

Mariam Ghani and Erin Ellen Kelly: When the Spirits Moved Them, They Moved

Jena Seiler

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JENA SEILER

Kentucky College of Art + Design

Review of

Mariam Ghani and Erin Ellen Kelly: *When the Spirits Moved Them, They Moved*.

August 21, 2020 – April 4, 2021, at the Speed Art Museum, Louisville, Kentucky, United States.

Mariam Ghani and Erin Ellen Kelly’s videos and photographs, taken at the Shaker Village of Pleasant Hill, Kentucky, occupied two gallery spaces on the second floor of the Speed Museum in Louisville, Kentucky. Pleasant Hill, located an hour and twenty minutes southeast of Louisville, is one of four Shaker Villages designated as National Historic Sites in the United States (Morrow 2019, 55). The Shakers were a Christian sect that emerged in England in the middle of the eighteenth century and found success in the United States during the social and religious fervour of the nineteenth century. The sect sought to bring “heaven on earth” through their commitment to sustainability, celibacy, and equality of gender and race (Morrow 2019, 55). Dance and physical movement played a central role in Shaker communalism and worship, leading outsiders to deride the believers for the way their bodies convulsed when the spirits moved them. For these physical manifestations and their communal focus, early members were ridiculed as “Shaking Quakers,” from which the name Shakers derives (Morrow 2019, 50). At the height of their influence, nineteen Shaker settlements spanned New England to Kentucky. Today, there are

only two remaining Shaker members, both residing at Sabbathday Shaker Village in New Gloucester, Maine.

Ghani and Kelly’s exhibition – realized through the support of the Pleasant Hill Shaker Village, donors, and Shaker scholars – presents photographs and a three-channel video of a site-responsive performance that took place at the Shaker Village Meeting House in the summer of 2018 (Speed 2020, 0:28). The 22-minute looped-video sequence condenses a day-long performance by dancers from the Louisville Ballet and Moving Collective and pairs that footage with scenes from the historically preserved Shaker Village, the most recent site in Ghani and Kelly’s ongoing collaborative series *Performed Places*. Each work in the *Performed Places* series responds creatively to the history and configuration of a specific space (Ghani 2019). Rather than reproducing a historical Shaker dance, *When the Spirits Moved Them, They Moved* engages the legacy of Shaker worship through a play of movement, space, and time. Gallery wall text frames the work as a “meditation on Shaker landscaping, architecture, song and dance as ways of organizing being-in-common” (Speed Art Museum 2020).



Figure 1
 Mariam Ghani and Erin Ellen Kelly,
Jump from the series *When the Spirits
 Moved Them, They Moved*, 2019. Dye
 transfer print on dibond. (c) Mariam
 Ghani & Erin Ellen Kelly; Courtesy of
 the artists.

As I entered the dark gallery displaying the artists' three-channel video, I also encountered three wooden benches set up on the gallery floor. The benches provide a physical counter to the three, two-dimensional projections illuminating the wall opposite the entrance. The video's horizontal arrangement evokes a triptych, accentuated by the artists' decision to project the same footage, flipped horizontally, on each of the two outside channels. "The symmetrical format of the 3-channel installation," Ghani explains on her website, "refers to the highly symmetrical gift drawings produced by Shakers as depictions of the visions received during these meetings" (2019).



Figure 2
 Hannah Cohoon, *Tree of Life*, 1854.
 Ink and tempera on paper. From The
 Andrews Collection at Hancock
 Shaker Village. This work is in
 the [public domain](#) in its country of
 origin and other countries and areas
 where the [copyright term](#) is the au-
 thor's life plus 100 years or fewer.

Rather than deploying these visual frames as three independent vignettes or as a narrative arc, the three-channel video acts as a moving-image ensemble bringing movement, light, color, sound, and image together. The center channel shows dancers entering the Shaker Village Meeting House, where they proceed to stomp, twirl, sway, clap, shake, sweat, step, and jump, until finally everything is still. The outside channels present footage of spaces beyond the Meeting House walls: a sea of trees, rectangular buildings, serpentine rock walls, measured white fences, tended pastures, and undulating hills. These outside channels buttress the movement of bodies in the center channel and offer glimpses of the environment the Pleasant Hill Shakers inhabited and the orderly world they constructed. Arthur E. McLendon writes that "Shaker landscapes and building interiors expressed extreme order and neatness, a well-known attribute designed to stress that Shaker villages were an earthly analog to the divine order of heaven" (2013, 49). Seated on the center bench, with projections pushing beyond my vision's peripheries, I was brought into the ordering of the space and the play of balance, repetition, and movement.

While retaining traces of the material conditions of the historical site, the creative liberties that Ghani and Kelly took in

executing and presenting their work frees the piece from the knowability and finality often associated with the archive. The three-channel video installation situates the videos within a geographic and historical place while simultaneously pushing the footage beyond the function of documentary record. Even in the confines of the gallery, the work is lively and active in a performative sense. The performative – as J.L. Austin first and then Judith Butler have articulated – entails *doing* or *constituting* something. Rather than simply documenting the performance at the Shaker Village, Ghani and Kelly’s videos performatively link the installation to the performance and site through a combination of sound, light, image, and rhythm. Performance scholar Baz Kershaw offers the biological concept of homology as a way of thinking about the status of a document in relation to an original live performance. “In biology,” Kershaw writes, “homologies occur when a diverse species share similar structural factors, such as the five digits of a human hand and a bat’s wing. I search for homologies that link performance effects and spectator responses in and between live events and their traces” (2008, 27).

One such homological structure in *When the Spirits Moved Them, They Moved* is gesture. A shared set of movements operate like a canon: a series of movements repeated by one dancer after another creates a link between video, performance, and the historical site. Through the presentation of the videos, Ghani and Kelly stretch the canon beyond its traditional boundaries, beyond the confines of the dancers’ bodies to create links across bodies, structures, and the land: the dancers shake, the trees shake outside; feet pointed toward the ceiling shake, leaves shake in the light; spider webs tremble

along the rock wall, bodies tremble on the wood floor; the woods sway, bodies sway; shadows stretch up along the yellow paneled house, bodies stretch across the planks of the Meeting House floor. The Shakers themselves shook: their bodies trembled when the spirits moved them. Ghani and Kelly’s intervention into the space calls attention to an embodied communion that manifests through bodies situated in the world. *When the Spirits Moved Them, They Moved* draws upon Shaker spiritual practices and emanates from the surrounding landscape—phenomenologically connecting and situating the body within a particular community and environment.



Figure 3
 Mariam Ghani and Erin Ellen Kelly, *Meeting House, Morning* from the series *When the Spirits Moved Them, They Moved*, 2019. Dye transfer print on dibond. (c) Mariam Ghani & Erin Ellen Kelly; Courtesy of the artists.

Though it included expressions of Shaker religion, *When the Spirits Moved Them, They Moved* is not presented as a history lesson, period reenactment, or cultural pagentry. The three-channel video does not recount Shaker worship through a set choreography. Instead, it opens a space for viewers to be present with the piece and affected by the rhythms of the video

installation. In a reenactment, one is positioned either inside or outside of the performance, but in performative works such distinctions become prickly. The inclusion of audience members in the video footage from the live performance, as well as an occasional visitor wandering the grounds at Shaker Village, contextualizes the conditions of the performance to highlight its production, and ultimately, extend its effect. Seeing visitors sitting on wooden benches in the Meeting House as they watch the dancers bend, twist, squat, and roll reflected my own position as an audience member sitting on a wooden bench inside the Speed Museum watching the dancers bend, twist, squat, and roll. No one is outside of the artwork. Acknowledging the production of the performance, the presence of an audience, and the transformation of the site into a visitor destination, *When the Spirits Moved Them, They Moved* closes the space between the “object” of viewership and the viewer, opening instead a space for being-in-common. Ghani and Kelly’s collaborations also offer a model for being-in-common where ideas, practices, and bodies come together to produce something new, something shared. This collaborative approach is multiplied in *When the Spirits Moved Them, They Moved*; artists, dancers, a singer, the production crew, and the liveliness of the material environment enter into the collaborative process, a process that offers a mode of being-in-common in which one’s actions, thoughts, and feelings move beyond the singular “I.” Reflecting on the collaborative nature of the project, Kelly has said, “it’s not my aesthetic, it’s not Mariam’s aesthetic, it’s not [even] the aesthetic we’ve made as our collaboration. It looks like nothing I would ever make as a dance piece. It looks somewhere out there [outside of us] as opposed to something I

would hold so close in my idea of what choreography should look like from an aesthetic point of view” (Speed 2021, 4:25). Ghani and Kelly’s collaborative approach to the site and the performance – combining artists and practitioners, human and non-human aspects, past influences and present conditions – produces an exhilarating exercise in being-in-common; one that invites the viewer to be present with the installation, the performance, the world outside, and that which exceeds us.

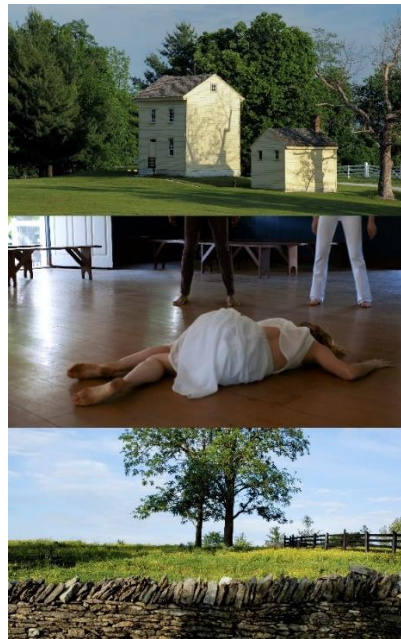


Figure 4
Mariam Ghani and Erin Ellen Kelly,
Two Houses, Ashley on the Floor, &
Last Cow in the Field from the series
When the Spirits Moved Them, They Moved, 2019. Dye transfer print on dibond. (c) Mariam Ghani & Erin Ellen Kelly; Courtesy of the artists.

One could spend hours gazing at all of the beautiful things the Shakers made: weavings, bonnets, drawings, hymns, tools, furniture. Viewing the museum’s

joint exhibition, *Careful, Neat & Decent: Arts of the Kentucky Shakers*, I was struck by the simplicity of design and deft execution on display in the Shaker chairs arranged in front of me. But unlike Ghani and Kelly's videos and photographs, these chairs were not made to be stared at, catalogued, or displayed in a museum; they were made for sitting. Ghani and Kelly offer a counterpoint to engaging the past as a set of fixed objects that one looks at, learns from, and then knows. *When the Spirits Moved Them, They Moved* creates a space for museum visitors to sit in relation to a work meant to be engaged as an embodied viewer. Through a set of shared effects that breach representation, we begin to think critically about what being-in-common means and how we ourselves might practice being-in-common. After a year of social distancing, loss, violence, and protests against systemic racism, sitting in the dark space with one other viewer as the light, sounds, and colors reverberate and move through us, I think: this is my practice.

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