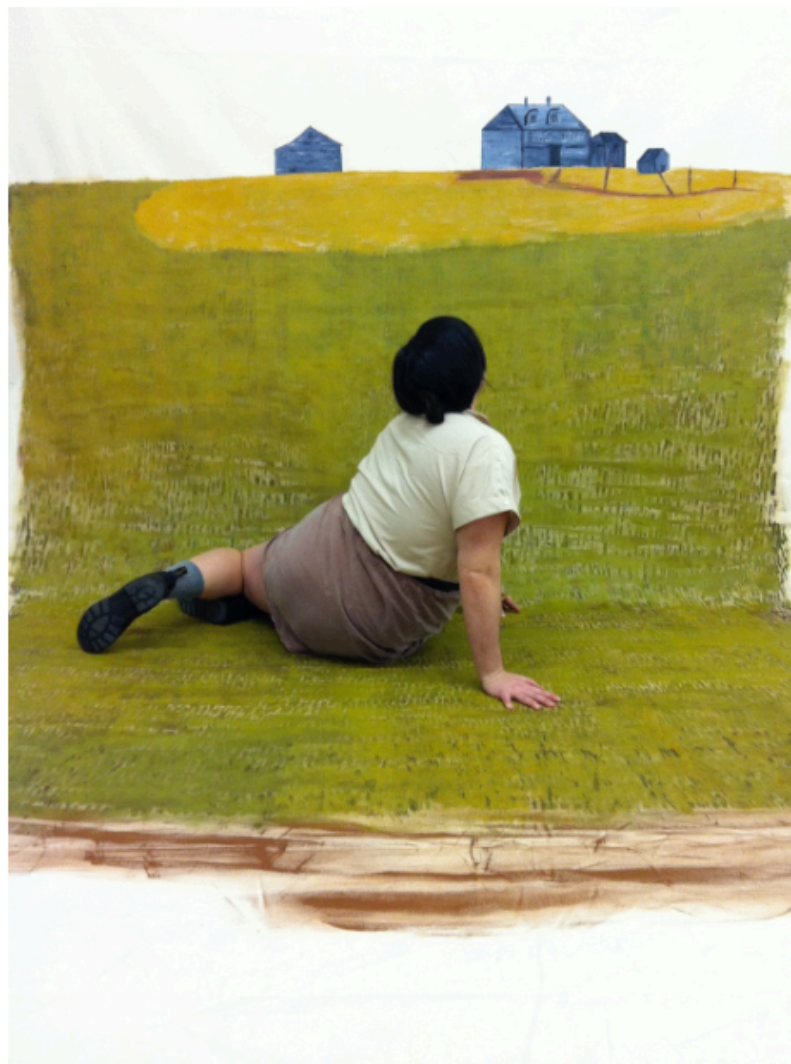


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Jen Rosenblit by Lizzie Feidelson

Choreographer Jen Rosenblit interrogates the curiosity for difference inside a regime of the "natural."



Still by Kate Brandt as part of her video project, *Tried and True*. Jen Rosenblit pictured. Image courtesy of the artist.

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In conversation, Jen Rosenblit is a liberal user of the double negative. “Not that that was not not a dance,” she said to me in passing over coffee on a chilly day in March, while we discussed her upcoming evening-length work, *a Natural dance*, premiering May 29 at The Kitchen.

Something about that circuitous “not, not” reminded me of Rosenblit’s choreography, much of which revolves around the potential of a good pairing. In her previous work, she’s toyed repeatedly with the provocative visual opposition of her own body posed with that of her longtime collaborator, Addys Gonzalez. The cast for *a Natural dance*, on the other hand, is much larger than a duet—it will include performers Justin Cabrillos, Hilary Clark, and Effie Bowen, in addition to Gonzalez—and its premise speaks of more expansive themes. The work is concerned with “ways of structuring bodies as they fall out of relation aesthetically and spiritually while still locating ways of being together.” If *a Natural dance* is anything like Rosenblit’s other pieces, the choreography will reflect her razor-like attention to detail, combined with a marked, cultivated lack of suaveness or sheen. I spoke with Rosenblit about her approach to thwarting her own tendencies, the challenges of ensemble work, and the logic of “the natural.”

Lizzie Feidelson How long have you been working on this piece?

Jen Rosenblit I’ve been working on it for about two years. Early on, it was actually a whole different piece. I had a different cast: Macklin Kowal, Pilar Gallego, Saifan Shmerer, and Kyli Klevin. The process only took five or six months. We performed it once as part of Danspace Project’s Platform “Judson Now,” on an evening titled “Nature and it’s Discontents” curated by Juliette Mapp. It was an early idea, but it was the beginning of interrogating concepts, content, feelings, and spectatorship, as well as the relationships between things—what happens when one thing is confronted with the next.

LF What has the process become?

JR We’re dealing with the question of what is natural, which leads us to things that are unnatural, and spirals us deeper into a further interrogation of not only what things are but why and how they are. If we decide to shift or change one element of something’s nature, what is the labor surrounding our understanding of the very thing we are curious about? I am asking: Instead of coming together, how can bodies fall apart? The nature of crafting work, in a conventional sense, is asking the question, How can we come together and start to make more sense? I’m obviously interested in that because I’m asking the direct opposite question. I feel like the opposite question holds more of my interest right now, in terms of logic. How can things be disparate, and seemingly separate, and still be operating together?

LF Why are you interested in things—entities, bodies—being out of relation? What has led you there?

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JR I think because that's how it is. Most of what is real and tangible in terms of living as a body—having to constantly relate or be isolated from things that we can't relate to—is much more slippery and illegible than we think. Sustaining difference is a hard task. Assimilation is a real thing, and it happens over time. At one point there was a scream in the work. I was working with Addys to set up a space for a high scream sound. I didn't want to work at doing a scream that would be acceptable, or easy to digest, or the right scream, or the crazy moment that convinces everyone that we are willing to go far with our ideas. It stayed in the work for a while as something for us to talk about. It was a problematic moment that helped us think more about what the labor is that we need to be ready for if we are not simply interested in beauty and resolution. What if what I am interested in is highly problematic? How can I choreographically and performatively exist with and navigate that problem without having to sit on either side of it morally? What if I'm not interested in the failure or success paradigm? Really, when it gets down to my politics, I believe in dissonance and difference and separation, in a lot of things slicing next to one another in the same space, sometimes working together and sometimes not, but still operating inside of a logic. Crafting that is difficult.

LF How do you relate "natural" to the idea of walking the edge between being crafted and not-crafted at the same time?

JR I teach classes that deal with improvisation, and a lot of times I feel the conversation that comes up is, "I want to avoid choreographing, I want to just feel this moment as improvisational, because it's where I can be free. It's where I can be more natural." And that kind of thing makes me feel less free, and less natural. Everything is a system of conditions. Freedom is a set of conditions. Imprisonment is a set of conditions. Looking like I'm improvising is based on a set of conditions. Looking like I'm doing choreography is based on another set of conditions. So that's the other thing: we're often talking about the way things look, but I'm also trying to talk about the way things feel. I could choreograph something that looks like we're tapping into difference. Inside of this process, we've definitely generated scores and setups that are like, "You're different because you're over there and you're wearing blue." But then there's also the way things feel. The way things look and the way things feel do need to be in conversation—even if they're not the same.

Just the other day, I was trying to get a performer to get this one little detail—puffing his chest out. I was slipping into this language of, "No, not that. No, not that." I could see I was weighing things down with all the "no's," trying to get to the precise thing that I wanted. I was using "no" to eliminate space or possibility for him. And we just stopped and he said, "There is no place in this work for my natural dancing body." I feel like that's the meat of what we're interested in—the questioning and interrogating of "natural." What is "natural"? I am working alongside my very specific aesthetic nature, conditioning and desire palette, as well as filtering in information that critiques and

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challenges my nature. I am interested in our choices, how we layer and pile them up over time. I'm interested in locating a first thought and spending time with myself until I get to the third thought. I'm interested in that difference and sometimes, in the context of the real world, I feel deemed a bit unnatural in my thinking.

I met with Neil Greenberg the other day. We were talking about natural. And he said, "When I hear 'natural,' I hear God-given." And then we both laughed. "God-given." What is "natural" then? Even if we believe in things, or even if we don't believe in things, we're still conditioned to believe there is a "natural." This is not even the earliest example, but Adam and Eve, for instance. Superficially, there is an order of nature that comes back to men and women. It's opposites, it's completion, it's these two parts equal each other and they complete a picture. What if I'm not trying to talk about completion?

In no way, shape, or form is my work about this, but it's a really simple notion: Eve fucks everything up when she eats the apple. Everything goes out of order when someone promotes difference, or even has curiosity for difference—maybe it's not even the action of her eating the apple, but the desire to. In terms of crafting dance, I am maybe more interested in the curiosity to eat the apple rather than the reproduction of the act of eating the apple. The rebelliousness. It is about that dissonant desire inside of that very small space. There's that one little sliver of curiosity. That's what I'm interested in crafting.

LF In the past, you've spent time working with the duet form. Now you're working primarily with a threesome. I was talking to Justin [Cabrillos] the other day and he said this piece was like multiple solos happening together. That may or may not be a particularly rigorous way of conveying your ideas, but it was his way of referencing his experience within the piece. Are you working with any kinds of specific vocabularies or concepts as a way of assigning identity to this group?

JR I am in general pretty resistant to doing ensemble work like this because of my natural relationship to it: I'm actually obsessed with unison. I'm obsessed with conventional standards of beauty. I'm obsessed with conventional standards of dance, and theatre, and what an audience expects. I'm constantly clashing with how much I tend to want it, and my lack of what I can give to those conventions. If given the opportunity to work with an ensemble—and by that I mean any more than two or three people—I will get really insane and be like, "Let's make a unison piece!" It will turn into cheer camp.

LF You'd be extremely precise and controlling of the group as an organism.

JR Absolutely. Which can work for people, and can be beautiful. Working with people individually—the early research—spoke closer to my duet form. But I'm also trying to generate information that is not just response oriented.

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LF What does that mean?

JR Not just, “You’re tall, and I’m short, so we can do these things.” Or, “If you’re over there sitting, I’m going to be over here standing.” Not just this Adam and Eve, Yin-Yang. Not just the thing that dance does really beautifully: “She’s lifted, therefore he’s lifting her.” But more of an improvisational form and a lens for a multiplicity of things happening.

Wait: the original question was about the potential for these separate solos. I don’t think that’s actually true. I guess there is an element of, “Everyone is doing a solo.” On a really conceptual or abstract level, I think most times people are. We can be doing tendus together, but I don’t know if that necessarily speaks to togetherness. I think that speaks to visual unity. And it speaks—structurally—to sameness.

If you start to work energetically, you start to realize there’s a whole world of information that challenges what is simply being seen. Each performer has a ton of responsibility in the work. Effie Bowen is doing some vocal stuff. I haven’t worked with her as rigorously as others in the studio, but her responsibility for the work she’s doing is just as momentous, and that fact creates an idea of “solo.” It sort of does what a solo does: it puts the spotlight on you and says: “You better do this really good.” It means a lot for the work. That’s why we have soloists, because they are the supposedly the best in the company. They could execute this the best, and they will showcase the best, and they will also move the work forward.

LF Right. Often in modern dance the soloist was the choreographer; the traditional modern dance company was a solo vehicle. So historically, the soloist’s artistry is closely aligned with the essence of the work.

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Justin Cabrillos and Addys Gonzalez pictured left to right. Image courtesy of the artist.

JR Right, and I think I've put that standard on the work. So have the dancers. The reason I'm working with them is because I see they take things very deeply. That's why anyone would work with anyone, right? Justin and Addys have this very rigorous duet inside of the bulk of the work. That's been structurally important. In thinking about interrogation, and the necessary technique or tools needed for this work, these are the people who I felt like would engage with this work in a really responsible way, but also who would potentially disrupt my ideas of what's going on. When Addys said to me, "There's no room for my natural dancing body," I was kind of floored. I was like, "Oh, shit." But at the same time I was really intrigued. Essentially, on some weird, fucked up level, the dance was working, yet I was confronted with the problem of not fostering space for my dear friend's body to feel natural.

LF How does "the natural" relate to what you've articulated in the past about your interest in ideas of rural and urban life?

JR It's really easy to say that my work deals with time passing, but how is time passing? What's the tone of the time? What's the shape of the passing? Urban time frames became a way for me to speak about, "Oh, I'm rushed a little. I'm being rushed." I'm being rushed to understand my rural-ness, and to even claim it as rural-ness. I'm interested in that. That's why I live here. There's a lot of time to daydream in Maine, but there's a really heightened, compressed daydreaming cycle in New York. Like, this condensed idea of: "Daydream right now!" And as someone who makes things, that's a really interesting proposition. What if "natural" is right here? And what if it has only this much

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space? And what if “natural” doesn’t leave room for your body? What labor do you do inside of that? Something about “natural” leaves me feeling like I don’t have any work to do, like I am not integral, and like there is no possibility for change. In class I’m often trying to come up with ways of allowing us to have our first thought and acknowledge it as our first thought. And then have a second thought. And then a third thought. And then I skip ahead and I ask them, “Now go to your thirteenth thought. What does that feel like?” And that’s often very upsetting for people. Or it’s confusing. I mean, it’s confusing for me too.

LF That sounds totally stifling.

JR Which is to me what “nature” is. When I’m improvising with somebody and they start improvising with me in this weight-sharing way that looks like how it did in college when we were studying contact improv, I get stifled. A lot of people do, because it’s reproducing and replicating some original idea that has no bearing on the conditions in the room. It doesn’t speak to my body, your body, this space or time that we’re in, or our references or our present. It doesn’t speak to anything new, or now. It only speaks to a time when we weren’t born yet, or we were too young.

LF That’s an exciting thought. Being present as a way to activate the kind of thinking that allows us to reject the presupposed. Which has wider implications to me, about how to go about daily life, or political life or something—how to allow yourself to recognize that things are inadequate.

JR I think that’s why a lot of people are interested in dance. I think that’s why museums are interested in dance. And not just dance. I think that artists and art-crafting are working in a very improvisational now-ness, with knowledge of its opposite—so not just constantly feeling “now!” and expressing “now!” but working in relationship to what is not now. We know there’s a history and we know there’s codification, and we know it’s working inside of our now. I think that’s the labor of dance. That’s why people meditate; that’s why they believe in God; that’s why they go to the gym.

LF So you have The Kitchen right now. It must be intense to inherit that space, where you’ve seen so much, and seen so many other artists’ choices actualized over the years. Does it lack blankness in some critical way? How have you made your decisions with the space?

JR I have really been resisting my natural desire to comment on or reference what I’ve seen, or ways that I’ve felt in there before, because I really want to stay inside of the logic of this work. But already there’s a Michael Jackson reference because I just died for Neal Medlyn’s *King*. It just reorganized things for me. It made me take a breath and say:

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“There’s no set way.” So there’s that part of the inheritance of the space, that I’ve seen a lot of things. I also haven’t seen a lot of people my age in there, or if not my age, my “emerging artist” bracket. So there’s also a lot of insane pressure that I put on myself. I’m trying to not pay that much attention to it, but I’m actually paying a lot of attention to it. I don’t know if it will work or look good or feel good. But I do know it’s working inside the studio. It feels good, it looks good, it’s challenging. We’re asking a lot of each other. So I hope that that translates into the space because we’re thinking a lot about the space.

LF Can you talk about scenic elements?

JR We’re building a set. It’s essentially a porch space built into the riser seating. It’s just going to look like a platform. We’re using the riser structure. But the energetic and conceptual work we’re putting into it is much more like a porch. The sort of thing that a porch allows you to do—it extends from the house. The audience is seated in the house. It’s comfortable. It’s theirs. The way the world works is kind of like, “Over here, this is you. This is me,”—those sort of boundaries. A lot of times work steps over those boundaries. It asks you to move, or asks you to put on a funny hat, or asks you to participate. And I’m kind of interested in people just sitting. Just sit there. I promise you we’ve crafted something that you can watch.

I also felt like there needed to be metaphorical safety. The porch acts as that extension. That between-space. I don’t know how visible that will be. I mean, it’s not going to have a rocking chair on it. But it’s not just another platform space that the dance can happen on. Nothing particularly special is there as opposed to the rest of the floor. Some things occur on it. It’s close to the audience so it will set up a value system of getting closer to them or farther. But it’s really a metaphorical space that’s, for me, speaking to the conflict of putting my work inside of a room that I haven’t practiced in. And then I’m working with Elliott Jenetopulos so lighting will become a big component in that as well. I love black box theaters. I love their conventional means. I love what they can do. And I’m interested and curious for my tech week to figure out what more it can do that I don’t know, because I’m real interested in conventions.

LF Yeah, black boxes are so, like, quaint. I guess because they represent a sense of possibility that has nothing to do with technology, or with being fancy. They are just rooms painted black! And for that reason they’re supposed to be able to do “anything.”

JR Yeah. Totally, and they’re pretty manageable in size. I really like that as a site for making work. And we’re potentially going to make it a half black, half white box.

LF It’s going to be a long dance, right?

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JR My ideas take time. They don't reveal themselves right away. So it does take time for a concept to move from the headspace into the body, and into the room. I had a clear idea that I would work with an hour or more, because I was going to snatch that luxury of being allowed to have my own show. But it's not two hours long. For sure it's not two hours long. It's probably an hour. But it probably pushes a little bit past that. I think somewhere, sometime, I wrote 120 minutes or something like that. Recently some people have been like, "Oh my God, is your show two hours long?" I think I just wrote that because I'm an asshole. I just wrote that because I was being a jerk and I was like, "It's going to be a long show." I want to take up time!