

# The Kitchen Center for Video and Music

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Concepts In

## PERFORMANCE



Robert Margolis

Draped fans as rolling hillside

## Live and Non-live; Motion and Stillness

Wendy Perron

clear view (one place at a time)  
Sylvia Whitman  
The Kitchen

The element that transforms visual arts to performing arts is the passage of time. A painting or sculpture remains just that, unless it needs to move or be moved in order to exist. And movement needs time. Some artists have widened their scope by entering the world of performing that time opens up. Objects come alive and live figures become scenery.

Sylvia Whitman is one such artist performer. This weekend she presented a program of eight pieces, most of them brief. Ingenious pairings of live and non-live objects (subjects?) delighted me in about half the pieces. In these cases, the compound imagery created an oddness and an easiness that co-existed. For instance, in a piece which begins with Whitman and a young tree standing side by side, the mechanics of how the tree parallels Whitman's moves is made deliciously clear: when Whitman bends at the hips, Lynne Morrison, who engineers the moves of the tree, bends the tree at a hinge which has been built into its slender

trunk. At every turn (and bend) we are made to notice the proportions of the tree trunk to Whitman's trunk, and of the trunk to the whole. The person takes on tree-like properties and the tree takes on human properties.

This little dance lends itself to analysis, but it also can be looked at more simply, as a lovely duet for a person and a tree who seem quite at ease with each other.

Whitman takes care never to let movement diminish the visual impact of stillness. An example of her impeccable instinct is in the first piece, "Introducing the Andrade family." About twelve dark-haired people of all sizes and ages enter and sit facing us, holding still for a family snapshot. They could be South American, Mediterranean, or even American Indian. Their faces and facial expressions, ranging from contentment to ennui, provide rich visual material for us and for a wheezing Polaroid camera. The family members do not budge; they are defiantly, innocently unaffected by our gaze.

Sometimes the stillness is too expository, too ponderous. Like a grammar school teacher accommodating the slowest learners in the class, Whitman wants to be sure we don't miss anything. This textbook manner dominates "Fans," which seems contrived from start to just before the finish. In this one piece, the attempt to integrate movement (four dancers wearing burgundy jumpsuits) and objects (four big beautiful fans made of folded brown paper) was so unappealing to me that I started thinking I was a purist—or wishing she were.

The interesting way Sylvia Whitman uses rhythm and spatial scale is reminiscent of the theater pieces of her husband, Robert Whitman, who recently had a 1960-1976 retrospective. The rhythm often consists of the following sequence: waiting, a rustle of activity (either violent or neutral), and then a blank silence. The distortions of spatial scale place us in a wonderland of "eat me" experiments. In Sylvia Whitman's "Cigar," four people are needed to crush a huge paper cigar against the wall. And in the last episode of "Fans," four small cardboard horses pop up behind the standing fans, which constitute a rolling hillside for the horses to skim along. The tape of the repetitive Terry Riley music, until now unconnected, suddenly becomes transporting. ●