

Liz Roche's *Pilgrimage*: shifts in perception through proximity to a dance

*Three bodies lilt repetitively in unison together, we feel the creaking, swaying to and fro as if on board a vessel, the heft and weave of an ocean liner. We are lulled into this gentle rhythm through the complex movement pattern, until suddenly a dancer drops to the floor and a new space opens.*<sup>1</sup>

We enter the piece, *Pilgrimage* by Liz Roche, through the foyer of Sirius Arts Centre, where dancer, Kévin Coquelard is moving, arms extended upwards. Through the doorway of the centre gallery stands a second dancer, Sarah Cerneaux, amid Brian O'Doherty/Patrick Ireland's wall murals, and behind her again, out on the sea-facing balcony, dancer Henry Montes mirrors their movement, each figure harmoniously embodying an aspect of O'Doherty/Ireland's *One, Here, Now: The Ogham Cycle*.

Next, we pass into an adjacent room and the dancers journey through it, using a range of movements, at once interlinking, then standing apart. The music, composed by Irish composer Linda Buckley commences and travels back through the various rooms – Ilse de Ziah plays the cello in concert with the voices of Suzanne Savage, Vivienne Hassell and Robbie Blake. At times, the dancers slow down to mark the shape of a body as it leaves an embrace, to mark the fold of the knees, the ledge of the hips or to trace the arc of an armpit out along the peninsula of an arm. Small distances mapped along these bodies, perhaps metaphors for the distances travelled for generations of people out from the port of Cobh.

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<sup>1</sup> I am writing as somewhat of an insider to this process, having worked with Liz Roche as a dancer, from when we formed Rex Levitates Dance Company together in 1999 and at various times over the subsequent years, including more recently in the piece *Time Over Distance Over Time* (2016).

We follow the dancers onto the balcony where the light blue sea mirrors a cloudless sky and vessels travel at various speeds across the bay. Here, the dancers carry each other in a procession of assisted lifts from one end to the other before they position themselves on the water's edge with arms directed outwards, beckoning and reaching across the water. One more stop along the way is in a white gallery space, filled with songs woven from O'Doherty/Ireland's *Structural Plays*, before entering the central gallery again, the room with the *Ogham Cycle* murals. This journey so far, is a process of attuning – it is the chance to make associations before surrendering meaning to the immediacy of the colours and forms. The bodies mark boundaries and borders, their flesh allowing us to feel our own, to be present to this experience to be *One, Here, Now*. In this final room the dancers are awash with the backdrop of colour from the murals and this fullness brings a vibrancy to each sinew as they twist and turn around each other, jumping off cues with timing and energy; one interlinked network across a sea of shared impulses. It is a modest sized room, but there is a raw abandon to their actions, no scrimping on the extension of limbs or on the sudden drops, seemingly falling, but fully in control. This last section appears as sensation and form, where the joy of 'being with' the murals is matched by the joy of 'feeling with' the dancers.

Feminist philosopher, Rosi Braidotti (2018), said recently in a lecture 'writing is a mode of inscription into life, encapsulating the energies around you'. This resonates with my endeavor to capture some of the many energies, emotions, perceptions, concepts and sensations that I experienced when watching *Pilgrimage*, but equally to articulate how this dance interacted with the vibrancy of the visual art work it was responding to. What engaged me most was the shift in perception I experienced. I moved from 'watching' at the beginning to 'feeling', by the time I was in the room with the murals, through an empathetic response facilitated by the receptivity and aliveness of the dancers' bodies, my visual focus softened, and the changing

dynamics resonated through me. Something altogether different happens in proximity to the movement of others and perhaps more pointedly so when that movement is conscious and focused. Nervous systems communicate when close together, before even words can form.

Much more than delivering a narrative, Dance has the capacity to engage audiences in a relationship with, what dance scholar Kirsi Monni (2008: 42) describes as, ‘the non concealed, poetic manner of being’. She explains that this is achieved because ‘a dancer’s bodily knowledge is the ability to stay within the immediate and instantaneous “here in the situation” moment, in the integrity of the bodymind’ (Monni 2008: 42). In this way, dancers allow us to see beyond our habitual and somewhat objectified modes of perceiving other bodies and to recognise the capacity of bodies for sensing, feeling and expressing experiences and perceptions beyond words. Monni (2008: 38), drawing from Heidegger’s writings on the philosophy of art, explains that, for Heidegger, ‘an artwork does not imitate reality. Instead, the figure, the Gestalt, of the artwork with its earth world structure wrests and brings forth the happening of the disclosedness *of being* set into work in the work itself [my italics].’ What is challenging is to be able to *be with*. That is, to move from our modes of categorisation and analysis to drop into our sensations before we decide what we are viewing. Resonantly, art historian, Alexander Alberro (2017) wrote that these works by O’Doherty/Ireland create a response in the viewer before meaning-making takes hold. He explains:

*The anti-humanism of these works lies here, in the positing of the essence of the work, not in terms of meaning, but in terms of the demonstration of their internal logic and movement. It follows that to behold these works is not to pass through them to semantic content or sense, but to respond to the activity of the work, to its construction.*

Liz Roche described to me how the initial choreographic investigations were made mainly with the reference points of pictures on a page and various analyses of the work as guides to encounter them.<sup>2</sup> In the lead up to the performances, I attended a rehearsal and viewed some of the movement explorations. At this stage, the dancers were beginning to form a sense of the layers of colours from the murals entering the process, how these were coming into corporeal proximity when they moved through improvisations. Liz Roche asked them to move with the concept of growing myriad connections to each other and the space; being aware of being seen by each other and being seen by the room. I wrote the following in response:

*Vines – hanging suspended – clean lines*

*Far from feeling, cycling through*

*Space separating waded and wandering*

*Loud in its tenderness, until a flick or flourish*

*Broad shoulders keep the shape*

*Of ordinary actions elevated*

At a later date, when the piece was more developed, I observed a studio session where I had a sense of the dancers directing and grounding energy; like an aerial receives radio waves, they were channelling the affective frequencies at play. At this point the discussion was on

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proximity, how the movement felt vibrant and alive from up close and how the next step was to see how this worked in the room with the murals.

The creative process of devised contemporary dance, such as in *Pilgrimage*, involves the layering of meaning-making that is encountered throughout the creation of a work. A framework of associations that are laid down throughout the research-and-development period, spawned by the enquiry of the choreographer and responses of the dancers, produces a structure through which the dance can be materialised in performance. By the time a work is performed, it comprises layers of memories laid down in the bodymind as mental imagery and movement impulse, anchored by sensations and proprioceptive<sup>3</sup> feedback that is then reembodyed in the instantiated present of the performance environment. Like bees re-enacting their travels from foraging, to display the location and abundance of a source of pollen to other members of their hive, the choreography contains the visceral journey into the subject being explored. In this way, the audience can reach the experience directly through the richness of what has been encoded in the movement language.

Liz Roche explained that they had stayed and rehearsed in Sirius Arts Centre for a number of days in the lead up to the performances, which facilitated a transition she made from looking at the work to being with it; a shift in her perceptual frame.<sup>4</sup> *Pilgrimage* brought us through this experience as we followed the dancers' journey through each of the rooms. Perhaps the construction of the choreography mapped the journey of Liz Roche and the dancers' engagement with the murals, moving from distant analysis to reveal the *being with* and 'beingness' of the work, allowing us as the audience to feel this also. By the time we entered the space containing O'Doherty/Ireland's murals, I was ready to be with them, to let the

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<sup>3</sup> Proprioception refers to the body's capacity to locate itself in space, through stimuli given from the body itself, such as through feedback from nerves, muscles and the inner ear.

<sup>4</sup> Personal conversations with Liz Roche throughout 2018.

colours flow through me and enter my senses without seeking to categorise or objectify. Through our journey to this point, it seemed we were fast-tracked through the process that Liz Roche and the dancers made when she composed the work. As I sat in the first room that acted as an antechamber for the beginning of the dance, I felt a process of attunement taking place. Moving through each space, seeing the shimmering blue sea through the windows, the activity of a port outside – we experienced the endless comings and goings of people and their stories, portrayed by the dancers as they moved in the outside spaces. That the dancers could be there, wholly embodied and attuned to their sensations allowed us as an audience to feel with them; to sense directly their harmonious entanglement with the raw colour and form of the murals.

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