

# Dancer brings joy to Washington Square Park with performances

By Bob Krasner

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Kanami Kusajima just wants to dance. Having graduated with a degree from SUNY Purchase during the pandemic, her options were limited.

“I took dance classes in my apartment,” she recalls. “But it felt so weird. It made me crazy dancing to the walls, the couch, the table. It felt wrong, it was depressing.”

With no job opportunities looming, Kusajima ventured from her apartment in Queens to Washington Square Park in September of 2020, where she began collaborating with painter Pinokio. The dancer/painter collab ran Tuesday – Saturday until November when Pinokio left the city.

Kusajima wasn’t so comfortable continuing to perform on her own, but Pinokio encouraged her, saying “New York needs art.”

In one of her first solo performances, while using Sumi ink with herself as a brush, she noticed that one of the audience members had been watching for a long time. “She was crying,” Kusajima says. “She told me that the performance was very powerful. It made me want to continue.”

The dancer’s performances, which have continued six days a week in the park, are total improvisation. Moving to music which ranges from Chet Baker to John Lennon to Chopin to Underworld, Kusajima is speaking the language of dance, moving to whatever is going on around her. “I don’t think about my next move, I respond to the environment,” she explains. “Maybe I’ll move with the wind, maybe I’ll follow people. It just kind of happens.” Continuing, Kusajima notes that, “dancing is like speaking – you speak without thinking about the next word.”

The weather is just another collaborator, as Kusajima welcomes the wind, rain and snow. But other people are welcome too and the performer was happy to work with Amanda Millet-Sorsa when the painter approached her to participate in her work.

“I found her on Instagram,” says Millet-Sorsa. “I had worked with dancers before and I wanted to develop that, so I asked Kanami to collaborate.”

It’s worked out well so far. “Kanami is a very strong spirit,” she acknowledges. “This session was focused on slow movements with no music. My role was to provide the materials and it was great to watch what she did with them.” So far they have completed two performances and plan to continue. “Some of the finished artwork will be brought to use in next session,” Millet-Sorsa tells us, also mentioning they are looking forward to that day’s weather forecast – which includes rain. “It will be interesting to see what the rain does!”

Kusajima also welcomes the rain but she worries about the future of busking in the park, as authorities have begun to crack down on noise levels. Unable to afford the price of a permit for her tiny bluetooth speaker or the cost of a ticket, she will be dancing to ambient noise if the city chooses to enforce the laws. Citizens might complain that Washington Square park is not a quiet place to think but as far as we can remember, it never was. A petition has been created to address the situation and can be signed in person at her performance or online.

“It’s been a great experience busking here,” says Kusajima. “People have told me that my dance is nourishing. One man told me that I had grounded him emotionally after the day that the Capitol was invaded. I want to share my art, I want to heal people. I dance for myself as well. I need food, I need sleep, I need dance.”



Kanami Kusajima, mid-performance.



Kanami Kusajima (front ) post-performance with painter Amanda Millet-Sorsa in Washington Square Park.



Kanami Kusajima (left ) collaborating with painter Amanda Millet-Sorsa in Washington Square Park.