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REVIEW

Peggy Baker's Gallery: Considering land | body | breath at the Art Gallery of Ontario

Peggy Baker Dance Projects

By [Ben Portis \(/contributor/ben-portis\)](/contributor/ben-portis)

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Kate Holden in land | body | breath by Peggy Baker / Photo by Makoto Hirata

Peggy Baker Dance Projects

[Toronto \(/city/toronto\)](/city/toronto) May 6-7, 10-11 and 13 -14, 2014

An arena that has bridged Peggy Baker's recent shift in choreographic focus from solo dance to her company is the non-theatrical setting of the Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto, various spaces within for which she has adapted or conceived new works four times since 2005. Her most recent incursion into the AGO was in May, when she mounted an original, sixty-minute, site-specific work – *land | body | breath* – inspired by the Thomson Collection of Canadian Art, utilizing the Frank Gehry-designed galleries that house it.



Baker arrived from Edmonton in 1971 at age nineteen to study at The School of Toronto Dance Theatre: “[Here] it was my first time in a city with a broad spectrum of the arts. I soon became a frequent visitor to the AGO and by now have been a long-time member. Something I always notice is the attitude that people assume when visiting a gallery. They’re making choices as to where and how to spend time. They become aware of contexts, from when and where the paintings come historically and gather in one place. That is a special, appealing atmosphere.”

Baker also has held a long-standing commitment to reaching new audiences. She aims to dispel inhibitions posed by initiation or culture, the associated manners of the performing arts, its prohibitive costs and, foremost, the separateness of a theatrical stage, with its inherent traditions and conventions, from the rest of life. Once every year, Baker assumes a project that does not generate revenue and will be met by varied publics, some of whom intently seek out the event, some of whom find themselves at the place and moment of the performance by chance. Each of her works at the AGO happened as a result of Baker advancing a proposal to the gallery, not by invitation. The considerable costs of production fall predominantly upon her company.

Baker's first performance at the AGO was in September 2005. The one-night event comprised three solo dances in the Henry Moore Sculpture Centre, one of the world's great museum set pieces, a comprehensive collection of original monumental plasters, personally bestowed and overseen by the artist. The centre opened in 1974, coinciding with the outset of Baker's professional career. Accompanied by improvised percussion by Debashis Sinha and vocals by Ahmed Hassan, her late partner, in his final public performance, Baker channelled an emotionally charged atmosphere, accentuated by a night storm pelting the skylights, in which she related her relatively diminutive, vulnerable live body to the massive presence of Moore's art, significantly figurative, abstract and female.

In February 2009, soon after the AGO reopened to the public after its last major redesign, in the axially re-centred Walker Court, Baker performed *The Disappearance of Right and Left*, an autobiographical solo work from 2004 co-created with choreographer Sarah Chase. Her return to the Art Gallery of Ontario presented a diametrically more candid, personal aspect of Baker's art. The AGO was but one stop on a city-wide winter tour of the work, each performance mounted in a different civic venue,

such as the Toronto Reference Library. However, the AGO performance added distinctive locality as Baker was flanked by amateur figure artists who sketched her movement gestures over the course of the dance.

In May 2011, Baker adapted four repertory works for the AGO, simultaneously performed as *interior with moving figures*, a dispersed event in which the option to take a tour of the work was presented to the audience rather than the company. In addition to the central large-scale work, *move* (2009), performed by sixteen dancers in Walker Court, the event included three chamber works, solos or duet, performed in distant galleries, sensitively matched to the prevalent themes and moods of the art on exhibit. (Walker Court does not customarily display art; its signature feature is the massive, cantilevered, Gehry-designed, wood-panelled staircase that spirals and floats above.) In an intimate, historic gallery Jessica Runge performed *Strand* (1997) within the limited perimeter of a small Persian rug, backed by a wall hung salon-style with nineteenth-century portrait and floral paintings. *three story house* (2009) was performed by Jacqueline Ethier in a soaring new contemporary-art gallery installed with stark, stern Minimal art from the 1960s. And Baker returned to the monoliths of the Henry Moore Sculpture Centre, performing Doug Varone's *armour* (2007/2010) with Larry Hahn. *move* itself had a markedly different treatment to that of *The Disappearance of Right and Left* two years earlier, which saw Walker Court bisected with the seated audience in one rectangle facing the performer in her rectangle. Now the square, marble floor of the court was a recessed arena stage that could be approached, viewed and departed from in any direction.

This recap sets up *land | body | breath* (2014), a complex new company work that expresses a collective yet personal experience of Canadian art at the AGO. However, it was not simply an elegy to visual senses. A choreographer who has maintained deep creative partnerships with musicians and composers, Baker brought Fides Krucker in from her habitual domain of vanguard opera, as her primary (and a first-time) collaborator. Together they devised sonic, acoustic, spatial dimensions that essentially held together a work that, during its first sections, was so dispersed across the interior architecture that it could not be fully appreciated by sight alone. *land | body | breath* begins with two symmetrical processions, each led by one of the vocalists, Krucker and Ciara Adams, behind whom the eight dancers divide, trail and are gradually deposited in various rooms of the Thomson Collection. Krucker and Adams assume positions at either end of a wide central gallery devoted to the paintings of Lawren Harris, in which they are joined by two of the dancers, Kate Holden and Sean Ling. The others each take solo occupancy of a thematic gallery along the route: Jessica Runge in a room hung with Paul Kane, Sarah Fregeau with Cornelius Krieghoff, Benjamin Kamino with James Wilson Morrice, Ric Brown with William Kurelek, Andrea Nann with Tom Thomson, Sahara Morimoto in a Canadian overview. Meanwhile the audience and gallery visitors freely roam the spaces too. Baker does not dance and discreetly mills amongst the crowd, looking in on the various compartments of her work. She chose spaces and works for each individual according to the sensibility of their performing style. Each dancer she considers to be a contemporary artist in his or her own right. They are corporeal counterparts for the long-vanished painters. "The art has such presence. It is easy to forget that a flesh-and-blood person was their creator," she reflects.

As choreographer, Baker vicariously assumes a role of collector and curator. Sensitively, she locked into the underlying layout of the galleries. The Thomson Collection is installed from east to west, historically and geographically, corresponding to the actual settlement and spread of European painting in Canada and its evolution into something distinctly Canadian. Her dance distills an epic story and the depiction of growth of a nation. The paintings almost all portray the land, often chilly and

forbidding, sometimes apparently totally barren except that we know that an artist was once there. The dancers perform choreographic cycles, the same from room to room, except that each has such personality, distinctive physique and movement, that it feels different on each encounter. These modalities of creation allow for multitudes of experience. As they move, the dancers utter bird calls that pierce and traverse the acoustic expanse of the collective galleries. The calls seem forlornly speciated and territorial, distantly audible from one end of the performance to another, yet they poignantly emerge from human throats. As finely tuned as are the dancers' bodies, this is an entirely new physical demand, for which they have been coached by Krucker. The bird cries give way to verbal utterances, remarking on the imagery that surrounds each dancer, disparate words and phrases such as "rosy cheeks," "northern light," "clear blue sky," "ice floes," "or "skates," finally converging on the unified refrain, "snow – snow – snow – snow ...". Meanwhile, Adams and Krucker have been building a foundational sound, wordless and airy, building the crescendo from breath to wind.

The pitched gestures and chants subside and the six far-flung dancers – Brown, Fregeau, Kamino, Morimoto, Nann and Runge—slowly assemble in the Lawren Harris gallery, joining Holden, Ling, Adams and Krucker. In addition to the canvases on the perimeter walls, the gallery also exhibits three antique First Nations works, including the powerfully lifelike countenance of a Tsimshian face mask, each in its own display case. The company form into natural pairs around the quarters demarcated by the four cases. As the dancers gather in the gallery, so do the roving visitors. There is no delineation between performers and the audience, who can only back away so far without encroaching on the paintings. Nervousness is evident in the dancers' eyes; they are unaccustomed to being seen so closely and to the possibility of an ambient, unpredictable visitor crossing into their sphere of movement. They have had limited opportunities to rehearse, restricted both by tight budget and scheduling. The first performance of *land | body | breath* comes exactly and only one month after the close of the company's two-week run of *he:she* at the Betty Oliphant Theatre. Baker notes that at the first public performance at the AGO, "the dancers did not fully know [the work] ... hence its delicate, tenuous, urgent tone. [It does not constitute an] idealization of the dancers." In this setting, there is a heightened sense of fragility and vulnerability over which they will eventually gain confidence, but never entirely relinquish. At such close proximity, their huffing efforts are plainly audible. The performance pushes against the audience, which swells toward the art. The gallery's security personnel demonstrate an attuned, sensitive level of restraint and support, in allowing all the unusual and simultaneous conditions of the event to coexist with minimal interference.

The performers, uniformed in prosaic, basic black, are nonetheless clearly distinguished from the public. The show has only the inherent lighting effects of the art museum, spotlights toward the walls and floodlights gently washing the customary traffic lanes. The dancers appear all the more sculptural in this setting.

Over the first thirty minutes, the vocals very subtly have increased from "sh-h-h" to "hm-m-m" to "woo-o" to an exaggerated huffing of their own. Folk songs are canted, one in French by Adams to the east, one from the British Isles by Krucker to the west. An especially attenuated rendition of Gordon Lightfoot's *Canadian Railroad Trilogy* proceeds so slowly that elongated notes and lyric syllables render it almost unrecognizable. The dancers unify the choreographic cycle into formation, which, after a while, intentionally shifts out of synchronization, phasing and breaking occasionally into quick kneels and crouches. From initial separation, contacts are ventured, a hand clasps or rests on the shoulder of another, fingertips touch; a hand clasping the nape of one's own neck indicates that the essential circuits are internal as well as communal.

At forty-five minutes, Adams' and Krucker's voices escalate into a whining, grinding buzz, mosquito- or gear-like, ambiguously calling to mind muskeg and forest, decay, regeneration and harvest. The dancers appear more rooted to the floor, swaying on their muscular feet. An occasional singular fall is as if a tree being felled. Within a couple of minutes, the singers transform the sound again into a percolating lilt. At fifty-five minutes, the dancers' voices resume, rounds of bird cries, laughter and silences that, this far along, can only be heavy, exertive breathing. The gestures of exertion emerge as well, the self-aware resting of hands on knees and thighs, calling to mind how deliberate their hand gestures have been throughout the work, an aspect to which Baker has consistently paid attention in her choreography for self and others. The dancers begin to fall into a concluding, linear file. The singers chant an earthy "hu-hu-hay-a" refrain, then plaintively incant the opening verse of Neil Young's *Helpless*: "There is a town in North Ontario ..." suggesting how personal, even private, this trip has been for Baker, channelled through the company and available to the gallery visitors, who will draw this encounter into their own relationships with the art and the land that it depicts.

Posted July 9, 2014

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