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CRITIC'S PICK

Review:

He Needs Your Help. And She's Trapped Under a Mound.

In Dean Moss's "Your marks and surface," at Danspace, images of softness and struggle coexist.



Dean Moss in his "Your marks and surface" at Danspace Project. Photo Credit...Ian Douglas

By Siobhan Burke

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So many potent images linger in the aftermath of Dean Moss's "Your marks and surface," a spare yet dense and delicately layered work that had its premiere at Danspace Project on Thursday. One moment that keeps replaying in my mind: the choreographer asking for assistance.

"I need help. Can you help me?" Moss says about 40 minutes into the hourlong piece, standing alone in the St. Mark's Church sanctuary and scanning the audience. It's a plain and uninflected request. He begins to point at individuals. "Can you help me?"

We had been prepared, in some preshow remarks, for "optional audience participation," a prospect that usually arouses anxiety. Yet here that discomfort was further complicated

by another presence onstage: an obscured body, buried — trapped? — beneath a sculptural mound of what appeared to be foil, rubber and carpet. This is the dancer Sawami Fukuoka, who, until the work's final moments, makes herself known only through intermittent utterances of "ow," barely perceptible squirming and a single foot that peeks out from the mass of materials atop her. We never see her face. She doesn't ask for help, but her persistent expressions of pain suggest she needs it. That Moss can at least articulate the question constitutes a difference between them.

A veteran downtown choreographer known for his deft involvement of the audience — the playwright Young Jean Lee once called him "the expert in that field" — Moss builds slowly to the charged interaction of recruiting help, which he got on Thursday night from a very game spectator, who amicably agreed to be wrapped in canvas, dragged around the room and left in the dark. (This ends up looking considerably more comfortable than it sounds.)

Up until that point, Moss has been performing a series of solo tasks. In one of the first, he removes the outer layer of the mysterious mound — the vast canvas in which he later enfolds the audience member — to reveal that there is, in fact, a person underneath.

This canvas expanse, with frayed rope along its edges, becomes a visual and conceptual centerpiece, continuously reconfigured. Spread out on the wooden floor, it's a surface on which Moss arranges his body, in relaxed and vulnerable postures. Gathered up and bound, it becomes a weight that he balances on his back as he repeatedly circles the room. With his torso curled around it on the ground, it transforms from burden to comfort. At times he goes to great lengths to manipulate the fabric, only to quickly unravel it and shape it into something new.

Early in the work, Moss also unveils a painting, perched on the church's altar, by the artist Angela Dufresne. Titled "Dean Moss," it's a portrait of him, in the same denim pants and shirt he wears onstage, seated with legs outstretched, amid the draping folds of a canvas that also resembles the one in front of us. The painting's prominent position, overlooking the proceedings, creates the effect of the artist both observing himself and watching us watch. Fashioning another kind of reflection or deflection, he discards a mirrored board on the ground, which, in tandem with Carol Mullins's sensitive lighting, sets patches of the ceiling gently aglow.

That softness — also emanating from Stephen Vitiello's luminescent score — seems to exist in a plane parallel to the sounds and images of entrapment and struggle that pervade the work, just one of many tensions and contradictions that make "Your marks and surface" both unsettling and intensely engaging.

One of Moss's previous collaborations with Fukuoka, a 2021 short film titled "demand me for the reckoning," dealt more explicitly with race: his identity as a Black man and hers as an Asian woman. In veiling her body throughout "Your marks and surface," he also veils aspects of their difference, yet the question remains: What does it mean to make her invisible and nearly immobile, largely unacknowledged until he embraces her and carries her away? With her emergence at the end, in a freer but still concealed form, the questions only multiply.