

# TWO COATS OF PAINT

Award-winning NYC blogazine, primarily about painting



UNCATEGORIZED

## Rachel Beach and Julia Gleich: Strength and precarious balance

April 20, 2016 12:55 pm



Pairing artists with choreographers often produces transcendent results, and it has a venerable tradition—Robert Rauschenberg and Merce Cunningham, for instance. Earlier this month, I was fortunate to get tickets to see **Counterpointe**, a collaborative series developed by **Norte Maar** that joined seven female artists with seven female

choreographers. Fusing the art community and the dance community not only triggered new ideas—it also expanded their audiences, and all three performances at Brooklyn’s **Actors Fund Arts Center** were sold out. Curious about the collaborative process, I asked one pair of participants, choreographer **Julia Gleich** and artist **Rachel Beach**, to tell me how their fluid and witty dance “Immovable” was composed.

[Image at top: Julia Gleich and Rachel Beach in Beach’s Greenpoint studio.]



Dancers with projected images of stone lifters.

**Two Coats of Paint: Have either of you done this type of collaboration before?**

**Julia Gleich:** My identity as a choreographer is linked inseparably with my role as a collaborator. I invite other artists to share their own vision which deepens and challenges my own creativity. My artistic fantasy is to follow in the tradition of **Diaghilev’s Ballets Russe**, where artists like Erik Satie, Jean Cocteau, Picasso and Bakst, Bronislava Nijinska and George Balanchine, created ballets together, ultimately expanding our view of what ballet can look like. One of my most memorable collaborations was **The Brodmann Areas** (2012) involving visual artists, poets, composers and a scientist. This new ballet with Rachel Beach was one of the most rewarding works I have made. Rachel understood the idea of tradition that is inherent in the pointe shoe. She and I both in our respective forms, were able to further abstract narratives that toy with the idea of ‘instability’, weight, and hardcore physical movement in relationship to the tradition of ballet.

**Rachel Beach:** I have never collaborated on any art project before, although working with a curator or gallerist often has a strong collaborative element. I’ve recently been thinking about collaborating with other artists or across fields. It might be a way to get out of my own head; step around my own roadblocks, and have fun with what I’m doing. So I was very happy to take up this challenge.

I had a sculpture in Norte Marr’s **Brooklyn Performance Combine** project at the Brooklyn Museum a few years ago, and it was thrilling to see my work in the context of dancers’ bodies and movements – so many angles and negative spaces. I had a strong inkling that something more could happen.

Of course Rauschenberg and Merce Cunningham are great references. I've also long been obsessed with **Dubuffet's performance piece**.



Gleich, Beach, dancers Tiffany Mangulabnan, Kara Chan, and Izabela Szylińska with Beach's sculptures.

**Two Coats: How did the collaborative process work for you?**

**JG:** With Rachel, it didn't take long to discover that we share certain ideas about art – we like weight and its juxtaposition with subtlety, precision. I was well aware of Rachel and her sculptures and loved that her work has a presence and elegance. It also holds the essence of contrasts, with precarious balances and large negative spaces cut into graceful yet imposing pieces. I had been playing with some ideas for the dance before we were paired and the process of discussing your own work in a way that is focused on moving it forward, not judging or evaluating, but unpacking and highlighting the relevant aspects, is extremely stimulating. I often feel alone making dances (even with dancers in the studio). Rachel, while not in the studio for the majority of the process, was still in my head; her ideas began to appear in the movement. Though one can never know for sure... I felt we completely joined up in our love of the abstract and embraced what Rachel calls, "the specific but unknown".

**RB:** Our process was a back-and-forth layering of ideas. Julia began the process by sending me sketches (dancers trying out her ideas). I was able to respond to those videos with what I thought, what I saw, what other things I was

working on that might connect to those ideas. I uploaded a bunch of images related to what I was thinking about. She responded to those. We honed in on an idea. She developed the dance further with those ideas in mind. I developed a concept mock-up for the projection and sculptures. We talked throughout, weaving and laying ideas. It was fun and also some of the more interesting conversations I've had about gender constructs as well as (and in relation to) abstraction and form. It was such a thrill and honor to see my thinking reflected back through someone else's thinking, in another medium. The whole process, and, I hope, result, was infused with a lot of heart and humor.



Dancers with sculptures at left and images of stone lifters projected on the back wall.

**Two Coats:** Talk a little about the choice of audio, the costumes, and the development of the sculptures.

**RB:** The first sketches Julia sent me included the Donald Trump China mash-up and the “I’m a Man” song. In both cases there was a strong sense of masculine posturing and assertiveness with a bit of tongue-in-cheek. My sculptures have an idea of strength and toughness to them. I often hinge that idea on a very precarious fine point of balance. I have been looking at stone lifters as source material in my studio – the body counter-weighting the stone in this delicate balance that is also raw masculinity. The relationship of the two elements – body and stone – one part relying on the other part, one part holding the other part, along with the delicate balance and precision, the rough hewn geometries of the stones and the swagger of the lifters was something that spoke to my sculptures and also fit really well with what Julia was after. This combination of strength and precarious balance is a perfect match for dance, especially pointe.

I was originally very interested in costume playing a major role in creating a back-and-forth relationship between the dancers and the sculptures. I love the **Malevich costumes** that feel somewhere between armor and geometric abstraction. But in the end the casual, cool posturing of the dancers called for something that wasn't “try too hard.” We still wanted to go with solid color blocking, but more everyday. We settled on tanks and shorts – I was particularly happy to find dance-style shorts with loose pockets that the dancers were able to use in their poses. The two main dancers who “challenge” each other were in black and white, which reinforced the connection to the black and white projection of stone lifters, while the outsider/“shadow” dancer was in pink and yellow, which made her feel of the sculptures. We had always talked about her as being a sculpture-come-to-life so that made sense. Her dancing often

mirrored one of the main dancers so that in turn helped the world of the sculptures connect to the world of the challengers. It reinforced a two-ness as well as a symmetry that was an off-balance two-ness; a nonsensical symmetry.

Julia was the hero of putting together the sound. At one point she sent me video sans music and I loved the raw feeling of the clicking shoe sounds; it reminded me of hammering or construction sounds. At that point we'd already talked a lot about building and construction. (We've both renovated houses; I used to work in the construction industry; sculpture as building and stacking; the physicality of making. Side note: There is an absolutely beautiful part in the choreography when one dancer grabs the other's legs and "builds" her by moving her limbs.) When Julia found and added the pile driver sound we were both jumping for joy.

**JG:** The dance explores the futility of putting up and then tearing down again, of taking up space, of experiencing the masculine in a form that is associated most commonly with the feminine. The soundscape for our piece was a combination of found sound from YouTube, environmental sounds, and a track from Joe Jackson, which incidentally, is a track which I initially set out to choreograph in 2003 but put aside. The piece starts with the voice of Donald Trump that features "The Donald" repeating over and over the word "China." I was amazed by how rich a grating voice repeating the same words could become. It immediately moved into abstraction – rhythm and tone without content. And of course, it is ripe with political overtones. We debated the role of this voice but felt it is it's own kind of heavy lifting.

**Two Coats: What was it like to see the dancers finally perform the piece this weekend?**

**JG:** When we get into the theater, the short time during which the work is danced seems so ephemeral, almost superficial, and the real artistic exploration felt like it happened in the studio, in the e-mails and Skype sessions, in the discussions of our visions for the work, in the drawings and the 30-second studies. The performance is almost an anti-climax as it presents an ending and we want to continue to move the sculptures along the path, not to conclude the voyage. Happily we intend to expand the work this summer.

**RB:** It's always pretty stressful to release a thing into the world that you've worked so hard on – knowing it could always be better, or more, or different. But once I let that go, it was a pure joy to watch. There were little moments when the dancers were in movements in relationship to the sculptures and the still projection; all the parts bouncing off each other, creating this formal, conceptual dynamic that we had been massaging for months, and I just thought – That! That is exactly right.

**Two Coats: Did the piece change with each performance?**

**JG:** Yes! One of my goals for this work was to avoid a sense of front. In the China section of the ballet, I required the dancers to change their facings (their orientation in space and location) every performance. This presents uncertainty for the dancers, introduces a raw, rough quality and requires their attention to be directed only with respect to the other – not to the audience. The typical presentational qualities of ballet, in which the dancer has an awareness of the angle of the body that the audience sees, would not be calculated quickly enough. It is a cruel thing to do to a dancer, and yet it sets the tone for the work – for the rawness of weight and posturing, for the sense of building up and of tearing down, creating subtlety and precariousness.

**RB:** I saw new things in the dance every time I saw it. I would notice a different nuance in the choreography – a shoulder bump, a sequence of folded limbs – and think about how smartly and precisely it connected to the visuals and concepts. I think what Julia did was genius; clever, funny, tough. And the dancers – Izabela Szylińska, Tiffany Mangulabnan and Kara Chan – were totally invested, even when we had them doing strange un-dancer-like things like lifting and squatting.

**Two Coats:** Thanks Julia and Rachel for sharing your process with me. Is there anything else you want to add?

**JG:** I was most excited when Rachel shared the image of the stone-lifters. In a quest to answer the question, “what makes a dance feminine or masculine?” the stonelifters offered a combination of both. We felt that these distinctions emerge from external pressures, just as a rock is formed geologically.

As an aside, it was thrilling to initiate this new collaborative direction for Norte Maar’s CounterPointe series. As the producer of this series which originated as a forum for the presentation of new work by women choreographers for the pointe shoe, it’s exciting to see this new added element of collaboration with women artists within the realm of ballet.

**RB:** I loved what we did, but I was also moved by what the other pairs or choreographers and artists did. Each team took things in a unique direction; each piece had its own tone and personality; so much to see and think about. A huge thank you to Norte Maar – Jason Andrew and Julia Gleich – and their supporters for making this event possible.

“**Immovable**,” Choreography: Julia K Gleich; Art/Design: Rachel Beach; Dance: Tiffany Mangulabnan, Izabela Szylińska and Kara Chan; Sound design: Julia K. Gleich ; Music: Donald Trump China mash up YouTube, Joe Jackson, Found sound – Pile driver from Philadelphia Naval Yard. Performed at the Actors Fund Art Center, Brooklyn, NY. April 8-10, 2016.

[Images of performance were taken by **Lucas Chilczuk** for Norte Maar]

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**Margaret Lanzetta**

April 21, 2016 at 1:29 pm



It was an awesome day of dance/art pieces. Very inspirational!



**Charles Kessler**

April 24, 2016 at 2:21 pm

Excellent interview — I learned a lot.

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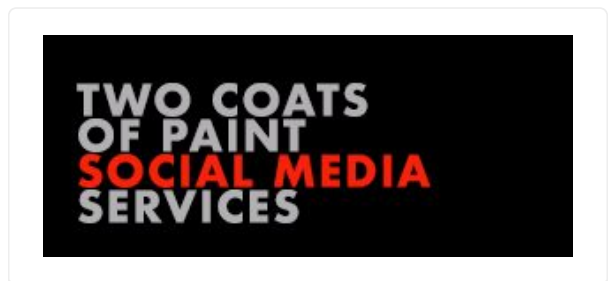
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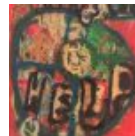
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