

# THE KITCHEN

VIDEO

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DANCE

PERFORMANCE

FILM

512 West 19th St. (Btwn 10th & 11th Aves) New York, NY 10011

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Wild Child in Transition



Pooh Kaye in *The River Sticks*.

N E W · Y O R K

**NATIVE**

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Pooh Kaye/Eccentric Motions  
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When I first saw Pooh Kaye's work in 1982, the program described her as "a performer, filmmaker, dancemaker, and visual artist who has been active in New York since 1974." Soon thereafter, Kaye's program copy began making the following claim: "Her ongoing interest in non-dance movement, movement derived from individuals rather than from traditional techniques, led her to the formation of Eccentric Motions in 1983." For Kaye's most recent performances at the Kitchen, this latter statement touting "non-dance" movement and minimizing "traditional techniques" was still being offered as background information.

All too frequently, high-handed egocentric notions such as these, with their cavalier disregard of dance's history, reveal an off-putting ignorance posing as some fresh font of knowledge. Few experiences in watching dance are more tiresome than witnessing undisciplined, untrained individuals "reinvent" unexceptional material and call it significant. Usually, such would-be primal and raw dance ventures end up as a mess of puny activities.

In Kaye's instance, however, the results of such risky rhetoric are, for the most part, rewarding. This is due, I suspect, to Kaye's knowledge, conscious or instinctive, of dance traditions, which Kaye apparently brings to bear in the process of creating her works. Kaye seems to work backward from something, rather than forge blissfully ahead out of nothing. Watching Kaye's personal works, rarely do I get a sense of cliché posing as originality.

The five-part program (four dances and an unfinished film) at the Kitchen gave a neat overview of Kaye's work up to the present. In addition to the consistencies it revealed about her vision of dance theater, it also showed a sense of growth and evolution which bring Kaye's present work into what looks like a transitional phase.

*The River Sticks*, a 1983 solo by and for Kaye, was the program's earliest piece. In its way, it was also the most varied work, making use of a fairly elaborate setting (various stick structures and props by Catherine Kernan), and drawing upon Kaye's mimetic and gestural skills as well as her more athletic abilities. In pieces such as this one, Kaye first acquired the "wild child" label that follows her around relentlessly to this day.

Performed in silence (except for the sibilant exhalings Kaye sporadically utters in the process of maneuvering among her sticks, which provide sounds of their own whenever they go clattering to the floor), this solo showcases Kaye in her most untamed, wily mood. Essentially a task-and-prop piece, *River Sticks* is not really a dance work so much as it is a mime piece. Kaye begins by waving, and eventually wagging, a spray of lengthy lathes, painted blue, black, and white. After she has cast down her bunch of wooden strips, Kaye manages to topple every other set of sticks in sight, but she does this with a good deal of surprise, making few of her mishaps the result of immediately predictable actions. Kaye threads through her slatted landscape like an imp through a house of cards. Though the whole structure sits ready to be collapsed, she effects its destruction in teasing stages which make each toppling somehow unexpected. She consistently works to postpone the actual undoing of the various stick structures until the very moment you're feeling amazed that some just-ended maneuver hasn't had any destructive effect. The denouement comes when a series of rusty metal hoops roll out, rather forcefully, from the wings and Kaye slips unceremoniously into a back corner of the stage.

*Ferocious Blows*, a 1986 work for a quartet of dancers (Kaye, Lee Katz, Robin Simmonds, and Felice Wolfzahn) is another work scented with Kaye's untamed mischief. In addition to raw, acrobatic cavorting, *Ferocious Blows* involves more guttural, sibilant utterances and some flickery-fingered hand gestures. There is an overall air of a pajama party, with the women less awkward than Kaye's "river" creature, but still less sophisticated than you'd find at your local sorority slumber gathering. Beyond some occasional over-cute carryings-on Kaye uses to color this scene, the work has a decent share of the choreographer's knowing, non-specific, outlandish movement material. *Ferocious Blows* is accompanied by an appropriately sprawling score by John Kilgore which has the air of a horror-film soundtrack written for Looney Tunes characters.

*Active Graphics #2*, which dates from earlier this year, and *Tangled Graphics*, a premiere, are less concerned with Kaye's self-consciously "wild" persona. Kaye does not appear in either, and both are limited to strict athletic movement (no shushing sound effects and no special hand/finger gestures). Both are costumed in stark black and white (the former by Kaye and Antoine Laval, the latter by Simmonds.)

*Active Graphics* is really a series of stunt moves first executed solo by each of its three-member cast (Katz, Simmonds, and Judy Oberfelder) and eventually in succession and in tandem as the piece plays itself out. Here no one acts self-consciously "wild," although the somewhat gymnastic vocabulary aims to show off the performers' abilities with their arms, which are usually worked as forelegs, rather than as upper-body extensions. These moves take place on specially designed (by Laval) mats, which not only establish a clear and changeable graphic pattern on the floor, but also give helpful padding to the work the dancers do on their knees and heads.

*Tangled Graphics* takes the individualized attention shown in *Active Graphics* and spreads out to create an ensemble work without any dependence on mimetic or small-scale personal gestures. This four-woman romp (with Wolfzahn, Katz, Simmonds, and Chisa Hidaka) has a charming, sourball score by Pat Irwin, who also did the drier score for *Active Graphics*. The dancers are dressed (by Simmonds) in combinations of leotard and tights which have separate knee pads and thickened panels across the back, giving them a kind of floppy dorsal fin leading into a cabbage rosette.

*Tangled Graphics* shows a fairly plain dance structure, more or less exclusively made out of the "non-dance" moves Kaye and her company have evolved from the work up to now. (The choreographic credit for group pieces usually names the dancers involved, as well as Kaye, in the program). While this work is mostly as willfully unpredictable and intriguing as other works in Kaye's kooky canon, it is also less confident. By dwelling pointedly on the semi-formal vocabulary of her Eccentric Motions moves, without any aid from the wild-child mannerisms that formerly filled out the stage picture, Kaye is gamely trying to shape a choreographic work by dwelling on the art's bare essentials. But by so doing, she is asking for further performing rigor and expertise, now that her dancers are deprived of the mimetic tics and personal details that formerly helped fill out their antics.

I can sympathize with Kaye's resistance to a practiced effort so smooth as to deprive her vision of its purposely rough edges, but right now, *Tangled Graphics* has an equally inorganic strain, that of timidity, which results from the dancers' occasional lack of strength to shape their eccentric moves to full scale. Still, this latest work of Kaye's is brave and, in terms of intent at least, as solid and pure an example of her stated purpose as she has yet produced. Probably for fear of losing the raw edginess that dominates her overall aesthetic concerns to a potential easiness of athletic accomplishment, Kaye is proceeding cautiously. But she is indeed proceeding, and has a good chance of maturing from wild child to wild choreographer. ■