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# ARTFORUM

## Devotion

By David Velasco, March 2011

It's a bit like Sarah Michelson has taken the carcass of dance and reanimated it via some sort of highly personal transvaluation machine, an apparatus powered not by a storm but by rakish lighting and thunderous music. But this makes the result sound like a monster rather than what it really is: a second chance. After all, what can you really do after the Fall except produce new children and hope that they turn out better than we did?

This, anyway, is one thing I took from the premiere of Michelson's latest piece at the Kitchen in New York. And there were many things to take (how many things she took). I loved how she sat with the audience, reading into a microphone ("Chapter One: Before the dawn on the Earth's ninth day, the crisp green gold of leaves and wood vital and pleasures infinite...") as her dancing "Narrator," Rebecca Warren, walked onstage through the doors to the lobby. I loved sitting in one of the seats lined up in a narrow band along one of the long walls of the Kitchen's black-box theater, the stage "flipped" clockwise so that we faced west instead of (the usual) south. I loved Warren's precise, stoic dancing throughout Michelson's twenty-some-minute reading—her Cunninghamesque ambulations and torqued revolved-triangle poses. I loved Richard Maxwell's poem—that hypnotic, convulsive reworking of Genesis and the birth of Christ—which he gave to Michelson to catalyze the work. I loved the ways that poem intertwined moments from Maxwell's own life with the biblical narrative. "That's how it feels when you freebase; the pleasure is all that matters."

Later, when Jesus stood crucified beneath TM Davy's lavish painting of Michelson and Maxwell as a pietà, and Mary did her stuttered leap around the room, it occurred to me that these literalizations of the

Christian narrative and Michelson's own sacrilegious staging of the Creation and the Passion might overload this calibrated system. When, nearly an hour into the piece, Philip Glass's ebullient Dance IX struck up for a third time, its calculated affect wore thin, and I began to wonder how Michelson gets away with it, and whether she should. (Funny, by the way, to repeat something so "repetitive.") That the music, like some of the costumes, alluded to Twyla Tharp's 1986 ballet *In the Upper Room* ("the piece in which aerobics are made cosmic," Arlene Croce once wrote) was incongruous, and, like all the biblical stuff, out of place at the Kitchen.

But "out of place" is relative and indeed Michelson's forte, and she knows how to mainline the mainstream without getting a hangover. She re-presents these old dances and archetypes and allows them to intersect with real people who embody and exceed and throw themselves at them. The exhilarating way that Eleanor Hulihan sprinted to and from Jim Fletcher during the climax and how (flirtatiously, incautiously) she leapt or fell into his arms again and again is as important, if not more so, as the fact that she was called "Eve" and he "Adam" in the program. And Pete Drungle's relentless score, recalling and fleshing out Glass's soaring *ostinati*, didn't frame the dance so much as embolden it, adding to its drama much like the swinging "chandelier" in the upper-right corner of the stage.

Michelson's dance went everywhere. A single, barely glimpsed leap in the lobby nodded to other dances, other rooms. The audience used the same entrance and exit as the performers. There was no bow, no ritualistic closure. Her world is totalitarian—immersive and exacting—but it doesn't secure its limits, and so we are stuck with it. "The ideas go on forever," Michelson read as Warren danced again at the end of this one-hundred-minute-long yet boundless piece called *Devotion*. I hope they do.