

Winter 2018-19

# *Ballet Review*



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# Ballet Review 46.4 Winter 2018-19

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# Site-Specific at the Rubin

**Karen Greenspan**

In another example of how museums are inviting choreographers to interact with their architectural spaces and art objects in site-specific works, New York's Rubin Museum of Art partnered with Pentacle Management for their spring 2018 programming with four evenings showcasing some of the city's varied and innovative choreographers. Mara Greenberg, Pentacle's visionary director, thoughtfully selected artists who represented different aspects of the organization's roster of inspiring dance creators. Given the run of the museum and guided tours of its exhibitions, each artist derived his or her personal inspiration from the distinctive space and Himalayan art content and brought originality and creative intelligence to the work.

## **Zvi Gotheiner/ ZviDance**

Zvi Gotheiner shared, "When I first toured the museum in search of a space in which to choreograph a dance, the spiral staircase immediately called to me." Gotheiner was intrigued by the Buddhist art in the galleries with the many dancing postures and gestures, but felt that the space was too constricted. As he contemplated the central staircase, the idea of a purification ritual moving upward toward the sacred artwork on the sixth floor quickly followed. Thus was created the twenty-minute work *Stairway*, performed by four eloquent dancers from ZviDance.

Audience members watched from the fourth- and fifth-floor circular landings as Chelsea Ainsworth, Samantha Harvey, Jessica Smith, and William Tomaskovic, carrying buckets with cleaning supplies, took their places along the section of stairway between the two floors. The dancers set down their pails and began cleaning the stairway – scrubbing the stairs or polishing banisters – moving up-

ward as each section was accomplished. The cleaning actions gave way to dance phrases that led to relationships between the dancers, particularly when dancers crossed into another's cleaning territory. The music by Scott Kylian, Gotheiner's long-time collaborator, provided a wash of electronic sound as dance movements filled with lyricism, whimsy, fantasy, and yearning provided a respite from the mundane activity of scrubbing.

After a sudden, frenzied flurry of dancing down and up the spiral staircase, the four dancers congregated on the fifth-floor landing with their buckets. They proceeded to sponge off their own bodies in a ceremonial cleansing – a reclaiming of their own pure and natural state. High, major chords proclaimed the dancers' approach to the pinnacle. Then, in a ready and purified state, the dancers ascended the final flight at varying times, and disappeared into the sixth-floor gallery.

## **Raja Feather Kelly/ the feath3r theory**

Raja Feather Kelly, in collaboration with his company the feath3r theory, presented *The Mouth of the Body*, a uniquely structured, interactive work designed to be a shared experience between artists and audience. Kelly placed the work in the fifth-floor gallery in front of three contemporary, monochromatic paintings on silk. The performance initially riffed on the museum-going experience as two of the performers, Amy Gernux and Aaron Moses Robin, acting as museum guides, led the audience on a walking tour of the gallery. They adopted a conversational tone as they mused about the relationship between time, transformation, and impermanence – ideas central to the Pentacle Dance Series' title, "Suspending Time," and to the museum's theme for the year, "The Future Is Fluid."

As Kelly and his company's work is dedicated to exploring pop culture and how popular media expresses and distorts human ethics and empathy, the script took an unexpected turn to reflect on a long-term advertising campaign for Big Red Chewing Gum. The guides reminisced about how the ads always



Zvi Gotheiner's *Stairway*. (Photo: Nan Melville, Rubin Museum of Art)

showed a romantic couple lost in a passionate kiss in some sublime setting – closing with one lover thrust back into reality scurrying after a departing ride. The tour concluded as the guides commented that their favorite of all the commercials was one in which the couple is lost in their kiss just moments before they are attacked by a pack of wolves. With that bizarre image playing in our minds, we returned to our seats in the long, rectangular gallery to watch the continuation of the piece.

The two tour guides continued speaking as

they were joined by four other dancers who positioned themselves across the space. In a seamless transition, the guides stopped their verbal communication and began dancing a duet together – just as all of the other dancers, grouped as couples, moved in physically connected relationships.

Most of the dancers (other than the two tour guides) were wearing black morphsuits – spandex body suits that cover the entire body including face, hands, and feet. As they frequently appear in Kelly's work, I asked him



Sara Gurevich in Raja Feather Kelly's *The Mouth of the Body*. (Photo: Austin Gill, RMA)

about them via email. He explained to me, "We efface our bodies/faces in a major visual way with every work."

Suddenly, the tour guide couple embraced and locked lips in what signaled a Big Red moment. As they did so, the other dancers clustered together tumbling, pawing, and crawling about in a slow-motion mass. The kissing couple pulled apart from their ardent embrace and seemed to be slowly separated across space by the suspension of time. The woman looked on in horror as her partner was pulled under by the marauding pack colliding and clawing across the gallery space.

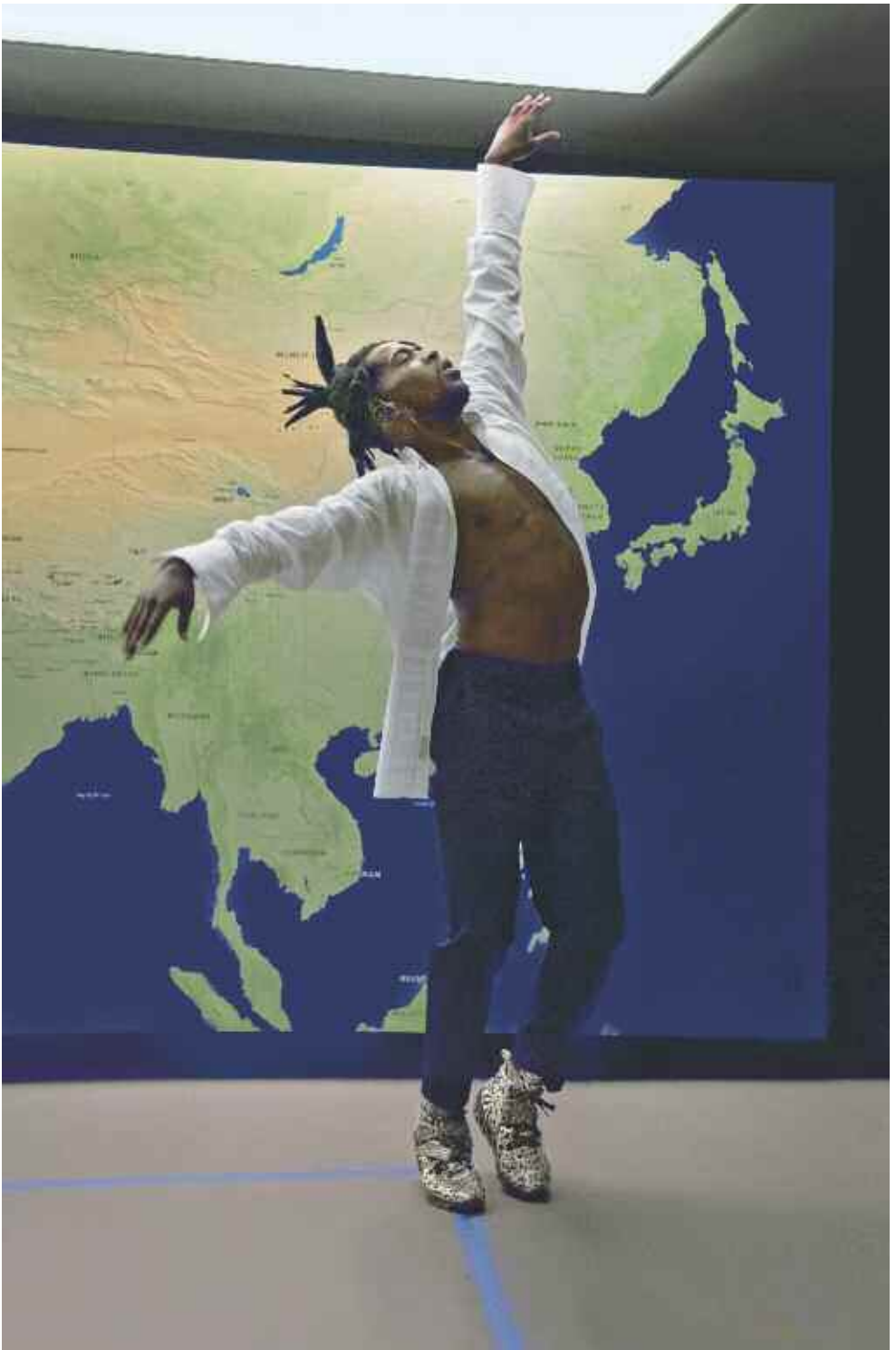
#### Nora Chipaumire

The Zimbabwe-born choreographer/performance artist Nora Chipaumire chose to present her work *The Dark Swan's Last Breath of Life* on the second-floor landing of the museum. Chipaumire, who is unrelenting in her explo-

ration of uncomfortable places and strident in her exposition of painful realities, chose the location because, as she offered, "It is the most immediate and primary real estate you encounter as you climb the central stairway."

Chipaumire originally performed the solo, which she created in 2005 for her mother and as a response to the shocking and brutal genocide in Darfur, in which the women – beautiful black swans – were being marched to their deaths. At the Rubin, the solo was performed by the talented Shamar Watt, who has worked with Chipaumire on several of her projects. Of course, seeing a dance conceived as a paean to African women performed by a male body (magnificent though it was), changes the experience. The dance is a reimagining of Michel Fokine's *The Dying Swan*, the delicate, tremulous solo created for the Russian ballerina Anna Pavlova. The rectangular niche between the galleries on either side provided a close-





Shamar Watt in Nora Chipaumire's *The Dark Swan's Last Breath of Life*. (Photo: Nan Melville, RMA)

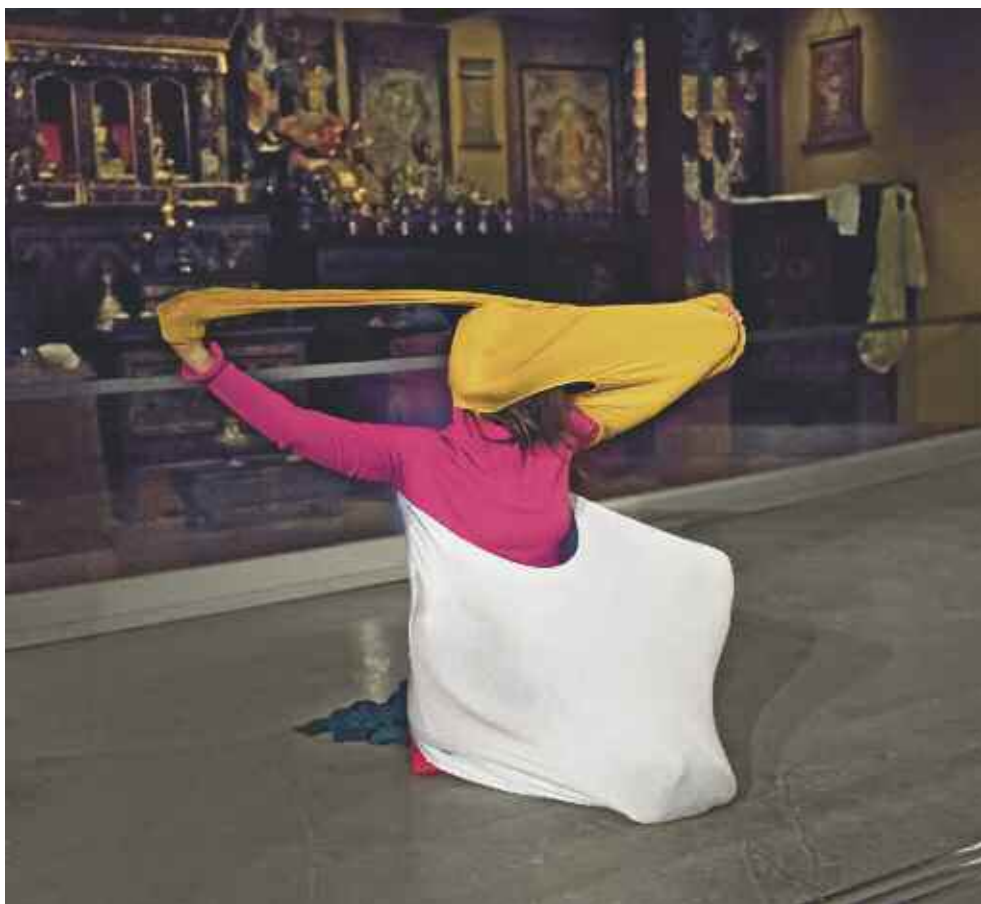
up view of the final struggle of this beautiful creature.

Shamar Watt, costumed in black pants, an unbuttoned, loose, white dress shirt, and black and white sneakers, was present onstage with his back to the audience as the dance began. Animated by his breath, he began to shift his weight back and forth between his two planted feet. The weight shift grew larger and was made visible through his breathing back and chest as well as his swinging and spiraling arms. He looked to be traversing great distances, although his feet were fixed to one place.

A languorous, full ripple through his arms and shoulders set his feet free to stomp an audible rhythmic pattern – like a tap dancer. Watt stretched his arms behind his arched

back into a still pose like a preening, male, flamenco dancer. As his arms returned to movement, his legs began to vibrate, initiating all manner of stepping. He bourréed onto his heels and then on the outer rims of the feet as if thrown off-balance. Watt gained control over his feet and fell into a tap dance routine. He eventually reprised the dying swan's balletic bourrées, but on tiptoe wearing sneakers.

The romantic strains of Camille Saint-Saëns' "The Swan" from *Carnival of the Animals* became audible. However, in contrast to the delicate control evoked by the familiar music, this dancer's feet flew out from under him in earthy, tribal dance steps and zany Charleston moves. Then the delicate bourrées regained their command before the swan returned to



Danielle Goldman in an excerpt from Beth Gill's *Brand New Sidewalk*. (Photo: Nan Melville, RMA)

the original weight shifting movement – but with great urgency.

The music over, Watt groaned and sang, “Oh Lord, won’t you buy me a Mercedes Benz” stomping about in frustration as he ran through the full vocabulary of previous stepping movements, trying to find one that felt like his own. Then, unlike the dying swan in the romantic ballet, this dark beauty did not expire onstage. Instead, he stomped out of the performance.

### Beth Gill

The museum’s Tibetan Buddhist Shrine Room was Beth Gill’s choice as the backdrop for a striptease ritual performed by Danielle Goldman. The performance piece was excerpted from *Brand New Sidewalk*, which premiered in 2017 at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis.

Goldman began the solo looking quite rotund dressed in a bulky, gray, quilted jumpsuit. She moved in slow motion to Jon Moyniaci’s score of interspersed ambient sounds of vibrations, nature calls, horns, and portentous chords. Goldman proceeded to bow, sink, roll, and rise like a large inflatable doll while removing layer after layer of clothing. The performed action, divorced from any emotional motivation, demonstrated an impulse to strip away confinements as represented by the endless variety of layered clothing. Leg-

gings, partially removed and tangled around her ankles, served as shackles; a shirt pulled halfway overhead tethered her two arms and cancelled out her face. Although she tried to repurpose many of the removed articles of clothing, like tying a stretchy sweater around her head into a turban, in the end, she threw them all off and crawled on all fours to make an exit.

\*

Only some of the choreographers fulfilled the prompt of creating work in response to the architecture and content of the museum, and that added a dimension of depth to their creations. Given the economics of dance making and the short shelflife of this engagement, it is understandable that others chose to restage previously choreographed work. Even in that situation, performing a piece in a new and different environment can greatly influence how the work is performed and perceived. For instance, Beth Gill’s excerpt from *Brand New Sidewalk*, although created for a site-specific engagement elsewhere, possibly became more potent and accessible when viewed within the sacred shrine space at the Rubin. After all, the dance was essentially a striptease. But rather than being performed to titillate the observer, it was instead a process of peeling off useless layers in an act of self-liberation. Isn’t that exactly what one does while meditating in a Buddhist shrine room?