

Daina Ashbee, Serpentine, La MaMa, New York

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Daina Ashbee

Serpentine, performer: Areli Moran, 2019.

Photos : Carlos Cardona

Daina Ashbee *Serpentine*

Standing in the basement of La MaMa, waiting for Daina Ashbee's *Serpentine*, it was impossible not to share the audience's sense of anticipation. Like many of the artists invited to participate in American Realness, the one-month performance festival in New York, Ashbee pushes the boundaries of live art by attacking the disciplinary norms that govern it. Known for creating viscerally cathartic work, she uses repetition and slow movement as a critical lens, shaping narrative arcs in her choreography through accumulations of physical and temporal fatigue. Considering themes of female sexuality, trauma, environmentalism, and her Métis identity, Ashbee generates carefully detailed and affectively charged pieces. As bodies reiterate gestures, as sounds are re-emitted, and as trajectories are unapologetically revisited within a single event, Ashbee's work is unafraid, brutally honest, and unequivocally effective.

Once inside the theatre, we encounter dancer Areli Moran lying naked in a child's pose with her arms between her legs, head to the ground. Over the next eighty minutes, to the sound of a composition for electric organ by Jean-François Blouin, she repeated a sequence of initially slow and deliberate, but gradually more aggressive movements. Silently shifting her weight forward across the stage in undulations, the definition of every bone, muscle, and tendon was enhanced by an oily substance coating her body and the floor. With exacting precision and skill, Moran allowed her limbs to take on new shapes, extending into the air and pushing against the floor as she moved forward. Midway across the stage, after fully exploring the range of the initial motion, the crawling and slithering intensified as she began to execute a Worm dance that progressively became forceful and violent. Alternating between slapping her pelvis and chest into the hard floor with intensity, the sound of flopping flesh hitting cold ground and panting for air rang throughout the space.

Moran struggled through the pain and fought the exhaustion, making indiscernible sounds between each breath. When the sequence ended, she unceremoniously returned to her starting position, performing the series of actions two more times.

Through repetitive gestures that reveal the vulnerability of bare corporeal contractions and extensions, *Serpentine* forces the viewer to think about the violence against women. Most of the audience members watch the piece from above, standing or seated. From this position of authority, observing the work at a distance, the blunt force of Moran's movements are both alienating and captivating. Spectators hold their breath in response to the vulnerability of each pose. This is where the more compelling power dynamics lie, as Moran controls the outcome of her dance with friction and gravity while spectators uneasily reflect on their complicity in bearing witness to the repeated battering. During the performance, artist and audience are engaged in a dance, with issues of control, agency, and self-determination at the forefront. In a political, social, and cultural context where increased attention is focused on the continued exploitation of women's bodies and the systemic oppression and denial of indigenous rights by patriarchal and colonial structures, Ashbee's choreography drives these reflections further with unwavering intensity.

Didier Morelli

American Realness, La MaMa,
New York, January 9–11, 2019