Multimedia Dance Duo Bridgman/Packer Take PS21

By Sparrow

In November 2002, Art Bridgman had an epiphany. While experimenting in his studio in Valley Cottage, New York, he discovered that he could project a life-size video of himself, stand inside of it, then step out, as if he were escaping from his own photograph. He showed the illusion to his partner, Myrna Packer, who immediately recognized its aesthetic possibilities. Long into the night, the two worked on the dance piece that would become "Seductive Reasoning."

Ever since, Bridgman/Packer have integrated video into their dance performances. They bring two works to PS21 in Chatham on August 16 and 17.

- Photo: Sally Cohn
- Explore the liminal state between waking and dreams with Bridgman/Packer's "Voyeur" at PS21 August 16-17.

Table Bed Mirror, their most recent dance, began as a series of improvisations with eight-foot conference tables, which sometimes doubled as video projection screens, as well as beds and mirrors. The shifting viewpoints reminded the dancer duo of dreams, leading them to research the neuroscience of human sleep. One of their discoveries was REM sleep paralysis, in which the brain sends messages to the body's muscles to prevent them from acting out the events in dreams.
A dreaming person functions on three levels: physically she is motionless, mentally she is active, and experientially she's driving cars and making sandwiches. Consider two people sleeping in the same bed, and these three levels are doubled. Furthermore, is it possible that their simultaneous dreams harmonize? Could they actually be visiting each other's dreams? These are questions Bridgman and Packer considered.

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In the soundtrack to Table Bed Mirror, the dance duo included some of their neurophysiological research. "The sounds of the various functions of the brain we found very poetic," Packer notes. "Medulla' and 'subcoeruleus nucleus.'" (For the insatiably curious, the subcoeruleus nucleus is a section of the brain associated with REM sleep.)

The second piece that will be staged at PS21, Voyeur, resulted from a commission by the Edward Hopper Museum in Nyack, to create a performance inspired by the namesake artist's paintings. Voyeur is, in a sense, dance as art criticism. Bridgman and Packer spent three days in Portland, Maine—which Hopper also visited—being filmed by their longtime videographer, Peter Bobrow. Their goal wasn't to recreate classic paintings but to evoke Hopper's forlorn atmosphere.

"In so many of Hopper's paintings, you see a partial moment of private life," observes Packer. This led to the theme of voyeurism, influencing the set they built: slanting walls pierced by two windows and a doorway, which reveal as much as they conceal. At one point in the dance, Packer and Bridgman disappear behind a wall, but the audience still sees them on a video screen. Suddenly the Canon camera becomes an instrument of surveillance.

Packer happens to resemble Edward Hopper's wife, Jo, who was the artist's only model. (Jo insisted that every woman in her husband's paintings be a version of herself.)

Bridgman/Packer spent two years making Voyeur. For the score, they researched sounds from midcentury America: radio dramas, movie music, and the evocative purr of a rotary phone dialing. In 2017, the piece won a Bessie Award, the highest achievement in the dance world, for outstanding production.

Bridgman/Packer Dance will perform at PS21 in Chatham on August 16 and 17. (518) 392-6121. Ps21chatham.org