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Elad Lassry's 'Untitled (Presence)' Debuts At The Kitchen

By Margaret Fuhrer

She looks directly out at us from the wall, not quite smiling. There's a hopefulness to her expression -- maybe naïveté. She is enclosed in a simple rectangular frame, but there's a second frame within that frame, a shape that could be a quotation mark or a speech bubble. She has something to say.

That striking woman is New York City Ballet dancer Megan LeCrone, photographed by artist Elad Lassry for his "Untitled (Presence)," now on display at The Kitchen.

"Untitled" is both an exhibition and a performance. Lassry has filled the space's upstairs gallery with 14 photos, a short film, and two sculptures. On three evenings last week, he also filled its downstairs theater with ten dancers from New York City Ballet and American Ballet Theatre, several of whom were recognizable from the photographs.

That's a lot of pieces to fit together, which I think is part of the point. *Untitled* hinges on our ever-fragmented view of the world, on the fact that we can only absorb so many of the countless snippets of information that pass us by. And artists like Lassry are especially careful about which fragments, which images, they linger on. As the show's press release says, "we necessarily see the world through the pictures made of it."

In "Untitled," those pictures are aggressively framed. Lassry has divided the upstairs gallery into several rooms, with geometric apertures in each wall, so that you can look from one end of the space to the other through a series of portholes. The set for the theater downstairs echoes that idea, with four walls placed (initially, at least) one in front of the other, each painted a bright color, two of them with large cutouts. Upstairs, your viewpoint shifts kaleidoscopically as you walk around the gallery. Downstairs, it's shifted for you as the dancers roll the various set pieces around the stage.

But what are you looking at through all those frames and filters? The gallery and the stage tell stories that feel strangely disconnected. Lassry's wonderful photographs range from soft, painterly portraits, pulled in close around the face, to flatly lit, self-consciously workmanlike studies. All of his subjects are beautifully, evocatively *present*. Seeing some of those faces appear onstage during the performance could have been revelatory. What happens when a photograph literally becomes present?

Instead the short dance hollowed out its dancers. Expressionless, they executed a series of simple choreographic sketches, every gesture structural, linear, planar. There were fragments of iconic George Balanchine works, particularly "The Four Temperaments." But any texturizing syncopation was ironed out.

I don't think Lassry is all that interested in dance. I think he was creating a living sculpture. Perhaps there was a deliberate attempt to mirror the flatness of the photos with a "flat" performance. But why waste 10 world-class dancers on such a task? It felt like a gimmick, a way to get rears in seats. (If that was its aim, it was a successful gimmick, at least.) Artists like Megan LeCrone have things to say onstage, too. I wish Lassry had let them.

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