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LIVING DOLLS

BY DEBORAH JOWITT

We're used to the sight of virtual bodies hurtling through desperate video games. Cathy Weis works at the other end of the technology spectrum. Since the early 1990s, she's been playing around with low-tech theater pieces that have the charm of the homemade. In the introduction to her latest show at Dance Theater Workshop, her image appears as an infuriated talking head, crammed sideways into a monitor hitherto concealed in a miniature grove of glittering palm trees. Turned upright by her agitated handler (set designer Jonathan Berger), the video box becomes the head of a dummy. Berger holds his hand over virtual-Weis's mouth while the flesh-and-blood Weis urges us to turn off cell phones and not to start up any chain saws.

You get the picture. Weis's new *Electric Haiku* is an anthology of interactive video pieces—some beautiful, some goofy. Bare-breasted Ksenia Vidyaykina dances slowly in one spot, while a camera projects a dual image of her on the backdrop; her black-and-white selves merge, even seem to embrace, but, like conjoined twins, never fully separate. For wacky, take Scott Heron in an improbable white outfit that includes a Marie Antoinette wig and a lace curtain protruding from his shoulders—rod and all, as in Carol Burnett's unforgettable send-up of *Gone With the Wind*. Annoyed by a buzzing red dot of light (released by 12-year-old Zane Frazer from a laptop on a glittery cart), he swats it; pretty soon a swarm of dots assails him.

The episodes are not exactly haiku. Heron's insect number is one of the few with a punchline, and several are not brief. In the most elaborately equipped, Heron bounces on bedsprings atop a gleaming, mic'd scaffold while Weis videos him from below. On a sheet of white paper that rolls down to hide her, we see the lively springs projected, and hear the clanking metal amplified in Steve Hamilton's sound design. If the event occurred in a gallery, you could relish walking around it for a while and then move on. Sitting in a theater, with no new developments, a captive audience is in danger of zoning out.

In *An Abondanza in the Air*, which Weis and Lisa Nelson first showed in 1990, Jay Ryan's skillful lighting rarely displays the women. We intuit their presence as they manipulate two cordless video monitors that glow like cats' eyes in the darkness. Reality becomes invisible and dreams light up. At first, the images seem connected: Shoes walk across a wooden floor as the camera "walks" too; a woodpecker attacks a tree; a logging truck rolls along a highway. But overall, the aesthetic issues are more beguiling than the piece itself, which has the air of a private journey through visions whose meaning to a couple of old friends we can only guess at.



CATS' EYES IN THE DARKNESS: WEIS IN AN ABONDANZA IN THE AIR

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