

Decoded threads:

BY HAILEY MURPHY

On October 4th, the Western Gallery filled to the brim with an audience, who squeezed in between art pieces from the exhibit Coded Threads: Textiles and Technology. They were gathered to watch a performance by the dance department called Decoded Threads. The performance accompanied the exhibit as a response in movement.

Pam Kuntz, a faculty member of the dance department and the artistic director of Kuntz and Company, created the performance. She was asked to make the movement response last spring by art department faculty Seiko Purdue. Kuntz met with Purdue, read about the exhibit, and viewed photographs of the pieces. She was never able to see the gallery in person until after she choreographed Decoded Threads.

However, this didn't stop Kuntz from creating two stunning dance performances. The first of the performances was initially inspired by the idea of, what



comes to mind when we think of textiles? Kuntz thought of clothing, which in turn made her think about pieces of clothing that are particularly important to her. She cited her grandmother's apron, her mother's wedding dress, and her grandfather's belt. If her house was burning down, Kuntz said, she would go back inside and get that apron.

It had never dawned on Kuntz what power clothing could hold. "It's their clothing that's their person," she said, addressing the crowd at the Western gallery. "It's so close to their breath, and their sweat, and their work."

With this idea in mind, she contacted eight students from the dance department; Naquoia Bautista, Cara Congelli, Ellie Evans, Valerie Goliff, Cindy

Johnson, Derek Loerzel, Alli Reissman, Cathleen VanBuren, and alum Makena Johansen. She asked each dancer to choose a piece of clothing belonging to a close family member or friend. Then, months later, the dancers came and sat in an interview with Kuntz. They were asked to describe the clothing, as well as discuss the person it belongs to.

These interviews would eventually become the soundtrack to the piece. Their voices, overlapping and echoing off the gallery walls, opened the dance. The performers began moving one by one. Articles of clothing lay scattered on the floor; a green flannel, a sequined hat, an old school rain jacket, a few shirts. Each dancer had their own solo moment, using the article as a prop. The music would start as the dancer's voice, telling the story of their loved one. Then it would blend into composed music in a variety of genres, from Bach to ABBA to the classic Madagascar anthem, I Like to Move It. The piece flawlessly blended relationship dynamics and real-life tragedy with moments of comedy, such as when the cast broke out into Breathe by Anna Nalick or when they all had a lightsaber battle.

"I think one of the more beautiful things about this piece is that Pam chose very well the moments that she wanted to be happy and the moments that she wanted to be emotional and the moments that she wanted to let whatever feeling the dancer had in the interview come through. I think that really added to the piece itself," said Cindy Johnson, one of the performers in the piece.

This piece was particularly special to these dancers. Not only were they able to tell stories of their loved ones, but they were also able to collaborate with Pam Kuntz on choreography. Each dancer separately created their solo with their article of clothing, and then the group came together as a whole to fill in gaps and create a cohesive piece.

Naquoia Bautista was one of the dancers involved in the piece. Her item of choice was a pinwheel hat that

Western gallery in motion

belongs to her 7-year-old brother. She initially wanted to use a fedora as the item, as her brother is a dapper dresser, but she couldn't take any of his fedoras away from him that long. So she chose the pinwheel hat to represent his more childlike side, which Kuntz helped her translate into movement.

"Taking that into account - the prim side, and the boyish child side - she



said, "I want the first part to be light and airy and represent his gentlemanly self. Then she brought out the hat... I think it summed him up really well," Naquoia said.

The second performance of the night was less a piece of choreography and more of a moving art piece. It featured two dancers, Western alum Cecelia Hanford and Nolan Hoppe-Leonard. Cecelia Hanford wore a red and yellow dress crocheted by Seiko Purdue, while Nolan Hoppe-Leonard wore a blue pair of shorts knitted by Stephanie Mason, an instructor from Western's extended education program. However, by the end of the night, both dancers wore absolutely nothing. Piece by piece, the threads of their costumes were unraveled to reveal their skin beneath.

"The other thing I thought of when I was thinking of textiles was... The devastation of having to unravel something when it's gone wrong," Kuntz said. "And I was thinking about what we cover with our clothing, and how different people decide to cover more or less. So those ideas of knitting and covering or uncovering merged for the second piece."

The dance had never been rehearsed; as the piece involved slowly destroying their costume, they were only able to execute it the night of the performance.

Fellow dancers and audience members pulled on the string to unravel the costumes. The dancers interacted with the threads by stepping over them, wrapping them around their limbs, and crossing them with one another. In the background, there were a medley of voices, mixed together with music from community member Richard Scholtz. The voices discussed fashion choices, body types, tattoos, and body parts themselves. One would often hear the voice of a young child saying "toes" or "boogers."

The art of knitting was never forgotten through the piece. The dancers were surrounded by a semi-circle of knitters, busy at work as the piece literally unfolded in front of them. Photographs of yarn and knitting needles taken by Helen Scholtz were projected onto the background. Then, as the piece concluded, the knitters left the stage, balls of yarn still in hand.

Pam Kuntz and Western students created a truly immersive experience that night. Surrounded by the pieces of Coded Threads, the audience was left with



a new appreciation for the roles that textiles play in our life, and the simple importance behind a piece of clothing. While Decoded Threads was a one-time experience, the rest of the exhibit will remain open for viewing through December 8th.

LEFT: Photo by
Jaden Moon //
AS Review

BOTH RIGHT: Photos by
Hailey Hoffman // AS
Review