

MEDIUM COOL

Amy Sillman on Alex Katz



Paul Taylor, *Scudorama*, 1963. Performance view, David H. Koch Theater, New York, November 1, 2022. Center: Maria Ambrose. Photo: Whitney Browne.

The curtain rose quickly to reveal a quiet stage dominated by a huge rectangular backdrop painted by Alex Katz with puffy clouds arrayed in pink-violet tones, though it was hard to say which colors were painted and which were conjured by Jennifer Tipton's perfect lighting. On the bare stage were eight clumps: the dancers lying motionless, two of them covered by cheerfully patterned beach blankets. Everything in this dance—Paul Taylor's *Scudorama*, 1963, staged this past November at New York's Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts in an all-Katz evening of Taylor dances—already seemed funny but odd, precise but unnameable: exactly the circumstances of so many paintings by Katz.

The action commenced: The dancers began to emerge from their towels, to creep, drag, and pull themselves up and across the floor. Against this machinery of motion was a man in a plaid jacket and tie, just like a Katz cutout, picking his way through the dancers and moving them around as though they were objects. Then a trio of ladies moved through in black leotards with starchy white collars, doing a silly kind of prancing tiptoe dance. The other dancers began arranging and rearranging themselves into various groupings, walking on- and offstage, coming out to whip their beach towels on the floor, or to perform other movements both athletic and awkward, to increasingly urgent percussive music. You started to feel like you were watching a TV show gone mad, somewhere between Stravinsky and *The Twilight Zone*. There was trouble happening,

and a lot of absurdity. A big dancer in a grape-colored leotard performed a demanding duet with his female partner, winding and unwinding her limp body around his neck, shoulders, and hips. The whole company returned with sinuous motion and athletic hurling, flailing, falling, and heaping up in rows and clusters, carrying one another around like zombified statues. Everything started to become animal, more creaturely than human; indeed, later I read that the dance partly came from Paul Taylor watching a dog in distress on the highway, “rearing, spinning and pawing the air.” I really started to wonder why no one had ever told me to see this dance. I’ve been schlepped to so many experimental dances by so many dance friends, at stages from Judson Memorial Church to Lincoln Center to everywhere in between, but this dance was the craziest, weirdest dance of them all, more radical than others in its strange hybridity of televisual pop abstraction. It reminded me of first seeing Michael Clark dances in the 1980s, but mostly it made me think of painting and about how so many paintings that I love, including Katz’s, defy simple categories like “abstract” or “figurative” and defy the category of “avant-garde” too. You couldn’t call this dance avant-garde or *not* avant-garde, just an entirely strange experience: direct, legible, at times playful, even cheesy, at times brutal and emotional. It made me think of the protagonists of a 2021 Nicole Eisenman painting, *Tail End*, harried characters who creep, smoke, and lounge their way across a desert, each doing their own thing near a bleak tree against a toxic yellow sunset. Likewise, Taylor had said to a *New York Times* reporter in 2009 about *Scudorama*, “I wanted to do something ugly.” This was that, but it was a cheerful ugliness, a mutt ugliness, where an agonistic tumult of modern dance was set against the elegant clarity of Katz’s distinct colors and readable shapes.

Over its nearly half-hour span, the choreography moved from sweetly antic to hysterical to doomy, the score moved from bells to police whistles, the mood shifted many times from innocence to monstrosity and back again. By the end, as the creatures crept back together to form a tight circular huddle under Katz’s beach towels, it seemed like the best dance I’d ever seen. When the curtain went down, my companion (also a veteran dancegoer) and I just looked at each other, gobsmacked by the fact that no one had ever told us to go see this off-the-charts artwork. We were just like: *Wow. What was that?*

Amy Sillman is a New York-based artist.

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