'Entangle,' three-part dance series, at Tang Museum

Creators use movement to explore human connections

By Tresca Weinstein  Updated 2:21 pm, Friday, March 10, 2017


Subtle emotions move across the woman’s face; she is by turns amused, concerned, moved. Occasionally, she winces or whispers to herself, or nods her head minutely in approval. She is watching something with complete, focused attention, and we are watching her watch it.

The woman is the legendary dance-maker Anna Halprin, a primary influence on postmodern dance and a pioneer in the use of expressive arts for healing. Her face is projected many times life size as a central element of “Rope Dance,” an installation on view at the Tang Museum at Skidmore College through Sunday, March 19. The work is the first in a three-part series—collectively called “Entangle”—created by choreographer Stephen Petronio and visual artist Janine Antoni.
“Rope Dance” sets out to give the viewer a visceral experience of Halprin’s approach to dance, via multiple layers of sensory information. It’s a journey of sorts that begins with the first sighting of her face, which appears almost ghostly on the giant screen set within a white room. To reach the next part of the installation, visitors must move through a darkened space, guided only by a rope beneath their hands.

The experience is a reflection of the approach Halprin took when Antoni and Petronio asked her to work with them to create a piece. “Stephen has been dancing for many years, and I’m not a dancer, so she had to figure out a way to work with these two very different backgrounds,” Antoni said in a recent interview. “She blindfolded us, laid a rope on floor and had us try to balance on it. That leveled the ground and put us at the same place, as far as movement quality. Putting viewers in darkness was a way to share with them the experience we had.”

The dance that grew out of that exercise is what Halprin is watching in the video; you can hear the sound of Antoni’s and Petronio’s feet as they move across the outdoor dance floor at Halprin’s home in Marin County, Calif. In several interactive events last week, they re-created that dance within the installation. Beginning with a blindfolded walk, it progressed into a duet in which the two artists, linked by the rope held taut between them, played full-body, free-form versions of tug-of-war and cat’s cradle. Eventually they ensnared (literally) a dozen viewers in the rope, and molded an improvisational work on the spot, calling out directions: “Lean,” “Make a square,” “Go high,” “Go low,” “Feel the shape.” “Feel connected.”

“We’re not making objects for galleries, we’re making scenarios,” Petronio said. “The more that the audience can have an experience physically, as well as intellectually, the better.”

He and Antoni met at a moment when both were primed to explore new directions in their well-established careers, she said. Petronio, author of the 2014 memoir “Confessions of a Motion Addict,” has been making dances for his New York City–based company for more than 30 years, working with composers, visual artists and fashion designers. Antoni has shown her performance art, sculpture, video installations and photography around the world, becoming known for provocative works like “Lick and Lather,” in which she made seven busts out of chocolate and seven from soap, then ate the chocolate and bathed herself with the soap. Petronio was looking to be “freed from the proscenium stage,” while Antoni saw dance “as a new form to help me look at my work differently.”

For their first collaboration in 2013, “Like Lazarus Did,” Antoni designed a “living set” to accompany Petronio’s choreography: a cage-like sculpture in which she hung suspended over the audience. They’ve created new work together every year since, including “Stripped,” a solo in which Petronio wore an elaborate fabric headpiece made by Antoni, and “Swallow,” in which they each swallowed half of a 10-foot-long strip of cloth.
"Entangle" brings together several of these past works, restaged for the Tang. The second part of the series, "On the Table," will be on display — and in use — at the museum April 6–30. It revolves around a tablecloth made out of 200 neckties, with a dozen of the ties extending out from the edges of the cloth, so that they can actually be worn by those seated around the table. "When you sit at the table, you put one of the ties on, so everyone is woven together," Antoni said.

During the month of April, Tom Yoshikami, museum educator at the Tang, will organize four dinner-and-discussion events at the table with Skidmore students, based on issues that are important to them. The installation will also be available for community members to use as a tool for dialogue; they can even design their own lighting to set the mood for the conversation. "We'll see if the conditions we've set up can really bring out true connection," Antoni said.

"Honey Baby," the third section of "Entangle," is an outgrowth of "Trevor," the final piece in "Like Lazarus Did." Inspired by sonograms of Petronio's nephew in utero, it was performed by Nick Sciscione, a member of Petronio's company. For "Honey Baby," on view at the Tang May 13 to July 16, the artists drew from the choreography in that piece — but this time, they put Sciscione into a vat of honey and videotaped him close up.

"It's really beautiful and sensual—the slow movement, the honey dripping and oozing," Antoni said. "You really feel like you're peering into a womb. Dance is usually an expression of gravity, but this is filmed in such a way that Nick seems weightless."

To emphasize that weightlessness, the video will be projected on the ceiling of the gallery, and viewers will be invited to lie on the ground to watch. "The video flips the frame of orientation to exclude gravity, so we thought it would be interesting to flip the viewing position," Petronio said. Sciscione will also perform "Honey Baby" live at the museum during the course of the exhibition.

Whether it's through an umbilical cord, a rope, a tablecloth or a shared experience, "Entangle" emphasizes the intimate ties between us. "The theme is the act of merging," in both physical and social interactions, Petronio said. "It's about how we connect, and how we're connected."

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