



**Xpace
Cultural
Centre**

2-303 Lansdowne Ave
Toronto ON M6K 2W5
416 849 2864
Tuesday-Saturday 12-6
www.xpace.info

Intersections in Dance Curated by Victoria Mohr-Blakeney

Daria Blum, Ella Cooper, Danièle Dennis, jes sachse, Allanah Vokes

July 28- August 26, 2017

In the exhibition *Intersections in Dance*, Canadian and International artists, Daria Blum, Ella Cooper, Danièle Dennis, jes sachse, and Allanah Vokes investigate dance methodologies via contemporary art practices. By way of video, drawing, photography, and social media, each artist positions dance in different ways: as a culturally encoded practice, a source of analysis and notation, an act of embodied self-expression, and as a vehicle of somatic repression. *Intersections in Dance* poses the question: what can we learn from the dancing body through the lens of contemporary art practice?

Ella Cooper's photographic series, *Ecstatic Nudes*, offers powerful visual narratives of self-expression via ecstatic movement¹. Cooper's work shows female-identified women twisting, swaying, bending, and leaping, as the artist captures nude bodies in fluid and elated motion. In this series, Cooper draws on the empowering and self-expressive qualities of improvisation and ecstatic movement in her work. Cooper states: "I continue to explore the act of reclaiming the Black female body through my own video performance artworks and the through the creation of 'ecstatic' nudes. Using safe space and embodied inquiry to develop

¹ Ecstatic movement/Ecstatic dance is a movement practice centered on self-expression with a focus on free-form movement as opposed to aesthetics. It is often practiced in group settings.

this new photo-video series as a continued exploration of Black Joy, I draw upon Afro-futurist principles as yet another act of resistance and reclamation.”²

Cooper’s powerful and joyful representations of Black female bodies reverberate on a cellular level through her boldness of colour, harnessing the inherent emotional qualities of self-expressive movement.

jes sachse is an interdisciplinary artist currently exploring dance and improvisation as a vehicle of self-expression. sachse’s work raises the question - whose dancing bodies are allowed to occupy space? Their work investigates what emancipatory spaces for embodied self-expression may exist within their own body. *Find@squirrelofmystery* is a series of Instagram videos filmed and performed by the artist, which occupy an intersectional space between the visible and the invisible. Trained in dance as a child in their mother’s dance school, sachse was never encouraged to pursue dance professionally. Dance has, however, persisted as an expressive thread in their life. sachse states: “Movement has been a means of survival, as a young queer person approaching liminal emancipations on dance floors; as a poor disabled person taking out frustrations in back alleys impromptu choreography.”³ sachse’s work calls for an intimate yet collective participation in the work on the part of viewers. The videos can be publicly accessed online via social media, positioning the work as simultaneously occupying and transgressing the gallery space.

While Cooper and sachse point to the empowering qualities of self-expressive dance and movement improvisation their work, interdisciplinary artist Daria Blum’s single-channel video, *I am ready*, examines the repressive methodologies inherent to rigorous dance training. Blum explores the obsessive qualities of physical training in the context of ballet including repetition, endurance and suffering. In *I am ready*, a ballet dancer’s head, and shoulders, performed by Blum, spins continuously, while fighting increasing signs of nausea and

² Cooper, Ella. Intersections in Dance submission.

³ sachse, jes. Intersections in Dance submission.

discomfort. Here, Blum uses *spotting*,⁴ a technique common in pirouettes,⁵ while continuously humming *The Dying Swan* by Camille Saint-Saëns. Embodied and imperfect, the vocalization reveals an internal narrative of a body striving in vain for flawlessness. Blum's work exposes somatic suffering as a central tenant to physical achievement. Blum states: "I am interested in the concept of suffering as a motor for creative and generative processes, and especially in the masochism of the performer and their audience—which is experienced individually and collectively."⁶ Blum's work posits suffering as a necessity in the pursuit of perfection, an ideology inherent in many dance practices. *I am ready* also points to the invisible contract between dancers, choreographers, and audiences that collectively serves to perpetuate insurmountable standards of perfection and execution.

Alternatively, Allanah Vokes' drawing, *Salute To Our Armed Services Ball-The Inauguration of Donald J. Trump, the 45th President of the United States of America*, transforms dance and motion into data, by way of analysis, translation, and notation. In this work, Vokes tracks an 8-minute video of the 2017 Armed Services Ball at a frame rate of 30 frames per second and draws the resulting motion vectors using a pen plotter. In this triptych, the artist tracks the noses of twenty-two dancers, including Donald and Melania Trump, and then plots the movement of each dancer frame by frame. Vokes' work questions the meaning behind these national rituals, in this case traditionally used to signify the peaceful transition of democratic power. In her work, the artist exposes the dancing bodies' ability to defy the apophenic drive, the human compulsion to analyze seemingly random data in an attempt to uncover an underlying logic. Vokes' work also

⁴ Spotting is a technique used by dancers in a variety of dance forms wherein the dancer focuses on a fixed point while spinning, so as to avoid sensations of nausea, dizziness and discomfort.

⁵ A movement comment in ballet wherein a dancer turns supported on one leg while the second is often in a bent and lifted position.

⁶ Blum, Daria. Intersections in Dance submission.

references a long history of dance notation systems, specifically Labanotation,⁷ designed to capture, interpret, codify and/or reproduce dance.

Danièle Dennis' two-channel video, *tek ah jump*, takes a different approach, positing dance as cultural practice. In doing so, Dennis' work examines the idea of exporting embodied cultural practice by enacting a one-woman carnival staged on a December evening on the streets of Philadelphia. Dennis' work opens up questions surrounding the embodied nature of racial and cultural identity. As the daughter of Jamaican immigrants, her work recalls family gatherings commonly involving dance, Dennis states: "We would wine to the sounds of reggae and soca. A significant portion of my teen and adult years were spent in Toronto where Caribana, Toronto's Caribbean street festival, remains the city's largest if not second largest cultural festival. We would revel together; we mash up di road in all our exuberance, feathers and sparkle."⁸ Dennis' *tek ah jump* explores the notion of temporal suspension in an attempt to question and subvert her surroundings by way of her dancing body. Dennis' dancing body becomes a tool to re-contextualize questions of identity, belonging, and embodied cultural expression.

Employing a variety of media and contemporary art practices, Daria Blum, Ella Cooper, Danièle Dennis, jes sachse, and Allanah Vokes each expose the ability of the dancing body to hold multiple meanings and significations. Vokes' work asks what knowledge can be gained from the dissection and systematic codification of embodied practices. sachse and Cooper position dance and embodiment as a tool of empowerment, intersectionality and self-expression. Dennis explores dance as cultural practice and the body as the cultural context by which culture is performed. Finally, Blum examines the repressive qualities of

⁷ A system of notation designed for analyzing human movement. Derived from the work of Rudolf Laban in the 1920s.

⁸ Dennis, Danièle. Intersections in Dance submission.

dance, specifically rigorous training, positioning it as a vehicle by which the body is both manipulated and subjugated. In *Intersections in Dance*, each artist poses questions about the dancing body through the lens of contemporary art practice, a process by which new meanings and significations are both revealed and concealed.

-Victoria Mohr-Blakeney