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**Voyeurism, skin, Edward Hopper and video: Bridgman|Packer Dance pushes the boundaries**  
by Manuel Mendoza, Special Contributor | January 24, 2017

Bridgman|Packer Dance has just two members, but the audience can't always tell.

Using sophisticated video technology, the New York-based duo can make it look like 20 performers are on stage. Art Bridgman and Myrna Packer collaborated for decades before realizing the possibilities that projected imagery would bring to their work.

"That was really a creative explosion for us, particularly working with our own video image, often life size, so we can multiply on stage," Packer says in a phone interview. "We discovered a lot of ways that we can say things we were already working with thematically in our choreography, but now we had a whole new palette to add to it. It brought a lot of fertile energy to our creative process."

Presented by TITAS, Bridgman|Packer Dance will perform two of their video-informed pieces, *Voyeur* and *Under the Skin*, at Dallas City Performance Hall this weekend.



Film or video images have been employed in dance since at least the 1960s, an experimental era for the art form. Its use among prominent touring troupes appears to be on the rise in recent years.

"Dance makers have been using video for many, many years," notes Charles Santos, director of Dallas dance presenter TITAS. "I love artists that are blending artistic mediums to create new works."



Voyeur, performed by  
Bridgman|Packer Dance. Photo by  
Tyler Silver.

Already this season, TITAS has hosted Jessica Lang Dance, which projected video of dancers moving in virtual architectural spaces as a central element of *Tesseract of Time*. Last year, Cloud Gate Dance Theatre of Taiwan immersed its dancers in a filmed natural environment for *Rice*, another TITAS show.

Also in 2016, the Dallas-based Bruce Wood Dance Project used a video backdrop by Shane Pennington that depicted the dancers floating through a foggy downtown skyline to amplify the themes in artistic director Kimi Nikaidoh's *Bloom*.

"It was right around the time that video projectors and video equipment on a consumer level were becoming more affordable," Packer says of the late 1990s, when she and Bridgman became interested in incorporating video in their choreography. "I resisted the whole idea because I'm not very technologically savvy. But I also didn't want it to be a distraction to the dance, where the audience would have to choose where they were looking."



The duo's first foray was commissioned choreography for a Haydn opera that included rear projection. Shortly after that project, Packer walked into their studio as Bridgman was experimenting with video images of himself.



*Under the Skin*, as performed by Bridgman|Packer Dance. Photo by Nan Melville.

"I saw him stepping in and out of his life-size image, and immediately I knew this could be a direction for our work to go," she recalls. "I saw all the issues of identity, of a person fracturing off from different sides of himself and then coming back into himself. I also saw the whole question of perception itself, looking at what is real and what is illusion."

Like Lang and Cloud Gate, Bridgman |Packer doesn't treat video as a tacked-on element. The imagery is central to the themes being explored and to the overall visual presentation. "What we try to do is incorporate it and have it be part of the essence of the piece," Packer says.

*Voyeur*, for instance, takes the paintings of Edward Hopper as its inspiration. Using both prerecorded video and images from live cameras, Bridgman and Packer create a three-dimensional set in which they dance with their own likenesses. The images are projected onto a pair of hinged wood panels and on a screen at the back of the stage.



"If you look at a number of Hopper paintings, you will see that there's a foreground, a middle ground and a background," Bridgman explains. "He uses architecture in a very engaging way, and also as a way of concealing. A lot of his work is looking through doorways and windows. You see parts of people and you don't know exactly what is going on."



*Voyeur*, performed by Bridgman | Packer Dance. Photo by Bridgman | Packer Dance

"Which is the essence of voyeurism," Packer adds. "The audience of any theatrical or dance event is in the role of being a voyeur, but we took that a bit further by creating this set that has a barrier, so we are only partially seen through the windows and doorway. And actually every person in the audience is seeing a slightly different piece."

"It might be a very beautiful environment, but you see that there is some kind of disconnect, a kind of emotional tug that is going on between those people in the painting," Bridgman continues. "So we wanted to work with both the architectural and the psychological aspects of those paintings."

Along with *Voyeur*, created in 2012, Bridgman | Packer will perform an earlier work, 2005's *Under the Skin*, in which their bodies and costumes become screens for projected images.

"They are so unique in our season and really in the dance landscape. They are not trying to be like anyone," Santos says. "Their work isn't so much about dance virtuosity and bravura, but something much more interesting and sophisticated. Using video projection and virtual partnering, they create alternative realities on stage."

Bridgman and Packer came to dance in different ways. He was an athlete at Tufts University in Boston expecting to become a lawyer until he took a choreographing class "because it looked interesting. It grabbed me and never let go. It felt like a total experience, intellectually, physically, spiritually."

She studied modern dance as a child and wound up getting a dance degree from Bennington College. They met in small companies in New York and began creating pieces together in 1978.



*Under the Skin*, as performed by Bridgman | Packer Dance. Photo by Kelly Gottesman

"We have always been interested in the human condition and saying something about the human condition on stage, as opposed to abstraction, although there is always abstraction in dance," Packer says. "We came up right after the whole Judson era, where people were really challenging what is dance, what is valid to put on stage."

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