

eyeondance

Performing Arts: Dance

ART BRIDGMAN & MYRNA PACKER

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Art Bridgman and Myrna Packer have been collaborating since 1978, working with video technology and live performance. Their two New York premieres at the Sheen Center, *Remembering What Never Happened* and *Voyeur*, brought up so many ideas and questions about representation, time, space, illusion and reality that my head was spinning – in a good way – for most of the evening. Although the use of video and projection in dance has precedent as far back as Massine and Tchelitchev's *Ode* (1928 for the Ballets Russes), and put Robert Joffrey's *Astarte* on the cover of Time magazine in 1967, its use has not become commonplace in concert dance. After seeing Bridgman and Packer, one wonders... why not? The melding of actual corporeality with flat, moving three-dimensional images that are a window to the world, into one integrated whole, seems to expand both art forms. And what better way to interest today's screen-saturated generation in a live performance and its possibilities?

Two dancers sitting in chairs on a darkened stage, looking into the wings, are soon bathed in a blue light, while projections of them – whether on the scrim behind them, or on their bodies, dance and move as they do. We become absorbed in the game of discerning precision: is this happening in real time, or are the dancers flawlessly synced with a previously filmed image? At one point, a small time-lapse emerges, with the projected image mimicking the dancer one count after she moves. In another section, he sits in a chair downstage and as he moves, his image is projected in multiples across the screen. At other times, the movements and projections recall Herbert Migdoll's time-lapse photographic experiments of the 1960s.

Bridgman and Packer's loose contemporary style recalls some of Trisha Brown's quality, but the movement itself is not the focus; instead we think about its relationship to the flat image, or to the other dancer, or how the bodies move from one circumscribed illusory space to another. In one particularly eerie passage, she is projected walking around what looks like the side of a rocky cliff, as he watches her from the stage. They simultaneously inhabit two different worlds, and it feels like peeking inside his head, witnessing his memory or imagination or both. Each aesthetic shift, unobtrusively accompanied by different optical illusions and soundscapes – from percussive to bluesy to violins – becomes a new question, a new story, and an increasingly more absorbing moment in time. Walter Benjamin wrote about how film could expand our visual and cognitive space; these artists literally embody this notion. Yet they also turn Benjamin's "distracted viewer" of film on its head: we are compelled to pay attention.

During intermission the audience is invited to walk around the stage and examine the flat cardboard cutout façade of a house, which will later transform into different homes, street scenes, and even a gorgeous seascape, through projections. Although the program tells us the paintings of Edward Hopper were a point of departure, at different moments I was also reminded of Dali's *Girl at a Window*, of 1925, the works of the 19th-century German Romantic painter David Caspar Friedrich, and the grit of Tennessee Williams' *Streetcar Named Desire*. Through their choreography, the dancers magnify a strange nostalgia, and a feeling of unease, with repetitive and sometimes violent encounters between them that occur through a window, or between a doorway, or in an alley, sometimes "real," sometimes projected, but constantly changing time and place.

These dance artists, along with their many collaborators – Philip Gulley for technology design, Frank DenDanto III and Andrew Trent for lighting design and operation, John Guth for sound, and Gil Sperling for technology engineering – have taken the merely optical or corporeal and by fusing them together, created a coherent, forcefully engaging aesthetically whole.

EYE ON THE ARTS, NY -- Nicole Duffy Robertson