

thINKingDANCE

Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Photo: Lindsay Browning

What Birds Can Teach Us about Life on Earth

by Megan Wilson Stern

Lindsay Browning and Kathryn Raines created and perform *Human Realm | Earth* in Isaiah Zagar's newest space—an immense South Philly warehouse covered entirely in the artist's iconic mosaics. The fanciful, swirling, glimmering designs encompass both the expansiveness of the universe and the passion, grit, and creative potential of a human life. The glitter of fragmented mirrors calls to mind transcendence, but also reflects back to us tiny pieces of our earthly selves.

Human Realm | Earth embodies the same vastness and complexities as the space it inhabits. In it we see fiery passion, desperate failing, and tender hope. It soars into outer space and plunges deep into human consciousness.

Upon arrival, we are invited to explore the warehouse, lit by candles and the soft glow of other-worldly chandeliers (created by Warren Muller). A nest of twigs and pillows is set, but the only performer is a small bird, billed in the program as Wally Bird, in an ordinary cage. Wally is joined by Sheila Zagar, whose dark and mystifying dance sets the tone for the performance to come. Every cell of her being seems to expand and contract as she relates to the bird; imploring, giving, blessing, cursing.

We take seats upstairs and find a scientist (Raines) leaning across a desk to peer through binoculars. She sports a blonde bob wig and her smiling mouth is half open in wonder as she gazes at us, sometimes lifting wide eyes to look directly at the humans in front of her. "I love birds," she says dreamily. "What can we learn from these caged lives?"

She is studying inter-connectedness and invites us to watch the unfolding story of a woman (Browning) and her bird. Browning, in a red lace dress, dances with a large mirror, presenting her reflected self to us while becoming engrossed in her own reflection. Raines removes her lab coat. Wearing nothing but a wrap of plastic and a few feathers, she is rendered delicate and vulnerable. Raines plays the bird brilliantly. She hops and perches, head bobbing, preening and twisting. Her arms ruffle and spread expressively. She even squawks.

Browning and Raines employ striking images and nuanced physicality.

They sit at opposite ends of a banquet table, tethered by a thick rope. The dance that emerges flows cleverly from literal gestures of controlling a trained bird to abstract movements, and Browning's performance modulates adeptly between tenderness, domination, fear, and bliss. At times, we see the two in harmonious movement, losing themselves in one another, but the woman's enthrallment with the bird also leads her to subjugate it and flings her into fury and despair when they are separated.

Through a dream-like weaving of poignant and physical scenes, recorded text, and narration from the scientist, we contemplate the potential and the failings of human life. The scientist is convinced that there is something within us more expansive than our human forms and she implores individuals in the audience to admit that they feel it too. "Do you think you have a soul?" she asks earnestly, "How do you know?"

When we descend the stairs and find Wally Bird still in the cage where we left him, we look at him more closely than before. He seems to know something we don't.

Lindsay Browning and Kathryn Raines in collaboration with Isaiah Zagar, Premiere of *Human Realm | Earth*, Isaiah Zagar Art Space, 1002 Watkins Street, October 9-11, October 16-18 at 8pm, <http://humanrealm.ticketleap.com/earth/>
Human Realm | Earth is the first part of a two part project. *Human Realm | Space* will premiere in May 2016.

By Megan Stern
October 17, 2015