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RIOT ACT VisionIntoArt productions offer a vivid barrage of disparate sounds and images.

Fusion power

VisionIntoArt taps the explosive potential of multimedia collaboration. By **Steve Smith**

"If I could have imagined what the group would be like, it would be a mix between the Wooster Group, Bang on a Can and a little bit of Almodóvar, just to put in the twist," composer Paola Prestini says, referring to the formative sparks of VisionIntoArt, which she founded at the Juilliard School in 1999. Musical cross-pollination is nothing new, but VIA takes collaboration a step further: In addition to composers and musicians, the group's roster includes choreographers, filmmakers, a poet, an actor and other disparate creators. The bold visions and fearless innovations Prestini admired in her artistic forebears also permeate VIA's dreamy-yet-kinetic multimedia extravaganzas, five of which will be staged at the Whitney Museum of American Art this month.

Born in Trento, Italy, and raised in Nogales, Arizona, Prestini, 31, was pondering boundaries from an early age. "Living on a border, you live with this sense of dual identity," she says. "Being an immigrant

formed my desire to understand different cultures, and also my love of folk music."

Prestini arrived in New York in 1995 to study composition at Juilliard. It wasn't the most supportive environment for some of her more unusual ideas. "I think people probably thought that I was a little bit nuts," Prestini says, laughing. "A lot of the actors and dancers got it—maybe a little more resistance from the musicians." Solitary pursuit of the muse was never a priority. "I always knew that I was going to be a collaborator," she continues. "I knew that the way I would keep learning and engaging myself was by working with other artists."

In 1999, Prestini received a prestigious Paul & Daisy Soros Fellowship. "That gave me not only the funds but the incentive to begin something," she says. "The fact that I was surrounded by doctors and lawyers who felt they had a mission and were making a difference in life made me aware that I could change my community. I could give composers a place to play, and I could pay my players."

The result was VisionIntoArt, cofounded with composer Nora Kroll-Rosenbaum. Musicians, actors and dancers were abundant at

Juilliard, but Prestini soon began to identify collaborators that would broaden the group's horizons. "I met Roger Bonair-Agard, a spoken-word poet, at an anti-death penalty rally in Central Park, and I knew I had to work with him," Prestini says. "I met Haleh Abghari, an Iranian singer, and everything about her made me want to work with her. As these people began to stick, the collective evolved into a completely different

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thing, which was really more about learning how to make multimedia happen." Creative differences led to Kroll-Rosenbaum's departure; Milica Paranosic, another Juilliard composer, has since joined the ensemble.

VIA's current run at the Whitney is due to curator Limor Tomer, long one of VIA's steadfast supporters. She cites "the collaborative nature of its creative process, its commitment to transmedia and its embracing of alternative, nonintuitive spaces" as qualities that led her to present the group at venues such as BAMcàfé and the Whitney's Altria outpost.

"The resident composers are hugely talented," Tomer adds, "and their vocabulary is contemporary and sophisticated."

The group opens with two works on Friday 6: *VioLens*, a reinterpretation of Heinrich Hoffmann's creepy children's tales by filmmaker Martha Coburn, with composers Prestini, Paranosic and Raz Mesina; and *Body Maps*, which features the striking images of Mexican visual artist Erika Harroch (as well as Prestini's first artistic collaboration with her husband, Kronos Quartet cellist Jeffrey Ziegler). Subsequent pieces deal with international pop songs and folk music, the art of Kandinsky and expressions of civil justice through music.

Prestini has clearly cherished the experience of forging a new medium, but she hopes to make things easier for those who would follow in her footsteps. "My dream has always been that we eventually become a company that teaches," she says. "It's really important to create a canon and keep it evolving, which only happens through more collaborations and new pieces."

VisionIntoArt begins a residency at the Whitney Museum of American Art Fri 6.