Q&A: ARTIST JANINE ANTONI ON HER RESURRECTION THROUGH DANCE

Janine Antoni

By Rachel Corbett

The artist Janine Antoni uses every part of her body in her work. For her famous 1992 sculpture Grow, she chewed away at 600-pound blocks of chocolate and lard—carving stand-alone sculptures, rough with tooth marks—until she was too tired to carry on. The following year, she cast busts of her own face in chocolate and soap and licked and scrubbed at them for the aptly titled Lick and Lather—currently a hit at the New Museum (http://www.artspace.com/partners/new_museum)’s “1993” exhibition. Elsewhere she has painted canvases with her eyelashes, and photographed her eyeballs. For her latest endeavor, Antoni is stringing herself up above an audience at the Joyce Theater in the collaborative dance performance Like Lazarus Did with choreographer Stephen Petronio (http://www.artspace.com/partners/stephen_petronio_company), running from April 30 to May 5. Artspace’s Rachel Corbett spoke to Antoni about her newest work (in which Lick and Lather makes a cameo).
You’ve described your role in Like Lazarus Did as “a living set.” What exactly does that mean?

We came up with the term “living set” because it reworked the idea of an artist providing the set for a dance, but what I’ve made couldn’t be further from a set. In fact, my contribution isn’t even on the stage. In the end, it was directly inspired by Stephen’s choreography and the dancers’ bodies, and yet it is physically separate from the proscenium stage.

I will remain still in a helicopter stretcher high above the audience with my arm reaching out to grasp a light. Above me is a constellation of my body parts, which include my body surface, organs, and skeleton. These forms are inspired by Milagros, a Christian practice performed in Mexico, Brazil, Spain, and Portugal. When a person has an ailment they purchase a small amulet or three-dimensional figurine of that part as a prayer of healing. In some churches the ceiling has been filled with prayers in the form of wax body parts.

In developing my contribution to the dance I began my research by attending a lot of rehearsals and watching the dancers each in their own way embody Stephen’s choreography. After many months I asked them to send me an image of a gesture that resonates emotionally or psychologically for them. They each responded with a picture they took on their phone. I also asked Stephen to do this from his perspective as well. I was curious to find out what resonates from the inside as a dancer, from Stephen as a maker, and from myself as a witness. I took the collection of gestures from these photos and enacted them in order to create casts from my own body.

How do the themes in this performance—resurrection, death, elevation—relate to those you’ve explored in the past?

Ephemerality has been a recurring theme in my work. We think of most art as something that should endure time. My work often challenges our culture’s desire for immortality, our attempt to capture it, and to leave a trace beyond our finite existence.

Stephen has resurrected his own past choreography in making this piece. Inspired by Stephen’s idea of revisiting the past, for my constellation of Milagros, I decided to use a mold of my head from Lick and Lather. The piece is made up of 14 classical self-portrait busts, seven in soap and seven in chocolate. I reshaped them by licking the chocolate and washing the soap. The classical bust is a genre meant to capture the self in a material in perpetuity. Of course chocolate and soap are not archival materials. They will age and disintegrate, just as I will.

Elevation, both literally and metaphorically, continues to reappear in my work. I have walked the tightrope to make work, perched on top of the Chrysler building, and for some strange reason many of my works require harnesses. For the Joyce, once again, I find myself hovering from up high.

What is the significance of the stretcher?

When I made the decision to be suspended over the audience I started to look around the real world to see the different ways bodies are held and suspended in space. This brought me to the helicopter stretcher. It brings up some interesting issues, certainly if you find yourself in one of those stretchers you are facing your mortality or at least the fragility of the body. But, more importantly, in this performance I’m interested in occupying the space between life and death.

How did you and Stephen Petronio come to collaborate?

Jill Brienza, a supporter of Stephen’s work and a patron of the arts, discovered my interest in dance and invited me to a rehearsal of Stephen’s company. Needless to say, I was blown away by his work and, after coming to my studio, we began a dialogue about how we might work together. I was surprised to find out how creatively compatible we are and how even our differences have been artistically fruitful.

What role does music play in your work? Did you have any involvement with Son Lux on the score?

I rarely use music in my work, but the making of Like Lazarus Did is a collaborative process and everybody is aware of each other’s contributions. All the parts are evolving simultaneously and are perpetually influencing each other. I am deeply moved by the music that Son Lux composed and I am excited to hear the Young People’s Chorus of New York City sing his powerful interpretations of early American slave spirituals.

What types of movements did the performers contribute that were ultimately cast into the suspended sculpture? How do these gestures resonate for you?

In all cases the dancers, as well as Stephen, sent me gestures that were a little peculiar within the continuum of movement of the dance. One of Stephen’s most interesting abilities is to slip in an awkward or strange gesture that acts as an underbelly to his virtuosic movement. It’s these distilled gestures that I have enacted to cast the Milagros.

It is always a surprise when a gesture takes hold of me. It is as if it has triggered a memory in my body that has been lost or repressed. Its rediscovery is healing. I will remain still contemplating these gestures very much like the audience contemplating the gestures on the stage.