

REVIEW: Intimate Encounters: dropshift dance, “Rooms” at Colvin House



Image Credit: Berto Martinez

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Colvin House

5940 N Sheridan Rd.

Chicago IL 60660

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By Michelle Kranicke

The historic Colvin House, a 1909 Prairie style house by architect George Maher, was the setting for dropshift dance’s newest evening length production *Rooms*. The piece, “a sensory recapitulation of our past” was the culmination of a two-year process that brought together 3 sections of the work, *DWELL/burrow*, *bloom* and *objects*, that had previously been performed separately.

Upon arrival viewers were given a program and a map of the space. The map of the 3-story residence and legend outlined where live performance would take place and where video installations were playing within the house, and where the audience could find repose and some food and drink if so desired. The dance began on the third floor in a small space resembling a girl's bedroom. Dancer Alexandra Claiborne-Naranjo sat quietly sewing while Andrea Cerniglia came and went arranging and rearranging objects. The quiet concentration and tenderness of the performers as they methodically went about their tasks gave the moment a ritualistic mood—the way one may feel when one runs across things that are from, or resemble, childhood with its cluster of memories smashing and crashing together in nonlinear dreamlike ways. Objects were from various periods: a VHS tape, a scarf, an old framed pencil drawing welcoming a newborn child to their life, a scarf, a lipstick. The quiet calm of the audience was as if, ghost-like, they were observing someone's, or maybe their own, private habits and routines—a rare look into the past—a memory—the performers', their own, everyman's. As the dancers prepared to leave the small space on the third floor they packed up certain of the objects—stuffed animals, small notebooks, their sewing—and moved to the stairwell. There they began pulling large round embroidered and appliqued blankets, beautifully designed and sewn by Collin Bunting, down the railings. Joined by a third dancer, Christina Chammas, the performers stopped on the landing where they began trading movement motifs and performing short dance phrases, tending to the objects they were bringing on their journey and carefully pulling the round blankets down the stairs.



Image Credit: Berto Martinez

Once they had assembled on the main floor the dancers began a long and intricate exercise of wrapping and unwrapping themselves and each other. The movement unfolded slowly forcing the viewer into intense concentration, the kind of focus one has when watching nature—attentive and alive so as not to miss the slightest shift. Individually moving across the space amoeba-like, assembling all together underneath, intertwined, as we are with each other, our various selves and our memories, and emerging from beneath the comfort and safety of their blanket fort only to forego fully leaving their wrap, the dancers maneuvered themselves around the main floor. An unseasonably mild spring evening meant the large windows of the mansion were open creating an, albeit unintended, soundscape that seemed to make the actions of the performers exist apart from actual time and space. An old cassette tape playing a familiar song from the 1960's added to the otherworldly atmosphere. After a long time moving in, and out, and through, the performers physically exited the main space for a short break. Upon return the dance resumed in a more traditional manner with the movers executing clear dance phrases, lifting and partnering one another, and weaving in and out of various patterns and pathways that morphed into duets, solos, and ensemble work. Throughout the concert a live cameraman recorded the dancers and a photographer took photos for the live video feeds throughout the house. The faster movement of the last section proved to be the most challenging for this idea as the camera men were often rushing to capture images and in that effort were occasionally an awkward visual element within the dancing.

In addition to the live performance there were live feed and recorded video installations in unique areas throughout the house. Even though the map the audience received when entering the space outlined where the installations were set up, often these spaces might simply be discovered while exploring the architecture. From the third floor into the basement one might discover one of these secret and captivating videos. Some videos seemed to be of the process, one (as I was informed by collaborating video artist Andrew Henke) was an extreme close-up, highly saturated video of the designs on the blankets and one included an old school carousel slide projector showing tinted or blank slides intermingled with old family images with their bleached and faded colors. Viewers old enough to remember that technology might have been reassured by the familiar click clacking as the projector moved from slide to slide. Often there was no one else exploring these spaces and I was alone watching the videos, itself a satisfying experience as both the isolation and the imagery created a sensation akin to a memory. The drawback to the separation made these installations seem secondary to the live performance.



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I was hoping the dancers, once they had made adequate use of the main floor, would have ventured again into some of the ancillary spaces in the house. It might have helped other viewers discover the smaller rooms with their lovely videos. In general, dance audiences are very well choreographed, and despite mild entreaties, often out of respect, don't venture out of the areas where the performers are dancing. How then to get them to move about? How, when an artist takes the time and energy to activate multiple parts of an architectural space, do they make sure the viewer experiences the full range of a work? As I watched *Rooms* it seemed like the majority of time and energy was spent in only one room. Maybe that was the point. We cannot spend an excessive amount of our present parsing the many details of each moment of a memory, especially as we get older. But sometimes venturing away from a prescribed idea of what an event seems to be elicits an unexpected experience, and one that though far from the action will create the same impression in a different way.

Michelle Kranicke is the founder and director of [Zephyr](#), co-director of [SITE/less](#) performance gallery and the Dance section editor for Bridge.