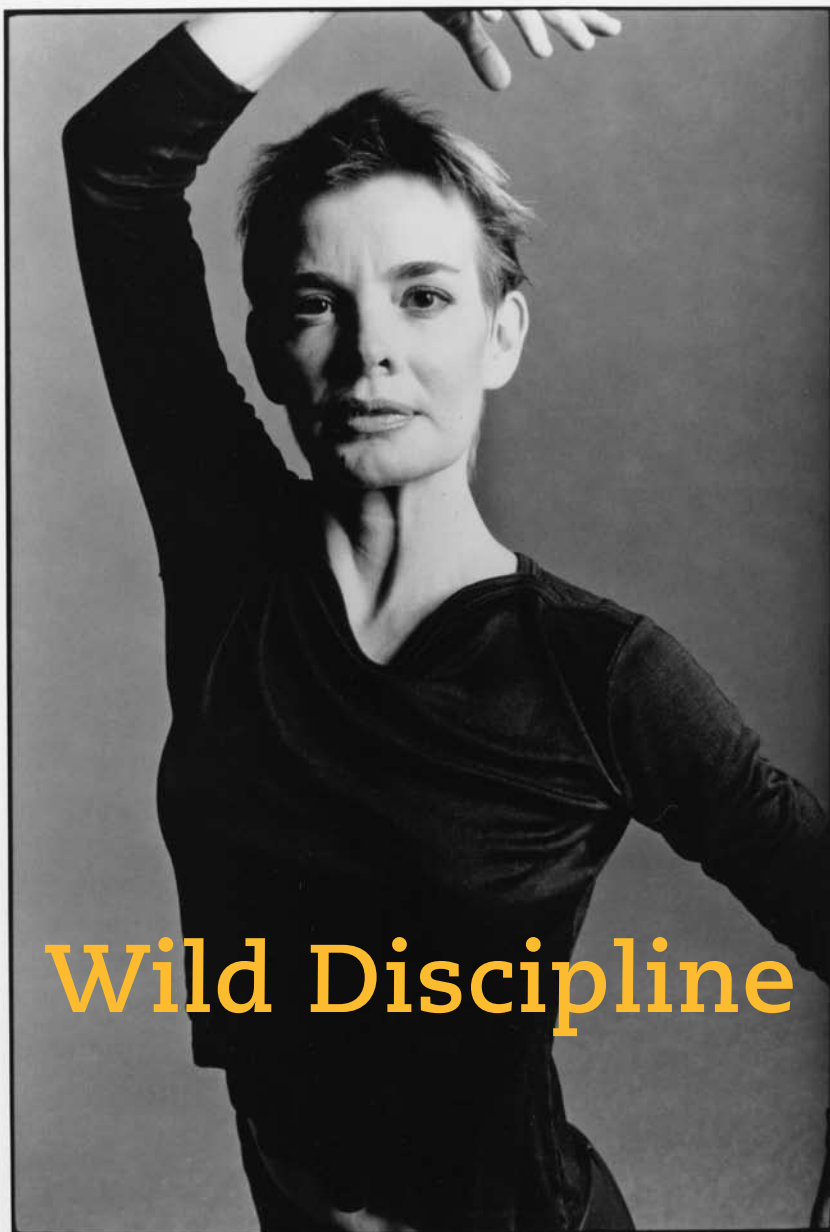
Thirty-two years ago, fresh out of Mills College with a bachelor's degree in dance, Fenley exploded all conventions by bursting onto the New York dance scene with none of the standard credits to her name. "I literally got on a bus the afternoon of graduation and moved to New York," says Fenley. "I had the confidence from having gone to Mills that it was possible." In 1977, she formed her company, Molissa Fenley and Dancers.

Since then, Fenley has created more than 60 works and performed both solo and ensemble pieces in major dance festivals around the world. She has accepted commissions from Deutsche Oper Ballet of Berlin, Australian Dance Theater, the Ohio Ballet, the Pacific Northwest Ballet, and famed dancer Peter Boal. She has also created dances on commission from her alma mater: In 1998, she choreographed *La Muse Ménagère*, with music by Darius Milhaud, and this spring she choreographed *Castor and Pollux*, with music by Harry Partch. She has received funding from numerous sources including the Foundation for Contemporary Arts, the Greenwich Collection Ltd., and the National Endowment for the Arts. She has received two New York Dance and Performance Awards ("Bessies") in

choreography, for the ensemble piece *Cenotaph* in 1985 and for the 1988 solo work *State of Darkness*.

Born in Las Vegas, Nevada, and raised for a few years in upstate New York, Fenley spent most of her childhood in Nigeria, as her father was working for the newly created United States Agency for International Development. For her junior and senior years in high school, she attended boarding school in Spain before coming to Mills College. "I was petrified of coming to the United States," she says, so the atmosphere of a small women's college that offered a major in dance—and the proximity of her sister in Santa Cruz—made Mills a welcoming choice.

Fenley's upbringing served, in a way, as a substitute teacher for what has become her distinctive style of dance. Freed from the constraints of childhood training in ballet and with her early exposure to flamenco and African dance, she draws easily from the vocabulary of movement present in a variety of dance traditions, using dancers' bodies to define angles and explore space. She cites Asian sculpture, Cycladic art, Egyptian hieroglyphics, and Yoruban dance as influences on her vision. "Fenley's style recalls dances of Hawaii, India, or Thailand in which each hand, foot, and finger movement has specific meaning. The precision and artistry can captivate you whether you know the fine points or not," critic



Timothy Greenfield-Sanders

CELEBRATING 30 YEARS OF DANCE



Paula Court



On December 11–16, 2007, the Joyce Theater in New York will present a week-long 30th-anniversary celebration of Molissa Fenley and Dancers. Fenley and her company will perform the New York premiere of *Dreaming Awake* with music by Philip Glass and the world premiere of *Calculus and Politics*, a dance for three women, three men, six stuffed swans, and a skipping rope, set to music by Harry Partch.

MILLS HONORS MOLISSA FENLEY

December 12, 7:30 pm
Joyce Theater, New York City

In conjunction with the Joyce Theater festivities, Mills College alumnae and friends are invited to attend a dance performance and reception in New York City in honor of Molissa Fenley. For more information, contact Barbara Goodson at 510.430.2242 or bgoodson@mills.edu.

Sharon McDaniel wrote in the *Palm Beach Post* in January 2001.

The precision of Fenley's work is often termed "cerebral" or "intellectual," but she also displays an unrelenting physicality. She trains both at the gym and the dance studio, merging cardiovascular endurance with the strength and flexibility demanded of dancing her choreography. Jennifer Dunning of the *New York Times* termed Fenley "a spare, astringent sprite" and *San Francisco Examiner* reviewer Allan Ulrich said, "She uses every muscle in her grueling, elegant choreography... Yet the body remains so beautifully balanced through its central axis that the risk-taking nature of the choreography is offset by a certain poise, even serenity."

Risk is also present in Fenley's adventurous collaborations. Her performances may take place with musicians on stage, or in silence. She might incorporate unusual components such as text by Eric Bogosian, video by Keith Haring, sculpture by Kiki Smith, or costumes by Merrill Wagner that tether dancers to the wall. She has developed close creative ties with composers Philip Glass and Somei Satoh, choreographed

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extensively to scores by John Cage and Lou Harrison, and performed to music by Laurie Anderson, Anthony Davis, Pauline Oliveros, and Talking Heads—partnerships that often germinated in the creative network at Mills College.

Perhaps it was, in part, this drive to stay in touch with new ideas that led Fenley back to Mills College as a teacher in 1999. Her continued friendship with faculty at Mills and the opportunity to work with students also aided her decision to return to Oakland, where she is usually in residence each spring semester. "It's interesting to be in a repartee with someone who's just starting out," she says. "It's good to be in conversation about how to make dance, why to make dance, what dance means in a culture that is constantly shifting."

Fenley will be spending spring 2008

in residence in Italy as a winner of a 2007–08 American Academy of Rome Prize. The prize has no category for dance, so Fenley applied in design, using the 13th-century Cosmati mosaics as a jumping-off point. These mosaics are designed using equilateral triangles and nested structures; Fenley's application outlined her desire to devise a dance exploring different aspects of movement in the same way the mosaics bring out different aspects of geometry.

While in Rome, Fenley will draw on the resources of the region and the skills of fellow awardees in a wide range of disciplines. The prospect of being a part of this vibrant intellectual community is tantalizing, she says. "I've not worked with an architect before, I haven't sat down to dinner with an archaeologist. I just find that a fascinating thing."