

The Boston Globe

Grace at the Crossroads of Dance and Technology

Playful eclecticism is one of the features of Cathy Weis' work, and it is evident in "Electric Haiku."
By Karen Campbell, Globe Correspondent | May 1, 2007

For more than two decades, Cathy Weis's creativity has flourished at the intersection of dance and technology, and she can meld the two with an artistry that is breathtaking. There are moments in the new "Electric Haiku: Calm as Custard," presented over the weekend at the Institute of Contemporary Art, that are not only visually stunning but emotionally resonant and provocative.

Two solos stand out. In the first, Weis dances in place as she slowly tells a story about being called for jury duty. She gradually reveals that she has multiple sclerosis, which has most seriously affected her right side. "I feel like I have two different bodies," she says, "like Greg Louganis and Margaret Thatcher hooked up. They don't quite mesh, but both are interesting."

As she bends and turns, the curves and stretches of her arms sometimes jerking slightly, two cameras set at different angles project mirror images of her on a giant backdrop screen. At times it looks like the awakening of a multi-limbed, two-headed creature. But when she goes ever so slightly off-center, the images separate a bit and connect as two, a convoluted duet with limbs intertwined, sometimes embracing, sometimes seeming to push away.

The same technology frames a later gorgeous solo by a bare-chested Osmany Tellez, but as his movements travel around the periphery of a pool of light, his screen selves clearly separate. When the projected images are replaced by a beam of light, he dances a duet with his silhouette. Then a camera begins recording and playing back his movements with a hint of delay, so as he rolls toward and away from the camera, his body creates onscreen a gorgeous wash of gray-hued tumbles.

Weis's other side is one of playful eclecticism, and when she turns her vision in that direction, it can be funny, confusing, or just plain weird -- even bordering on the tediously self-indulgent. (What was the deal with the Johnny Cash song and the cowboy theme near the end of "Electric Haiku"?) Structure is not her strong suit.

Among the playful elements, the most intriguing tableau involved Weis's face on a small screen, which was passed around the audience. As Weis and Jennifer Miller danced onstage, the audience gamely took direction from Weis's on screen head, as she urged, "Would you mind lifting me a little higher? That's it, coming through. Careful . . ." The live action didn't have a chance next to the clamoring screen image.

The program opened with a shorter work, a humorous duet with Scott Heron called "A Bad Spot Hurts Like Mad." Again, the most effective part of the dance is the most straightforward conceptually -- Weis's movement playing across a screen, her multiple images reflected ad infinitum, like a never-ending hall of mirrors.