

KATE WERBLE GALLERY

83 VANDAM STREET NEW YORK, NY 10013

artcritical

the online magazine of art and ideas

BEAUTIFUL YOUNG MEN DANCING TO MUSIC: BRENNAN GERARD, RYAN KELLY

BY PATRICIA MILDER

AUGUST 14, 2010

Brennan Gerard and Ryan Kelly, *Ideological Formation* at Mount Tremper Arts in the Catskill Mountains, New York, August 14th, 2010

Back in March, after repeated visits to the Guggenheim to secretly record an audio score for Tino Seghal's "The Kiss" (2002), Brennan Gerard and Ryan Kelly directed two male performers at the Volta Art Fair in a disruptive "corrective" of Seghal's original work. Performance critic Claudia LaRocco suggested they post the video documentation of this and a subsequent performance on her now-defunct blog on WNYC's website, which resulted in the creation of their video work, "You Call This Progress?" The video itself, a political performance document with overlaid text, is limited as an aesthetic product. However, over the last five months, Gerard and Kelly have developed the video's content into a more mature, layered, if at times intellectually overwrought (even amid Lady Gaga references) performance for three dancers. "Ideological Formation," shown August 14th at Mount Tremper Arts, is a mash-up of high and lowbrow references that, even as they are decontextualized and collaged together, stay concretely based in militaristic and sexual representations of the male body.

Like Seghal, Kelly (a former New York City Ballet dancer) and Gerard have earned crossover art world appeal because of the critical foundations of their choreography. They just completed the theory-heavy Whitney Independent Study studio program and tend to focus on contemporary ideas about the commodification of the body (hello, Marina and Tino) and the fetishistic elitism of live art. But this particular piece is grounded in seductive, historically and pop-culturally aware danced movement, which at times feels like a guilty pleasure. Perhaps that's because in it, three beautiful young men are actually dancing to music—a rarity in contemporary interdisciplinary dance works, though the tides may be changing—and that music happens to be "Material Girl" and "Alejandro."

Kelly performs with Jose Tena, a lanky 15-year-old who attends high school at LaGuardia, and the exquisitely present Ben Asrial. As a trio, "Ideological Formation" recalls, abstractly, Brown's choreography, and explicitly, a petition for human relationships moving beyond the conformity of the couple. Tena and Asrial—both deeply vulnerable performers—are used in sexually or emotionally suggestive formations that challenge the assumed neutrality of Seghal's male-female couple. The work claims a broad heritage by inhabiting other artists' movements, something Seghal has famously, and revolutionarily as far as the economics of performance go, sought to make impossible.

They also trace a lineage from Martha Graham through Madonna, who was once her student, to Gaga. By recreating these women's choreography directly, gay culture is, in a sense, stolen back or re-appropriated. (Madonna and Gaga are commonly critiqued for poaching and repackaging a queer aesthetic.) Young Tena performs Graham's iconic contractions, which she designed with a sexually mature woman's body in mind, and even speaks her words: "I am a dancer. I believe that we learn from practice..." More formally, the piece uses the minimalist aesthetic of Trisha Brown's early work as well as certain of Robert Morris's dances, referencing his use of performers hidden under and then interacting with white cardboard boxes. These Morris references, like every aesthetic choice, are also loaded with questions about gender representation and intellectual property in danced movement; he's rumored to have stolen much of his choreography from Simon Forti when they were married.

TEL 212-352-9700 FAX 212-352-9704

www.katewerblegallery.com EMAIL info@katewerblegallery.com

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Video and installation artist Chelsea Tonelli Knight collaborated with Kelly and Gerard on a video, which was screened halfway through the performance. It featured the same dancers and choreography, only the performers stood waist high in the Esopus River, which is just a short walk from the performance venue at Mount Tremper Arts. Again, Brown's formal challenges to theatrical conventions during her heyday in the late 60s and 70s get a nod. But beyond that, the video succeeds because it is used simply as another medium through which to present these male bodies in motion as both formal aesthetic instruments and as human beings with thoughts, lovers, and a shared representational history.

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