

Mary Overlie: Enigmatic Witness

By Sally R. Sommer

One hot day last summer, a cluster of people lounged on the street and sidewalk of West Broadway, watching Mary Overlie perform in a display window of Holly Solomon's gallery. She was suspended, waiting in a relaxed arabesque, her arms draped over her head. Then the head slipped out of the encircling arms and tilted slightly, while the arms still cradled the shape of a head no longer there. Highly sensitized, she seemed to be listening for a secret signal we could never hear. Then movement. An explosion of trembling begins in the foot, coursing through the leg and torso, finally flying out of the fingertips of one hand. Our eyes fastened back on Overlie's face: She has remained calmly gazing at—seeming to think about—the foot that initiated this rush of movement.

She has a curious way of splitting concentration, of presenting *herself*, which is utterly compelling. As she dances, she watches what she does, rather like an unruffled, nonjudgmental witness. Actor David Warrilaw, of Mabou Mines, has compared this watchfulness to "Grotowski's idea of the 'silent partner,' or witnessing in the Buddhist sense, or the artist's eye—movement filtered through consciousness."

Overlie—who is presenting a new work, *Painters Dream*, at the Kitchen June 8 to 10—describes the process as holding a personal score of images in her mind, sometimes emotional, sometimes spatial, and these mental pictures cause the movement to bubble up. Watching her dance, I feel a double and equal involvement. The images imbue the movement with emotion that remains completely enigmatic. But its intensity is tempered because it rebounds against her own quiet observation. I do not know what those images are, nor is it important, nor do I suspect they remain the same for each performance of a dance. David Warrilaw performed that same summer day in her piece. He stood alone in a window smoking, chatting, blowing his nose, his dance an accumulation of gestures both funny and forlorn. Framed and behind glass, we could hear nothing of what he said, the emotional overlay intense and disturbing because it was grounded in what was for us a silent text. In order to fuse what was seen with what was felt, the mind tended to create its own scenario, to conjure up its own private score of associations, the more powerful because they were so personal. Overlie puts her dances together in such a way that the audience is seduced into participation, entering the landscapes of our own minds, and two sets of private images mesh in public performance.

She has choreographed dances for odd spaces. Holly Solomon's windows provided a stage eight feet high, two feet deep, and five

feet wide. At another performance, five dancers were compressed in one window, dressed in muted green, the slight imperfections and quivering of the glass lending the dance an eerie underwater quality, movement rippling through the group like currents. The year before she made a dance on an indoor football field for Lee Breuer's (Mabou Mines) *The Saint and the Football Player*. Thirty dancers wheeled about in huge patterns, then slowly fell onto a mound of crumpled bodies, which were scooped up in the jaws of five fork lifts. The bodies draped and fell from the raising prongs, and as the machines moved forward, they left a path littered with human debris.

JoAnne Akalaitis's *Dressed Like an Egg* had a dance by Overlie, placed on a Mylar runner stretched across the width of the stage. A half-curtain at the performers' off above the knees, so all focus centered on the feet. The women wore clear plastic shoes, the hollow high heels glimmering with tiny lights. This dance was a gentle, witty seduction of light taps, pattering out a Morse Code of love. Gradually, the women's feet were joined by men's feet in dapper shoes. A duet, a brief engagement. Then four pairs of shoes began a waltzing flirtation, the women's shoes attached to the arms of the men.

David Warrilaw has described Overlie's work with actors as being tremendously compassionate. She doesn't impose her dance on them but elicits a style of movement that is their own, weaving it into the pattern of the dance. When she teaches she does the same thing, and it reminds me of a statement that an early modern dancer, Loie Fuller, made in 1909. She said that she did not teach her "children," that they were not learning, but *attaining*.

Overlie is investigating performance presence in her work, that elusive quality everyone instantly recognizes and no one defines well. Because she does not use narrative or character or tasks—nor is she interested in personality—what remains is the investigation of self through a distillation of personal images expressed in movement. It is revealing and baffling. Presence cannot be called up without something else going on, a deeply involved concentration concurrent with activity.

Although she is clear and direct in conversation, when discussing her work she evokes the same paradox of calm simplicity and intense inner complexity so characteristic of her dancing. I find myself reverting to my own associations, or reaching for someone else's impressions (such as Warrilaw's) in an attempt to explain the power of her presence as person and performer. ■