

Q+A with *The Dance Enthusiast*

Features

The Dance Enthusiast Asks

THE DANCE ENTHUSIAST ASKS: Inside Imani Gaudin's Creative Universe and Her Latest Work "new york, please"



By Theo Boguszewski

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Imani Gaudin. Photo: Isabella Pagano

See it at New Dance Alliance's 40th Annual Performance Mix Festival

How do we give deeply of ourselves while still preserving our minds and bodies for a lifetime of art making? Self-care for artists is at the center of Imani Gaudin's **gaudanse**, a New York-based organization rooted in accessibility, sustainability, and wellness. Gaudin creates work that blends movement, sound, storytelling, and experimental performance, and her latest work *new york, please* – to be shown at **New Dance Alliance's** upcoming **Performance Mix Festival** – contemplates the need for self care against the backdrop of an addictive City that never stops pushing.

In conversation with *The Dance Enthusiast's* Theo Boguszewski, Gaudin discusses the evolving creative universe she builds across disciplines, and her approach to performance as both a deeply personal practice and a communal act of care.

Sunday, June 7 @ 12 PM

Abrons Arts Center, 466 Grand St, New York, NY

Theo Boguszewski for *The Dance Enthusiast*: *gaudanse* was founded in 2020, during an especially uncertain moment for artists and communities. What inspired you to create the organization at that time?

Imani Gaudin: The biggest inspiration for me was knowing that there was a lack of accessibility, sustainability, and wellness-based practices in the arts. And the pandemic just highlighted and heightened this; a lot of artists started discovering their practice of caring for themselves because they were spending so much time alone at home. So the biggest catalyst for me was the idea of creating a haven for artists.

How do those values of accessibility, sustainability, and wellness show up in your creative process?

I've been having an ongoing discovery of a practice that I call "awakening consciousness." It's a wellness-based practice of awakening your brain to receive information; it allows artists to check in on themselves.

I also incorporate a lot of [Makko Ho](#), which is Japanese stretching based on Chinese medicine and meridians. So that's the physical wellness.

The mental wellness is journaling. And then we combine it all by building up heat and cardio to prepare the body to actually move and dance.



Imani Gaudin's *gaudanse new york, please*. Photo courtesy of Artist

***new york, please* is described as "an exhaustive, blackly humorous plea for comfort, success, and relief from a city that feels like a bad habit that refuses to be quit." What first sparked this work for you?**

I was walking around my neighborhood in the Bronx, and I just started thinking about New York being so difficult. Right now I'm actually about to premiere work with [Shamel Pitts](#) in Boston, and we have one dancer named Marcella who is a very goofy person. And one day I was just like, "Marcella, *please*." And everyone laughed. And then every day after that I found myself being like, "New York, *please*." This exhaustive feeling of living in New York led me to a poem – the first line is, "New York, please keep my lights on at night." And then I was like, you know what? I need to make a piece about this. So I started dancing to the poem.

How would you say your relationship with New York City has evolved as an artist and as a human being?

Simply put, New York is so addictive to me. The first time I came here, I knew I belonged. I was 13 years old, a little girl from New Orleans. My grandfather is still mad at my mom about it to this day.

Eventually I went to school out here, and I continued to feel at home. It wasn't until about 2021 that I started to question my purpose in the city, why I was here, and what I was doing with myself. And luckily, I was able to work with an artist who reminded me that my relationship to New York City is the most organic relationship that I have in my life. My relationship continues to evolve, and although at times it feels super toxic and even pointless living here, I remember that dance is why I came here. When people come up to me and say that my work really made them think, or my work changed something in them, I remember that the reason why I love it in New York so much is because I'm accepted.

You mentioned that you grew up in New Orleans. How did New York and New Orleans influence your artistic identity?

I think that New Orleans influences the cultural side of my artistic practice. I started with African and modern dance in New Orleans. New Orleans is a city that, in my opinion, houses all of the culture and history from the Atlantic slave trade. Today, it's the only city in America that I believe houses the voices of the people who were brought over here and then eventually made someone like me. And so I think the root of everything I do is based in New Orleans. But then I would say the more fantastical, whimsical, imaginative, even nonsensical side of my artistry comes from New York. New York allows me to be the weirdo that I've always contained inside of myself as a child. New York was where I discovered myself, who I am at a deeper core.



Imani Gaudin's *gaudanse new york, please*. Photo courtesy of Artist

You're going to be presenting this as part of the **Performance Mix Festival, which has a long history of championing experimental performance. What does it mean to you to be part of this festival?**

It's a huge deal to me because I've always been an experimental person, but not every space has a capacity to hold experimental work. Because of this festival's nature, it is going to allow me to get the feedback and response that I've been looking for. Traditional concert dance audiences come to see a performance, whereas this audience ... it feels like they're coming to experience something. And I want my work to be witnessed, but also experienced. So I'm super excited to be a part of this.

Your piece is going to be presented at the **Abrons Art Center. How does this energy of the space influence the piece?**

Abrons is another space that I feel extremely comfortable being experimental in. And I'll also be presenting in the space of artists that I am extremely inspired by, like [Symara](#) and [Niall](#). These are people whose work has really spoken to me, and I've seen them evolve as artists from just being able to present in this space openly and freely. The energy of the space is going to allow me to let loose and be myself and also be a little bit *more* than myself, if that makes sense. Almost like the spirit of everyone who's performed there is holding me and allowing me to feel protected and safe in going as far as I possibly can in this moment.

You work across dance, performance art, film, music – all different mediums. How does this interdisciplinary approach shape the way that you put together a piece?

I'm actually rewriting my artist statement, so I've been thinking about this a lot. Everything starts with movement for me, no matter what. That's why I chose to be a dancer. My thoughts even start in movement, and so I kind of build from there. I also think a lot in spatial design and what kind of container my movement wants to be in. If my movement is liquid, the set is a container, and so it works together and they complement each other, rather than the set design being an embellishment.

And then the music comes in, because movement creates sound; they go hand in hand for me. I create a lot in silence. That was a big part of the feedback that I used to get in college – my professor would always be like, “where's the sound?” And I'm like, “my body is making music.” I also sometimes incorporate culinary arts; this artist that I work with, she says, “you're ingesting the movement.” So it's full circle for me. Everything is interdisciplinary in my world. Not multidisciplinary. I feel like “multidisciplinary” is things coming together to enhance this one thing, whereas interdisciplinary is everything coming together to enhance everything.

You mentioned that you also perform with [Shamel Pitts](#). How has working with someone else's choreographic universe influenced your own artistic practice?

I think in my body and in my spirit, I've always worked with Shamel. When I was a child in school, my teacher showed us a video of [Batsheva](#), and it was Shamel dancing. And since then, I watched every single video possible, just trying to embody his movement and also his energetic presence and initiation. And so I feel like I was always dancing with him.



Imani Gaudin's *gaudanse new york, please*. Photo courtesy of Artist

gaudanse emphasizes support for early career artists. What types of support and mentorship were most meaningful to you early on in your career?

In high school, I had a teacher named [Keshia McKey](#). She would always beg the question of digging deeper, in allowing yourself to sit with things and move through things, move through questions. Another teacher that I had at SUNY Purchase named [Stephanie Tooman](#) has definitely been a mentor that has helped me find things. She's just one of those people that is constantly questioning, and she's made me think very hard about what exactly it is I'm doing. I need to be questioned because I need to figure out the “why.”

There's a strong sense of care embedded in your work and your organizational mission, in a cultural landscape – particularly in New York City – that really prioritizes hustle and burnout. How do you define sustainability for artists?

I feel like sustainability and wellness practices go hand-in-hand. And so in order to sustain yourself as an artist, you must find a practice for yourself that keeps you grounded. Maybe that means you have to wake up every day and journal, maybe that means that you have to drink a bottle of water once an hour – something that just reminds you that you're a human being,

Another part of sustainability is learning how to be an adult in this world, and particularly in the United States. And that means, how do you budget? How do you sustain the amount of money that you have from gigs? If you're a freelance dancer, how do you sustain yourself in a company that might be asking more from you than you're willing to give? How do you set boundaries? That's a part of sustainability.

And also how do you find people to work with who are going to take care of you in the way that you need to be taken care of? I think that's And also, how do you find people to work with who are going to take care of you in the way that you need to be taken care of? I think that's also a major thing in regards to sustainability. How do you take care of your body if you are experiencing burnout? How do you move forward from burnout?

What's next for you?

I have so much going on! So for Juneteenth, gaudanse is hosting a [two day event where we're going to support local artists](#) in Donaldsonville and New Orleans, Louisiana. We're going to have a book signing, a roundtable discussion for the community of Donaldsonville, and an immersive installation in City Park in New Orleans. Just to wake up the City for Juneteenth. After that, I'll be performing a solo that I've been in process with called *Bury Me in New Orleans* at [Jacob's Pillow](#).

And then we have a few residencies this year to continue the creation of *nanibu*. We created act one and now we're creating act two after popular demand. And then touring with Shamel. In the fall I'm performing at [Beyond the Black Box Week](#). It's a crazy year!

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