

PRINT

What Matters: Deborah Kass on the Music and Art That Move Her

Debbie Millman has started a new project at PRINT titled “What Matters.” This is an ongoing effort to understand the interior life of artists, designers and creative thinkers. This facet of the project is a request of each invited respondent to answer 10 identical questions, and submit a decidedly nonprofessional photograph.



Up next: Deborah Kass, an artist who lives and works in Brooklyn. She is thrilled to have received her second COVID vaccination.



What is the thing you like doing most in the world?

I love going to the beach all day long—reading, walking, swimming in the ocean. Break for lunch (see final question). Also, I'm very big on sleeping.

What is the first memory you have of being creative?

First memory of visual consciousness: the mobile above my crib; the colors red, yellow, blue; a cardinal, a goldfinch and a bluebird made of painted wood. First act of artistic appropriation: stealing the giant chunky crayons from nursery school. First serious committed act of creativity: drawing all over my house, up the stairs into the hallway, with said crayons. Next: ongoing comic strip deeply influenced by Charles Schulz's "Peanuts" in second grade.

What is your biggest regret?

Not being born rich. Oh, the good I could have done! Does that count? I definitely haven't traveled enough. It was something I put off till right about now in my life, and now—COVID. Moral: Don't put off for tomorrow what you can do today.

How have you gotten over heartbreak?

Time. That's all that helps.

What makes you cry?

Great art makes me cry. Genius makes me weep.

With music there is a long list of weird tear-jerkers. In no particular order, here are just some:

Sinatra, "One More for the Road"; Spinners, "Could It Be I'm Falling in Love"; Bruce Springsteen, "The Rising" and "Thunder Road"; the opening chords of *La traviata*; Maria Callas, "Tosca"; "Sunday" by Sondheim; *A Love Supreme*, John Coltrane; Chaka Khan, "Papillion"; Bob Dylan, "You're Gonna Make Me Lonesome When You Go"; "At the Ballet," original cast album of *A Chorus Line*; Barbra Streisand and Judy Garland, "Happy Days/Get Happy" TV duet. Even writing these titles makes me tear up.

I have been at the theater, and much to my surprise, started to sob during overtures: the recent revival of *South Pacific* at Lincoln Center. Maybe it was a buried childhood memory of my parents' records. I don't know. And the London revival of *Company*, with the main character Bobby being played for the first time by a woman (Rosalie Craig as Bobbie). At the very first notes and characters singing the intro my pal and I simultaneously began to cry, which continued unabated as we held hands through most of the first act. Waterworks throughout *Hamilton*, even now years after my first time seeing it, when I listen to the cast album, as we just did in the car. "The Story of Tonight," a catch in the throat. Then welling up through "Helpless." Audra McDonald in *Lady Day*, inhabiting and acting that voice and in everything/anything she ever does. Cate Blanchett in *Streetcar Named Desire*: a Blanche for the ages. There will never be a better. I will never see another. Epic. Primal, feral, terrifying. Greatness. Tears.

A few times I have burst into tears unexpectedly in front of a painting. Cézanne's last painting, *Bend in the Road*, 1906, because, visionary that he was, you could see he could see the future of 20th-century painting. Gasp. De Kooning's *Excavation*, 1950, because of its crystal-clear influence on a very young Elizabeth Murray, an artist whose work has meant the world to me, who saw it every day as a student at the Art Institute of Chicago. That just moved me to tears. I first saw Kerry James Marshall's *Scout (Boy)*, 1995, many years ago at the Brooklyn Museum, and his exquisite picture of pure dignity, nobility, citizenship and aspiration went straight to my heart and tears just shot out of my eyeballs. Once at dinner drinking Ghost of Marys at Prune with the painter Rochelle Feinstein, she showed me a newly finished painting on her phone. Its flip, off-handed weirdness smashed up against formal brilliance and quirky material originality evoked the wildest, deepest emotion, and I totally lost it.

I absolutely love when this happens because it's always a surprise and reminds me why art matters.

How long does the pride and joy of accomplishing something last for you?

Depends on the accomplishment. But if it's something really, really great, so far it lasts forever.

There is nothing like seeing the best of me, my sculpture *OY/YO*, in front of the Brooklyn Museum surrounded by 10,000 of my queer brothers and sisters in love and power at the Black Trans Lives Matters Rally. What pride! What joy!

Do you believe in an afterlife, and if so, what does that look like to you?

No.

What do you hate most about yourself?

Hate is way too strong of a word. I don't hate anything about myself, although I could definitely list things that could use some improvement. If I could I would do something about my DNA, so imprinted by centuries of trauma that I always expect the worst. Proof it's genetic: My sister is a therapist, my brother is a short-seller.

What do you love most about yourself?

It's a tie: honesty and humor. I am a riot in every sense, and my life's work is speaking truth to power.

What is your absolute favorite meal?

Home-grown tomatoes and basil, and fresh, still-warm mozzarella, with excellent extra virgin olive oil, salt and pepper, followed by many, many ears of just-picked corn.

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