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DANCE

# The Body Recorded, Reflected, Refracted And Projected

From Cathy Weis, Cubist angles in a hall of mirrors.

By CHRISTOPHER REARDON

HERE was a candy machine at the Louisville ballet school where Cathy Weis took lessons as a girl. She'd drop a dime into the slot intending to select the chocolate-covered peanuts, but then she would hesitate, drawn by the offering hidden behind a yellow question mark.

"I had this dilemma every week," she recalled in a recent interview. "Which one? And every week I did the same thing: I went for the question mark. Of course it was never as good. Either I was really curious, or I was one dumb kid."

It took a while — and a shift to modern dance and modern technology — but her sense of wonderment is paying off. Now in her 50's, Ms. Weis has emerged in the last decade as an artist who courts the unexpected. Her off-kilter aesthetic, a mix of movement and video that earned a Bessie Award in 1996 and a Guggenheim Fellowship in 2002, gives Southern gothic a postmodern twist.

"Cathy's work has a kind of crazy irreverence mixed with a poignancy that always gets to me," said Theodore Berger, executive director of the New York Foundation for the Arts. "The way she juxtaposes the real thing — a person dancing — with the mystery of virtual images is always interesting. It reveals another side of the self."

Ms. Weis has forged an unlikely career path. At 13, she became a soloist with the Louisville Ballet, where she performed the Chinese solo in "The Nutcracker." Four years at Bennington College put an end to that. "I went in a ballet star," she said, "and I came out all sex, drugs and modern dance."

She spent the next decade playing in a bluegrass band, tap dancing and — after injuring her right foot — making art objects from stained glass. But when she laid her hands on a Sony Portapak, an early video camera, she was

hooked. Moving to New York in 1983, she began documenting works by pioneering choreographers like Steve Paxton, Meredith Monk and Bill T. Jones.

She shifted gears again in 1989, when doctors traced the chronic weakness in her right side to multiple sclerosis, a condition that had claimed her mother's life 13 years earlier. "I had to start making things right then," Ms. Weis said. "And these were the two tools I had: dance and video."

A pixie with a mane of auburn hair, she revels in her low-tech approach, which favors simple cameras and projectors — tools that have been around for decades — over the latest computerized gizmos. All the parts move, like the dancers, and everything is exposed.

"It's the opposite of slick," said Sara Rudner, a dancer and choreographer who appeared in one of Ms. Weis's early pieces. "There's an honesty to her work and a texture that is deeply human."

In her last show, "Electric Haiku" (2002), Ms. Weis presented seven closely observed tales of trial and transformation. One solo, "The Chrysalis," trained a pair of video cameras on Ksenia Vidyaykina, a swanlike figure in a feathery skirt. As she danced, images of her shot from different angles were superimposed on a nearby screen. There, she appeared to cleave in two and then fuse back together before scuttling off like some sort of eight-legged freak.

The same format shapes Ms. Weis's new show, "Electric Haiku: Calm as Custard," which will open a two-week run on Wednesday at Dance Theater Workshop.

It sets six vignettes to a live score by Steve Hamilton and lighting by Jennifer Tipton. "A haiku has a very specific definition," Ms. Weis said, "and I am taking artistic license with it. Each one of my dances is like a little poem, a little distilled idea."

The cast includes two mainstays, Scott Her-



Andrea Mohin/The New York Times

Cathy Weis, left, working with Jennie Liu, center, and Elizabeth Ward in "Electric Haiku" for Dance Theater Workshop.

on and Jennifer Miller, and one notable newcomer, Diane Madden, a veteran of Trisha Brown's troupe. Ms. Weis, who also performs in the piece, said it's her sense of her disease, and its possible effects, that drives her to seek out such top talents. "I don't know how much time I've got," she said.

When she showed some early versions last year, her use of hand-held lights, live video and projectors on rolling carts turned a SoHo loft into something like a hall of mirrors. Dancers cast long shadows on the walls and floor, while projected images of their bodies multiplied, dissolved and appeared from multiple perspectives. It looked as if a painting by Braque or Picasso had sprung to life.

"She's asking us to question our own realities," said Martha Wilson, a performance artist who has followed Ms. Weis's work closely. "Our sense of theater and scale and mobility, and what it takes to be alive and walking around on this planet."

In her new show Ms. Weis makes room once again for her alter ego, a ventriloquist's dummy with a small television for a head. A frequent presence in her work, it reinforces the sense that by fragmenting the body, Ms. Weis is trying to deconstruct and reconstruct the self.

"I've always done that," she said, "but not consciously. I go into the studio and let things develop. I try not to judge it or understand why. That seems to be the most successful stuff, for me, because it's an intuitive, kinesthetic, heart-felt thing, instead of a cerebral thing. Then I can go back and analyze it."

One obvious reading of the proliferating bodies in her videos points to multiple sclerosis. "Calm as Custard" even includes a monologue about the disease, and how it has altered the way she controls the right side of her body. But the fractured images resonate on other levels, too.

"The Cubists," she said. "Weren't they all doing that? It's not just M.S., you see. It's the human condition."

**'ELECTRIC HAIKU:  
CALM AS CUSTARD'**  
CATHY WEIS PROJECTS  
Dance Theater Workshop,  
219 West 19th Street,  
Wednesday through Saturday  
and Feb. 23-26.