

A Brand New End:
Survival and Its Pictures
Carmen Winant

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BOMB

How Far Can We Feel?: Daina Ashbee Interviewed
by Nicole Loeffler-Gladstone

Surfacing the subconscious through body language.



Daina Ashbee, *Laborious Song*, 2020. Photo by Vanessa Fortin.

I can't remember exactly when or how I became aware of Daina Ashbee's work, but I will never forget the impact of seeing it live. The 2019 performance of *Serpentine*—part of that year's American Realness festival in partnership with the Global First Nations Performance Network—shook me. I felt like I was witnessing some kind of searing primordial excavation, and I was unprepared to receive what the performer, Areli Moran Mayoral, brought forth.

Ashbee's work is often described as living at the edge of performance. She creates for dancers whom she refers to as “interpreters”: artists of exquisite sensitivity and focus who push their physicality to extremes that sometimes border on the brutal.

Laborious Song is one of Ashbee's latest solos. It has its US premiere at New Dance Alliance's Performance Mix Festival on June 11. I caught up with her via phone in late May as she prepared to head to the United States from Germany.

—Nicole Loeffler-Gladstone

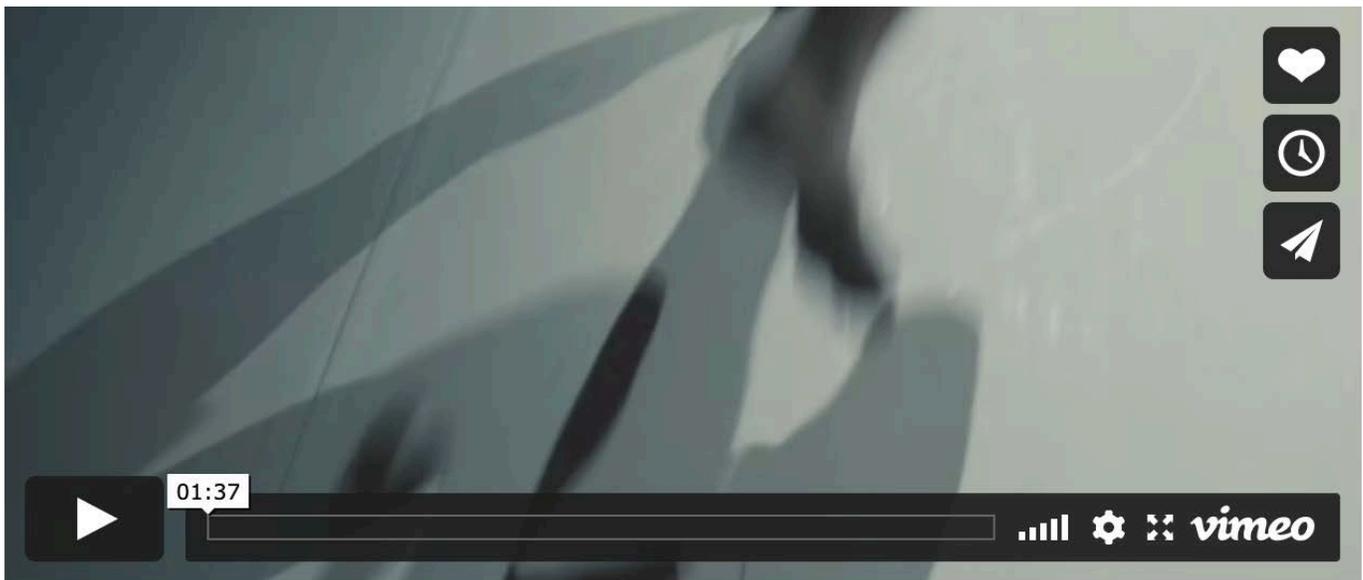
Nicole Loeffler-Gladstone

You've made many solos for singular performers. Where does *Laborious Song* fit into your oeuvre?

Daina Ashbee

Laborious Song talks about my history with my father in an abstract way. I started making it in 2019, and it premiered in 2020, but it hasn't been seen very much because of the pandemic. It toured in France, and it premiered in Brussels. This is the first time it's being presented in the United States.

It's like other solos I've made in its minimalism and its intensity. It's equal amounts of vulnerability and empowerment, violence and power. I saw this piece very clearly on the performer I chose (Benjamin Kamino). There's a heaviness of a subdued, imaginary landscape which is quite present.



Benjamin Kamino performing *Laborious Song*, 2020. Courtesy of Kim-Sanh on Vimeo.

NLG

Mm, that's such an evocative phrase. It immediately makes me feel like I'm shrouded in fog and mist.

DA

It's a transforming landscape. For me, there's an image of a shallow swimming pool and then a series of diving boards. Then it transforms into an island that's sinking, and then a huge storm in the middle of the ocean.

NLG

Does your history with your father show up in a specific way?

DA

My father's parents were fishermen. I had this memory of him teaching me to drive a boat at night, and I saw those lights. Since the rest of the lighting in this work is very subtle, it was important to me to include the red and green.

NLG

What do you mean when you say you saw the piece on the performer?

DA

That's something I always do with all my creations. I premeditate what I want, what I smell, what I hear and see, before I go into the process with the interpreters. I do my exploration and research in isolation by myself. I do this on long plane rides. I put my headphones on and meditate. It's a place without distractions. I'm open to what's coming up in my body and imagination.

NLG

Do you have a particular approach or practice with your meditation?

DA

I have a pretty strict and rigorous meditation process. The idea is that if something comes to my mind, it's meant to be there. I write it down and arrive in the studio with a big packet of writing. In rehearsal, I'm able to tell the interpreter what I saw and ask them what they think, all while remaining open to what comes up in that rehearsal space. I really try to work with the body in front of me. I don't spend a lot of time trying to get things to be exact. Openness allows more images and ideas to come into the creation process.



Benjamin Kamino performing *Laborious Song*, 2020. Photo by Vanessa Fortin.

NLG

These powerful images and impulses are coming from your subconscious, yet the interpreter is the one required to physically manifest them? How do you approach the necessary vulnerability of a new solo project?

DA

It's not just one person being vulnerable in the process. It's a give-and-take, an opening on both sides. I need to be as open with them as I'm asking them to be with me. Every person

I've worked with has been very different, and it's about learning what they need, the support and space they need.

NLG

Do you maintain a similar level of intensity throughout your rehearsals?

DA

I always assume that the piece is its own entity, energy. It transforms in time. This perspective allows me to separate my role from that of the interpreter and to see the piece as the third entity. The interpreter might have an experience from the inside that's different from my experience on the outside.

NLG

Is the audience yet another entity that contributes to the work?

DA

Everything has importance within the performance space. A distracted audience will impact the piece, its timing. I'm aware of the way the work impacts people, and I've put trigger warnings in the program. But it's not meant to. It's about feeling. It's about the language of the body. We can feel and speak through the body.

It's an intense and visceral experience, but sometimes I need something to wake me up, shake me up, and remind me why I'm here. For me, it's great to be so present in the body, even if it's heavy as an experience. I don't think these experiences should be shunned.



Daina Ashbee. Photo by Patrice Mathieu.

NLG

How has your approach shifted over time?

DA

I love the idea of “less is more.” The less I'm influenced by the goal of entertaining an audience, the more I'm able to listen to the body and go deeper. The layers of musicality that can be generated by the body go on and on. My goal has never been to follow any rules or make anyone happy. Instead, I'm interested in listening to my subconscious, putting the body onstage and using it to its limits. I want to know how far we can feel, how deep that language can go.

Laborious Song *has its US premiere at New Dance Alliance's Performance Mix Festival on June 11–12.*

Nicole Loeffler-Gladstone is a writer and performer based on Dax̣ẉabš land. She is currently producing True Voyage Is Return: An ambiguous opera, based on Ursula K. Le Guin's novel The Dispossessed. Come see it at The Brick Theater, November 3–5, 2022.

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