

'Atlas Revisited' at EMPAC makes a political statement — with camels

Trying something new has its struggles

By Tresca Weinstein Updated 2:16 pm, Wednesday, March 30, 2016



In our media-saturated world, creating something new is becoming an increasingly difficult feat — and it's even tougher if you're trying to make a meaningful political statement, too.

That explains a lot about the dancing camels in "Atlas Revisited," a new multimedia performance by visual artist Karthik Pandian and dancer/choreographer Andros Zins-Browne, which will be shown at EMPAC Friday at 8 p.m.

"The challenge for a lot of artists of our generation is how to speak about current events with an image language that feels fresh, not like you're just watching the news," said Zins-Browne, who lives and works in Brussels and has performed his own dance pieces throughout Europe.

In 2012, inspired by the Arab Spring movement, the artists—who met 15 years ago at Brown University—decided to merge their respective mediums in pursuit of an unexpected artistic and politically minded creation.

"Andros was in Brussels and I was in Los Angeles, but we were both seeing images of a revolution spreading throughout the Middle East, images that were a vital element of sparking that revolution," recalled Pandian, whose sculpture and video installations have been shown around the country and in Europe. "We felt an urgency to speak to something very important happening in the world."

To do so, they went far afield. At Atlas Film Studios in the Moroccan desert — where scenes from numerous Hollywood movies, including "Jewel of the Nile" and "Gladiator," have been filmed — they hired a group of studio camels and tried to persuade them to dance. Their concept was to restage sections of the 1982 dance film "Channels/Inserts," by Merce Cunningham and Charles Atlas — using camels.

It was an idea based on two metaphors: the camel as a symbol of a burdened people, and dancing as a symbol of freedom and the ability to choose one's own life path. The question they were investigating, Zins-Browne said, was, "What would it look like if the camel would revolt, stop carrying everybody's stuff and start doing something else with its body — like dancing?"

They chose "Channels/Inserts" partly because of the "Atlas" pun and the fact that Cunningham was a choreographer and Atlas an artist working with the moving image, but also because "their work, with its hand-held, close-up style of capturing moving bodies, is formally similar in many ways to the Arab Spring and other protest videos," Zins-Browne said.

But there was one problem: The camels didn't really want to dance. The artists and the camels' handlers (many of whom were children, working full-time) tried all kinds of ways to get them to move in tandem: tempting them with food or hay, roping them together, attempting to designate a leader for the others to follow. They even considered using fishing line to guide them, then editing it out of the footage, but they didn't have the technology.

"We couldn't ignore a certain sense of exploitation that we ourselves were producing by making this work," Zins-Browne said. "The irony was really stark: We went there to produce an image of freedom, and we were employing kids who were coercing animals to produce an image for two Western artists."

Shaken by the experience, they put the project away for a couple of years, then returned to the footage in 2014 to cut the video "Atlas/Inserts." In the process, ideas for a second chapter began to percolate.

"Atlas Revisited" was created during a residency at EMPAC in January. The artists again hired camels (two American professionals who have appeared in commercials and with the Rockettes in "Radio City Christmas Spectacular"), but this time their approach juxtaposed fantasy with transparency: They used a gigantic green screen and special effects, but also included footage of the creation process, including the production crew at work. Along with video from both Morocco and EMPAC, the piece includes text and live dancing by the two artists.

"The performance presents possibilities, some contradictory and some that may seem fantastical," Zins-Browne said. "It raises several questions that we don't necessarily answer: Why did we go to Morocco? Did we go to Morocco? What does it mean if we went to Morocco?"

Underlying these are more universal questions about art-making, the difference between freedom and images of freedom, and how to speak about politics in a way that's not superficial (particularly relevant in an election year, the artists note).

"There's an idea that politics is always 'over there'— in Egypt, or in Tunisia, or wherever," Pandian said. "The performance is enabling us to say, 'No, it's here, too.' A lot of these themes are alive in America in 2016."

Tresca Weinstein is a frequent contributor to the Times Union.