

BIOGRAPHY

Michael Richardt (DK/NI) is a performance artist specialising in time-based and long-duration performance. His practice includes video, photography, sculpture, writing, vertical dance, and music. Michael is a matriarchal thinker and creates work using a self-developed system that consists of frames based on spectral colours, objects, and natural phenomena.

In 2017, the documentary *My Mother Is Pink* focused on Michael's durational, intergenerational, and interdisciplinary artwork *RULE PINK*. *My Mother Is Pink* was nominated for Best Art Documentary at the Sheffield Documentary Film Festival and won the Outstanding Excellence Award at the Desert Edge Global Film Festival in India. In 2018, Michael worked for Marina Abramović performing *Imponderabilia* and *Freeing the Voice* at Denmark's Louisiana Museum of Modern Art and *The Freeing Series* at Norway's Henie Onstad Art Centre. In 2019, Michael wrote the film script and book for his future film *My Father Is Black*. His work was recently exhibited at the Kunsthall Nikolaj in Denmark as well as the Reykjanes Art Museum and the Nordic House in Iceland.

BROWN

MICHAEL RICHARDT

This is a story of how a childhood art practice travelled through time from the 1980's to arrive in 2021 as a vocal performance by MRI.

MRI is an acronym for Michael Richardt Iridescence—a conceptual performance persona that I use to embody a utopian vision of love and freedom. This figure embraces, contains, and expresses all colours. The 'I' stands for Iridescence, which is a hypersurface structure found in nature that creates the appearance of spectral colours. It is commonly recognised as the colour of soap bubbles. My performances and objects strive to become light, and so do I. In that process they and I turn to music. My final performance will be a vocal recording.

THE MAGIC TWELVE

As a child every now and then I would be given a package of twelve felt-tip pens. Red, Orange, Yellow, Light Green, Light Blue, Dark Green, Dark Blue, Brown, Grey, Purple, and Pink. I would use Pink first; it often dried out while colouring in a big skirt. My grandmother would remove the lid and pour spirits into it; this would dilute the colour and keep it going. The third time,

Pink had turned to Rose. By the fourth time, it was almost gone. Then I'd use Purple, but my interest was already dwindling in the absence of Pink. The rest of the colours I had absolutely no interest in engaging with, but I had to use them all up, to get a new Pink.

Next, I'd try to make my own Turquoise by mixing Light Green and Light Blue. It was hopeless. I was not going to look like an amateur and have my paper ruffled up. This was my reality. Turquoise wasn't there and only sometimes I would have Pink. The two colours became synonymous with my parents. The remaining eleven felt-tip pens represented the reality that surrounded me, with which I wanted to have very little to do.

So, with all the colours, I drew a bubble, put myself in it, and a tornado carried me away. This bubble was the imaginative vision triggered by my grandmother's magic game. When there was turmoil at home, I took refuge in paper, like a tiny cowboy in his grandmother's skirt, guided by the music in the ink.

1.

THE BLUES BALL PEN

On paper, I was born in 1980 in Skanderborg, Denmark to a Danish Mother and a blank space! The blank space should have carried the name of my Nigerien father; since birth, I've only met him three times.

I was raised by my grandparents. They nurtured me and cared for me until the age of five. Then I went to live with my mother. We lived in eight different places until I ran away at fifteen. After that, I returned to live again with my grandparents.

Being the only mixed-race child in the neighbourhood meant that I was unusual and often alone. We lived in a small neighbourhood, and I would walk the streets wearing my grandmother's skirts tied with a belt. It made me walk differently. I felt like a cowboy just like John Wayne on his horse. All the neighbours were used to me passing in my skirt, with a bottle of Sommerdrik, the Danish equivalent of Kool-Aid. I grew up playing with Barbies, My Little Pony, He-Man, and Racetracks. I had very little interaction with computers. My brief encounters with them consisted of *Bubble Bobble* and *Great Giana Sisters*, two adventure games about going to another level.

MY CHROMATIC SCALE

When I was four, I was obsessed with a three-year-old Chinese child who could play Bach and Beethoven on the piano. I so wished that we had a piano because a piano is a huge animal that can climb and crawl up and over everything. I pleaded with my grandparents to let me go to the Rudolf Steiner School where you could learn the violin. I didn't go. They said it was a sect and sect meant NO.

I never got a violin, but I had a blue ball pen. The pen was my violin. The blue ball pen was a portal from the mundane to the magical. There were no fancy art materials at home.

The leaky, disposable blue pen is regarded by most to be as commonplace as a bluebottle fly. For me it is

the underdog and unsung hero of the art world. The blue pen was a crude resource that was ever-present in my childhood world. It was to be found at the hairdressers', at the local garage, on the grocer's counter, and sometimes on the street. The blue pen's clip enabled it to sit in the breast pocket of grandpa's shirt close to his heart just like I would. The blue pen was my first experience of thinking before making.

At my grandparents' house, everything was brown and orange with yellow flowers on the carpet. I remember my uncles, Finn and Dennis, who lived at home at the time. They were big fans of AC/DC and Iron Maiden. I loved AC/DC, Iron Maiden, and my uncles. Finn and Dennis both died young. I miss them very much.

My grandfather and my uncles were always unhappy in their work. I watched as these men in my life went somewhere in the morning, somewhere that took them and made them sad. Then they had to do it again tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow, every day. Something was stealing their happiness and the ability of their bodies to be true and free. I remember, at one moment, looking out into my future. I had to avoid that day-to-day prison and actual prison and find something that would keep me from losing my joy. As I had heard about something called an Artist, someone who paints images, I thought to myself, "I can paint! I think that I'll have to become what they call an Artist." The blue pen clicked its tail.

FIRST DAY OF COOL

I started school when I was five. In my first week, I went to the library to ask for books on art. The librarian looked at me, and then she took me to a shelf, and passed me four small books of the same size. I couldn't read and wasn't familiar with names like Picasso, Van Gogh, and Monet. I remember clearly thinking, "This one is watercolour;

2. *My story* by Isobel
the Bachelorette,
written by Sjon.

I know how to do that. This is that rough crayon feeling; I know that, too. This is that line thing I do with the ball pen and then fill in with felt pens, yes know that.”

Holding one in my hand, I looked at the pictures and recognised them. I knew these places. I had seen them. I knew that they depicted the world as I saw it. The book was about someone called Dali. I wasn’t allowed to borrow the book, but I could visit it daily.

A piano could take me to a perfect reality in the outer world, but these deserts could take me there through the inner world. These are the landscapes I see when I am in performance. My mind is filled with the deserts of Salvador Dali mixed with the landscape of old American westerns which I saw on TV with my grandparents.

I would watch my grandparents deep in their movie. They would make faces and be so loud, laughing and shouting at all the shooting and dying. I loved turning the television knobs so that the images and people onscreen looked red or blue, which infuriated my grandfather. “He’s been at it again!” Turning the knobs and colour dials was like painting with light. It puzzled me why people had to be certain colours and not others and why some colours were allowed, and others weren’t.

GRANDMOTHER’S MILLION KRONER GAME

Every day I would sit across from my grandmother and play my favourite game. *If I had a million crowns, I would...* We would take turns to list the wonderful things we would buy, the places we would go and things we’d do. During the game, she’d pass me a piece of paper or the back of an old letter. “Here! Draw on this one,” she’d say, tapping it with her finger. Grandmother always wanted to own her own house by a lake with swans on it, to have long hair, and wear beautiful dresses. That game transported us into a vision of who we

could be. A better reality.

“Look what I’ve found!” Another game I enjoyed very much was Ting-finder or Thing-finder. I’d ask grandmother for a plastic bag, and I’d go out into the world and look for objects. One day in the field behind my grandparents’ house, I happened upon a silver pendant buried deep in the ground (Gondry 1997).² The dragon head on the pendant caught my eye first, then the shields. It felt heavy in my hand. I then realised the pendant was a ship.

The pendant was perfect for hopscotch. I’d throw it and watch it skim across the asphalt, as I hopped on the numbered squares. I eventually lost it again. Things do that; they are found and eventually return to lost or just go somewhere else.

On a good day, I would find five things. My favourite objects were buttons made of see-through and colourful plastic. My grandmother kept them in a jam jar together with all the other buttons. I would take the see-through, colourful plastic ones and the metal ones and put them in a tin. Then I’d go to the end of the garden and bury them beneath the great cherry tree. I’d wait as long as I could before digging them up again which gave me intense pleasure.

One day, the great cherry tree was sick and had to go. If only I had known that there is nowhere to go. I don’t believe the cherry tree was sick. I believe it didn’t let in the light and therefore had to be removed.

HOMEMADE OPERA

In addition to my uncles’ AC/DC and Iron Maiden albums, my first musical influence was my grandmother singing her homemade opera. My uncles’ albums provided an orchestra and choir to my grandmother’s soprano. I would hear her through the window out on the street. ‘Piv-falsk’ my grandfather would say—off key. As for the key’s purpose, Janet Jackson said it unlocked the cages of the many ani-

3. The album *Music Box* was written, performed, and produced by Mariah Carey in 1993.

4. From the song "Declare Independence," *Volta*, written by Björk Guðmundsdóttir and Mark Bell.

5. Quote from *Poltergeist* (1982), spoken by five-year-old Carol Anne about the arrival of the poltergeists or 'The TV people' through the TV screen. The scene in the screenplay runs from page 13 (section 27) to 14 (section 28) (Spielberg 1982).

mals her family owned, explaining that she was responsible for taking care of them when she was young (Williams 2021).

"We had so many animals growing up. We had fawn, mouflon sheep, peacocks, giraffe, just all kinds of animals. So, it was my job to feed them, to clean the cages," Jackson told Falon. "That was my chore. It was a working key. So all through school, I wore hoop earrings and I would keep the key on my earring."

Grandfather was a very talented musician. Our house was the neighbourhood music box (Carey 1993).³ In grandfather's car, we would hear Danish 'Top 100' pop, with songs whose lyrics spoke of rings of gold, coffee, and flowers. Grandmother's laughter was like a great horn that called me back to myself and reminded me of who I am. I, too, was making my own homemade songs, but I couldn't share them with anyone else but my grandparents because they were made up on the spot.

ART IS MY SPACESHIP

My coloured pens became a chromatic spiral staircase at the core of my life. Viewed from above, this spiral forms a circle in which all the colours perform as a whole. An iridescent compact disc. My percussive steps as I climb this staircase lay down the tracks and the beats. To reach what is true in me, I would climb to the highest peak.⁴

With a flag and a trumpet
Go to the top of your highest
mountain and
Raise your flag (higher, higher!)
Raise your flag (higher, higher!)
Raise your flag (higher, higher!)
Raise your flag (higher, higher!)

Raise your flag (higher, higher!)
Raise your flag (higher, higher!)
(Guðmundsdóttir 2007)

The R&B, hip hop, and rap artists that I'd see on MTV danced and jumped while singing. They were the most physically expressive people I'd ever seen. Colour TV. They looked like me and you could buy them on CD.

Rap and hip hop came from the streets and the artists developed it from what resources were at hand. They had been poor just like me. I wondered if they'd written their songs with a blue ball pen on the back of an old letter. They used their own poetry and speech rhythms. It was a raw, heartfelt language which articulated their experiences and spoke of hopes and dreams. Their music acted as an artistic digestive system for their lives.

POP AS MY CHURCH

Pop music connects me with the magical possibilities of grandmother's Million Kroner Game. It carries me into a soap-bubble reality, protected and transported by a thin mercurial and reflective film. Shuffling across the floral carpet of my grandparents' living room, I charge myself with static electricity and create tiny light storms across the bubble screen with the stroke of my hands:

They're here.⁵

I'm magnetically enfolded by the iridescent film of soap-bubble reality—jumping and dancing, popping and laughing, bouncing, and gesturing hands while singing. I burst the bubbles while my grandmother washes the dishes. She helps me pop the bottlecap and it jumps, fills the sky with bubbles. Pops covers me up with freshly cut lawn as he wheel-barrels me around the crops.

And there is this one black
guy. I can tell you exactly
right now. What he looked
like. He wore one of those
things around his hair. A

6. "The Sensual World" is the title track from Kate Bush's 1989 album (Bush 1989). About the song, Bush commented, "The song is about someone from a book who steps out from this very black and white 2-D world into the real world" (Scott 1989).

7. My relationship with colours has led to my performance persona *Iridescence*. Since 2011, I have worn wigs from red to purple using time as a prism. I change the colour of my wig when I receive a printed public solo interview, an article, or a portrait made that, on its own, can stand as an independent work of art. This documentation is then fed back into my art, creating a positive feedback loop. In my imagination, I am a refraction of light, revealing the inner workings of light over time. In the documentary film *My Mother Is Pink*, I painted my body with blue ink for the duration of filming, thus embodying the blue pen.

scarf. And he had such a soulfulness to him. Which a lot of classical artists had no soul. You see. So it was a big deal for me. My first love, in a way. Through the music. I mean. I was six, he was eighteen. And he would sit and talk to me. Talk to me about music. Do you know what's going on out there? And I would say, no, what's going on?
(Tori Amos Special 1992)

I learned to make art with what is at hand. I am still making art with what is at hand. This accessibility and involuntary crudeness lie at the heart of all my performances, which often utilise discarded and salvaged objects. In my final live performance, the architecture is my notebook. The space is a page. There, ink becomes what it always was: my voice.

STEPPING OUT OF THE PAGE INTO THE SENSUAL WORLD⁶

From a young age, I've expressed myself through colour, as I myself am mixed race, a blend of colours.⁷ Mix them all and you'll get *Brown*.

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