

thINKingDANCE

Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Photo: Gala Derroisne

From Birth to Death and Everything in Between

by Darcy Grabenstein

In keeping with this year's "story" theme, Grounds for Sculpture's Day of Dance interspersed spoken word with dance, performers weaving stories as onlookers weaved their way through the expansive sculpture garden. The eight-person Banda Punto de Lanza percussion band led us from one performance to the next, joined by ten baton-twirling young dancers. [The Outlet Dance Project](#) partnered with Grounds for Sculpture on this 19th annual event. Living up to its hype, the artists' works celebrated the intersections of visual and moving arts, exploring relationships between sculpture and dance, place and movement. Project Executive Director Donia Salem Harhor opened with a tale about three goddesses, moving gracefully among [Three Graces](#), phallic-looking sculptures that clanged as she rapped her ring-laden hands on each one.

The sculptures became the setting for *The Conundrum*, choreographed and performed by Sri Thina Subramaniam and Aparna Shankar. Wearing colorful harem pants accented with gold scarves, the two perform Indian classical dance. Their movements are elegant and precise, from bell-bedecked ankles to daintily pointed pinkies. They tell a story of love through expressive faces and universally understood hand gestures: touching the head in thought, a finger to the lips for silence.

From love, a child is born, as choreographer/dancer Cierra Woods wows the audience with *Íyámi*, which means “my mother” in Yoruba. The program notes include this passage: “Maimed and twisted beyond repair/ her child emerges from her womb as whole and perfect as she once was.” It is an apparent reference to Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, whose protagonist gives birth while escaping slavery. Woods dances in front of the [Hawthorne Tree](#) sculpture, which reminds me of pelvic bones. My attention switches from the sculpture to the dancer, her arm motions accentuated by long, hot-pink silk gloves. Many of Woods’ movements are a pantomime as if she’s inside the womb looking out. She is at once eager and hesitant; fists clenched like a newborn.

The afternoon’s story progresses with *Afterbirth*, choreographed and performed by Shuning Huang. She dances on a serpentine path, her body arcing in unison. Huang makes her way to the [Where Is Geometry?](#) sculpture, pulled by an unseen force. She maintains contact with the abstract form as if drawing strength from it. [Cloud Spring](#), a oversized swing set, becomes both set and props in *I’m This Many!* Choreographer-performer Jenna Charko, her hair braided in little-girl pigtails. She wears a blue sports bra and leggings that match the swing set. Charko expertly navigates the moving swings, which add both motion and rhythm. As she leaves the playground, she smiles and waves goodbye to us all.

We go from queen of the playground to a time-traveling queen of Latvian descent in Esther Baker-Tarpaga’s *A Movement Conversation with Pitchfork Lightning/Bamboo/Water*. With a lake in the background and the [Pitchfork Lightning](#) sculpture on her “stage,” she becomes one with the elements. I was too distracted by her costume—greenery and flowers strapped to her front, small orange plastic tubing resembling an insect’s legs attached to her back, red foil, and tulle cape—to fully take in the first part of her performance. Only when she removed the costume could I appreciate her love affair with Mother Earth.

Like a water nymph, Jennifer Turnbull emerges from the [Lotus Pond](#), hands and feet caked with mud, accompanied by a solo djembe drummer. Turnbull describes her choreography, *Untitled*, as the story of her relationship as a Black, queer, gender-expansive woman. The drumming stops, and music begins. In the background, I spot banners with “Reckon with Black Legacies” and “Black Future.” Whether or not they are part of the performance, they provide the perfect backdrop. The audience *is* part of the performance, holding strips of red fabric that Turnbull transforms from curtain to skirt. She moves with purpose to the lyrics “I love you,” which I interpret as love of self. Bravo!

Our storyline continues with *Still Love*, choreographed by Heidi Cruz-Austin and performed by DanceSpora: David Austin with des amaiya, Felicia Cruz-Sharpe, Abby Donnenfeld, and Lyron Kaliq Paulin. The [Sumo](#) sculpture looms large, its bulk a stark contrast to the lithe dancers that surround it. They caress the sculpture, almost idolizing it. The music is jazzy, sexy, just right. At the end of the number, the dancers exit to their own spots in the distance, as if saying “I need a little space.” In the last performance of the day, we entered a dream space with Kiana Rosa Fischer’s *Dream*, danced by Jess Michal, Anne Tantuico, and Elena Yasin. Here, the [Rondo VI](#) sculpture becomes a fourth performer, its round spirals providing support and sustenance. Even the music is dreamy, starting point with single plucks on a stringed instrument. Two spoken-word artists, Gabriel Ramirez and Yamini Pathak, shared personal reflections on their family relationships. Ramirez was riveting. Although he spoke of death and grief, his presentation uplifted me. This line stuck with me long after the event had ended: “When not even death keeps us from dancing.”

Story, The Outlet Dance Project, Grounds for Sculpture, Oct. 8, 2023.

By Darcy Grabenstein

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