

thINKingDANCE

Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Photo: Levi Gershkowitz

A Day of Light and Movement

by Andrew Sargus Klein

I'm standing at the edge of a pond for the final performance, and I can't see anything. The six dancers in my line of vision are completely backlit by the sun setting in an open sky. I only see an abstract texture of light that overwhelms my eyelids and lashes. The weather is perfect, the work romantic and uncomplicated, and this moment—all but impossible to plan for—is a happy accident of bliss.

Five performers pose on a raft in the middle of the pond, with 15 more placed around the bank. The central group unfolds slowly with sculptural embraces and weight sharing. Around the edge of the pond, the dancers' sequences are even more minimal, with lateral extensions, hands raised and crossed above their heads, and watchful stillness.

Grand and pastoral, *Interrupted* is a ceremonial conclusion for the 15th iteration of the Outlet Dance Project, a daylong festival at [Grounds For Sculpture](#) in Hamilton, New Jersey, where performance is paired with sculpture throughout the 42-acre grounds. donia salem harhoor (intentional lowercase) and Ann Robideaux's curation has brought together 14 performances richly diverse in aesthetic and execution, race and ethnicity, and tone and sensibility.

The first half of the day takes place in two large galleries; the second half is outside. The stronger performances treat their accompanying sculpture as an equal part of the piece. This is clearest in *Our Only World*, choreographed and performed by Blakely White-McGuire and Kim Jones and paired with [Isaac Witkin's *Eolith*](#). This 14-foot stack of boulders is placed on a small hill, which amplifies its cairn-like qualities. White-McGuire and Jones move toward and away from the sculpture, alternating gestures of worship and triumph, of pleading and aloofness. Through stillness and repetition, small details leap out for discovery. A handstand with feet against the rock transforms the sculpture into a spinal column; open mouths and pointing fingers bring attention to the body; hands threading through the rock evoke an embodied landscape.

[Batalá NYC](#), an all-women percussion group, leads the audience from site to site, lending necessary energy for a physically demanding day. We walk by a series of [fantastical bronze animals by Dana Stewart](#) that seem as if they are following us, like a scene from a Studio Ghibli movie. Much later, the percussionists lead us along a narrow path through a dense crop of grass, and, thrillingly, we have no idea what's on the other side.

Lying in wait, an arresting piece of dance theatre. Justina Kamiel Grayman's *Untitled* begins with three dancers drawing out applause from the audience to heighten the sense of spectacle created by the massive iron rings behind them ([Arcs in Disorder: 4 Arcs x 5](#) by Benar Venet). They address us, promising funny, mundane stories, but the tenor of the work shifts toward shame as they stand in a line performing loosely syncopated gestures ranging from anxious self-regard to choking to wordless panic. It is an uncomfortable and impactful section in its vulnerability.

Taga-Ilong [From the River], a structured improvisational duet choreographed by Annielille Gavino* and paired with [The Bathers by Isaac Witkin](#), is inspired by memories of bathing in the rivers of Gavino's home (the island of Panay in the Philippines). The duet begins with her singing the lullaby "Ili-ili tulog anay" in her native language of Hiligaynon. Gavino and Chloe Marie Newton each hold an opaque white tarp that catches the breeze in dramatic arcs. Threading playfulness and nostalgia, Gavino's choreographic choices create space for shifts in meaning and association. Newton remains still on the ground covered by her tarp before emerging as if from a carapace.

Several works more directly relate to narrative and place. Movement of the People Dance Company's *The Only Truth Is Change / The Winter of Our Discontent* is the most ambitious in scope as a "multidisciplinary cautionary Afro-futuristic journey." Using a score built on sirens, static, and discordance, the performers implore the audience to "duck, hide, run." The movement is so decentralized it is impossible to know where to stand or look. I crouch behind a stone only to find myself just a few feet from the dancers. The work's central question—how will this era be danced into history?—evokes the Cold War-era's "duck and cover" legacy. I make myself as small as I can, as if cowering in fear.

The festival hums with large and small moments of inspired collaboration. It is the best kind of blur. Keomi Tarver's solo *I Too, Am a Trilogy* incorporates proudly lyrical text—"I am made from the best soil"—with movement phrases of deep spiraling and lunges. Maxine Steinman's *Dwelling* balances a contemporary duet of intimate partnering with Clement Meadmore's enormous and imposing [Offshoot](#).

The day's broader arc is inclusive and thoughtful. No one can choreograph the weather—the elements are their own—but the meteorological bliss only emblazons what has been so artfully cast: conditions for organic and compelling choreography that lingers after the day is done and my eyes are closed.

*Annielille Gavino has recently joined thINKingDANCE as a writer.

[The Outlet Dance Project](#), Grounds For Sculpture, October 3.

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