

Dancing with Eva Yaa Asantewaa: Exclusive Reviews

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- Reel: Tom Pearson
- Sitelines
- Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian
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Like many visitors to the National Museum of the American Indian located in the former Alexander Hamilton U.S. Customs House at Bowling Green, Tom Pearson noticed the circle of New World explorers--Hudson, Vespucci, Columbus, others--who stare down from murals in the ceiling of the building's elliptical rotunda. Pearson--a dancer-choreographer of Euro-American and indigenous heritage (Coharie, Muskogee, Cherokee)--invited three of his dancers to stare back at the explorers and help him craft a response. The result is *Reel*, an elegant, half-hour work that, by the power of love and beauty, softens the formal austerity of this imposing environment.

Reel opened on the day that London's transportation was struck by terrorism. Lower Manhattan's financial and governmental district saw a heavier than usual police presence. NMAI's security staff took extra care with baggage screening and then politely apologized for the bother. No bother at all. It felt good to be in a place whose treasures affirm culture and spirit and life, soothing to see numerous schoolkids of all colors among an audience surrounding the rotunda's circular, central enclosure.

Just past 2pm, Donna Ahmadi (Gullah Cherokee, Chickasaw) made the first foray into the center, bending, arching and stretching her spritely arms beside one of the rotunda's tall brass lamps. Louis Mofsie's Heyna Second Sons--American Indian singers--assembled shortly after, carrying drums and a flute. Ahmadi's exquisite opening--movements and gestures that took the measure of an envisioned landscape and sky as drumming thundered--would have been enough. But like a scout or an explorer, she blazed a trail for those who would follow: her fellow dancers Pearson, Marissa Nielsen-Pincus, and Mayuna Shimizu.

Gazing up, the dancers "discovered" the discoverers. They scattered, huddled and marched, and made sharp, pointing gestures at the Europeans looming overhead. Although these gestures could be read as accusatory and as imprecations, they seemed strangely cute, as if the dancers were secretly amused at their own resentment and its uselessness at this late date. After all, "they" came, saw, conquered, even intermarried. Like this Eurocentric building that now houses the art and artifacts of indigenous nations, modern-day America and Americans--and Pearson's own troupe--are an inextricable and wondrous mix.

The dancers whipped up energy and cleared the air with swift, explosive movements, landing on secure feet and sturdy legs. Nielsen-Pincus positioned herself inside an archway. As other dancers pointed at her, she covered her ears and averted her face, but instead of isolating her, they led her back to the center. For a few lovely moments, Pearson supported her on his lap as they both calmly eyed the Portuguese navigator, Cortereal.

Support might be the most significant motif within *Reel*. The movements depicted people deeply engaged in purpose, with each dancer's path individually wrought yet understood and embraced by all others. The people are related yet free. Ultimately they join forces and circle, bringing to mind the four cardinal points on the grand circle of the universe and of Earth herself—East/Air, South/Fire, West/Water, and North/Earth. Nothing can exist or survive and thrive without some measure of each of these elements and energies.

Reel neared its conclusion and it was clear that the dancers had claimed, warmed, and reimagined this historical space, at least for as long as the dance (or its memory) lasts. But one task remained. Pearson retrieved a large spindle of thick cord propped against a lamp. He unraveled it, strung it among the lamps, and began to weave a strong, bright-blue web.

Remaining performances of *Reel* can be seen on July 9, 14, 15 and 16 at 2pm and July 14 at 6:30pm. For more information on the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council's Sitelines site-specific dance series, visit www.lmcc.net/sitelines. Visit Tom Pearson's Web site at www.tpdance.org and the Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian at www.AmericanIndian.si.edu.

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