

GIRLS' NIGHT OUT

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Kelly Nipper creates austere and carefully executed works based in photography, video, and performance, which explore nuances related to time, motion, weight, space, and dimension. Often employing dancers and meticulously choreographed activities and movements, Nipper's works are poetic studies of motion and relationships. Although her highly formal works often engage precise structures and systems, they nonetheless leave room for the introduction of chance and the possibility of a collapse of order, revealing such influences as Yoko Ono's open-ended poetry and instruction performances and Allan Kaprow's happenings, environments, and activities.

Drawing on such models, as well as on Merce Cunningham's concepts of fluid and improvisational dance movement and Hélio Oiticica's theories on free-form space and color, Nipper's newest and most ambitious work to date is a four-channel video projection installation that explores balance, motion, and the interior space of the body, employing images and metaphors connected to water, ice, and figure skating.

into empty space and in a state of total openness that would produce the appearance of fluid and effortless movement.³ Although Linthahane's training prepared her mentally and physically to perform the movement, the final execution was anything but effortless. As Nipper's video reveals, at times her muscles failed her as she attempted to hold a position, while at other times she fell momentarily out of balance. Related to the footage of this video are several passages of rap lyrics written by Nipper. While these lyrics echo or reference some of the shapes and motions employed in *Bending Water into a Heart Shape*, they also suggest how these elements might reappear and expand in other contexts.⁴

Connecting Linthahane's movement to the site most associated with a lutz are two videos made at a figure-skating training center, each shot from opposite sides of a spinning turntable positioned in the middle of the ice. This footage presents two dizzying views of the perimeter of the rink, visually suggesting the field of vision of a pair of spinning skaters. The fourth video of this installation features a delicate

The central video in *Bending Water into a Heart Shape* (2003; fig. 66) features a single female dancer moving in slow motion through the movements of a counterrotation figure-skating jump known as a lutz.¹ Standing on the floor of a studio, the dancer, Phithsamay Linthahane, moves through the positions of a triple lutz, attempting to stretch the movement out to an excruciating sixty minutes. In an intensely meditative state, she continues to shift and counterbalance her weight, slowly spinning up on her toes while the camera remains stationary.

Linthahane's face and body reveal the extreme physical and mental intensity of her movement, recalling the unconventional and at times unconscious movements of the avant-garde dance form Butoh.² Internal martial arts training prepared the already agile and disciplined dancer for a change in her body and mind, allowing her to attempt to move both

spiral mobile composed of wire and teardrop shapes made of ice. The video records the process of the ice melting, which slowly and unpredictably throws the mobile out of balance as its weight and shape gradually change. Within this quiet and poetic video, the concepts of *Bending Water into a Heart Shape* converge. The slow and physical transformation of water from one state (solid) to another (liquid) references Linthahane's mental and physical transformation, while the spiral construction of the mobile echoes her slow, rotating movement and the two spinning views from the training rink's center. Like the dance footage, this work is dominated by the intervention of chance and the loss of control. During Linthahane's lutz movement, her body becomes unpredictable and inconsistent under the mental and physical stress, while in this video the mobile's melting forms cause the wire and ice structure to fall out of balance as it literally disappears.

Together, the four large-scale video projections that make up *Bending Water into a Heart Shape* explore such concepts as control, balance, and change. As Nipper's enigmatic title suggests, the work is also a study of circular shapes: the spiral of the mobile, the spinning movement by Linthahane, and the two related rotating rink views that suggest the form of conjoined circles, a heart shape. Marked by elegant forms, movements, and images combined with subtle ruptures in order, *Bending Water into a Heart Shape* is a poetic and complexly layered work that embodies many of the concepts and influences that have shaped Nipper's artistic practice.

The conceptual and aesthetic roots of *Bending Water into a Heart Shape* can be found in a number of Nipper's earlier works that have involved choreography, movement, and the visualization of intense mental states. In the photographic sequence entitled *interval* (2000; fig. 64), for example, Nipper explored time and motion through an elegant series of images featuring four seemingly related positions held by a dancer. In this simple yet enigmatic sequence, she calls attention to unknown movements between the frames while introducing a subtle disruption of logical order. Just as *interval* suggests the hidden activity that takes place in the space between a series of motions, Nipper's new work records the intense mental (and similarly hidden) activity of Linthahane's transition into empty space.

Norma—practice for sucking face (1999; fig. 65)—an installation lasting ten days, which featured a group of dancers and a highly structured score of pedestrian movements—was, like *Bending Water into a Heart Shape*, an exercise in controlled movement, but it too was made richer by the introduction of chance and the unknown. The elements of this work included a group of dancers, a large platform, 120 gray cushions, five sets of sculptural objects, and a numeric score counted in French by Linthahane, who was one of the dancers.⁵ An element of chance was introduced into the work in the form of the gallery audience, whose presence in the space at times affected the actions and prescribed configurations of the dancers, who spent each day reconfiguring the gray cushions

in relation to the large platform in the gallery. The dancers' own physical and mental fatigue also impacted the piece, as they gradually fell out of precise time, constantly changing the atmosphere and physical configuration of the space.

In many of Nipper's works the concept of time is an essential element to be exploited and explored physically, mentally, and visually. It is perhaps in her recent work, *Bending Water into a Heart Shape*, that time has the greatest impact on her audience. There is a sense after seeing Linthahane move slowly through part of the lutz motion, or after watching the ice forms on the mobile melt drop by tiny drop, that part of an understanding of this work is in the endurance of experiencing its images. These quiet and poetic forms reveal themselves slowly, asking viewers to readjust their usual hurried pace and to give themselves over to an experience that explores some of the elemental relationships and abstract correspondences between the body and mind.

NOTES

1. The distinguishing feature of this difficult skating maneuver is that the skater enters the jump moving in one direction and concludes the jump skating in the opposite direction.
2. Butoh, which connects conscious and unconscious movements, is characterized by striking, unconventional movements and a transformation in the body.
3. Linthahane trained with internal martial arts instructor Joseph Zeisky, with an emphasis on Ba Gua, a practice that fosters a deep state of meditation, allowing one to become centered and calm while conditioning the body, expanding flexibility, and improving fighting abilities. The so-called internal martial arts are characterized by the use of the force of the entire body, rather than isolated muscle groups, and by the influence of Taoist spiritual practice.
4. These rap lyrics, entitled "In the Floating World," foreshadow Nipper's still-unrealized project of the same title. Not only do these lyrics thus connect *Bending Water into a Heart Shape* to this future work, but their title also reveals Nipper's interest in the images and philosophy embodied in ukiyo-e during the Edo period (1615–1868) in Japan.
5. In addition to Linthahane, the other dancers in this work were Anna Nuse, Allison Westfall, Dani Lunn, and Laura Koyle. The movement coordinator was Liz Maxwell, and the French adviser was Sheila Espinelli.