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Reflections on Seeing and
Saying
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DANCE

Reflections on Seeing and Saying

by Leslie Allison

FROM A TO B VIA C BY ALEXANDRA BACHZETSIS
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Swiss choreographer Alexandra Bachzetsis's *From A to B via C* orbits around a brief reconstruction of the 17th-century Diego Velazquez painting "Venus at her Mirror." The original painting depicts Venus lying nude on a bed, her body turned away, while Cupid holds up a mirror to her face revealing her reflection to the viewer. In Bachzetsis's version, the dancers (Bachzetsis joined by the highly charismatic Anne Pajunen and Gabriel Schenker) become Venus (Schenker) on an exercise mat, a nude Cupid (Pajunen), and a Reflection in a Mirror (Bachzetsis's face captured by a live feed camera and displayed on a flatscreen).

Bachzetsis's use of the "Venus" tableau is not just an aesthetic reference, but an interpretation of the subject/object matrix inherent in performance. It may also be an extension of the feminist conversation kicked off by suffragette Mary Richardson's vandalizing of the Velazquez painting in 1914, when she broke into the National Gallery in London and hacked away at Venus's back with a meat cleaver. She stated, "If there is an outcry against my deed, let every one remember that such an outcry is a hypocrisy so long as they allow the



Bachzetsis, Schenker, and Pajunen stripped down to their musculature. Photo: Arion Doerr.

destruction of [fellow suffragette] Mrs. Pankhurst and other beautiful living women.” Richardson’s act of art destruction attempted to redirect the societal gaze away from the mythological women represented in visual culture and onto the very real oppressed women among us. Bachzetsis also takes an interest in both real and mythologized bodies, and in mediating or interrupting gazes. In examining perception, Bachzetsis’s work clearly prioritizes the “*via C*” of the title.

The movement sequences begin with a silent and meditative period of athletic gesture (wrestling, stretching, playing squash), which is then jolted into a higher gear with a unison dance sequence accompanied by a loud metronome. All three performers fluidly transition through movement forms: jazzercise becomes jig becomes hip-hop music video becomes abstract modern. The blending and decontextualizing of these culturally disparate genres seems to highlight the changes in how the viewer perceives them. “How are these forms different?” is less the question than, “How are they made different by the viewer’s gaze?”

Throughout the piece, the dancers remove layer after layer of white and beige skin-tight shirts and bodysuits, ending in a final layer of anatomically accurate musculature suits. Thusly clad, the performers devolve together into an amoebic, primordial goop of bloody tendons, fat, and muscle, lolling on top of each other on the floor. Following a moment of stillness, the piece literally rewinds, and the dancers perform an exact palindrome of the previous segment—down to counting 3-2-1 instead of 1-2-3. This balletic “remix” is certainly lovely to behold, but one wonders what it shows in the conceptual framework besides their virtuosity.

Reoccurring motifs (the mythology of balletic body type, the incessant rhythm counts, the barked mantras of a frantic fitness guru) focus on challenging the traditions of the dance academy—a conversation that is not exactly current, or perhaps is simply more relevant in the Swiss dance scene than at the COIL Festival, where this piece was performed. The work could also have been stronger had it leaned less on certain hollow technological elements like the LED light box and the live feed camera and screen, which, aside from their role as Venus’s mirror, In the oddly moving final sequence, each dancer takes their turn before the camera to sing and simultaneously sign ASL versions of alterna-hit songs accompanied by piano arrangements: No Doubt’s “Don’t Speak,” Roberta Flack’s “Killing Me Softly,” and Depeche Mode’s “Enjoy the Silence.” The overall effect is tenderly wrought awareness of sign language’s place in the movement context, and of the complexities and pitfalls of verbal communication—or more broadly, the necessary translation and mitigation of any message in the act of its transmitting. In both their singing and signing, the performers strike a satisfying balance between sincerity and self-consciousness. Due to the lyrical overlap in these songs, (“don’t speak,” “stop explaining,” “singing my life with his words, killing me softly with his song,” “words are very unnecessary; they can only do harm,” “words are trivial”), this segment had the pleasing side effect of teaching the viewer basic sign language vocabulary, a generous and complex conveyance.