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Victoria Marks

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Reviewed by Eva Yaa Asantewaa

A title like *Not About Iraq* is a little suspect. If it's not about Iraq, why isn't it? If it's about not being about Iraq, what good is it? But if it's actually all about itself, who cares?

Victoria Marks' piece, her first showing at Danspace Project after a 10-year absence, awkwardly references itself—and dance in general—to a distracting degree. The title deliberately resonates with Neil Greenberg's *Not-About-AIDS-Dance* of the 1980s, a piece that located dancemaking in the context of plague and loss. Not deliberately, it calls to my mind Daniel Linehan's equally self-conscious whirling-while-talking dance, *Not About Everything*.

Marks inserts herself as commentator—a precious, self-conscious device offering little illumination. Is her movement “beautiful,” as she questions, or “sexy,” as she declares? Five years into the disastrous Bush adventure, when American moviegoers are mostly avoiding films about the Iraq war, it's dismaying to see a choreographer merely toy with what it means to make art in the midst of moral catastrophe.

When Marks sends out a perky, black-clad quintet of women to jazz up the space, perhaps she intends to satirize dance as entertainment. But who's the target? For the most part, contemporary dance artists are making abstract dance, not jazz dance or anything like it. Moreover, they're making art that, one way or another, is serious and progressive in intent even if not directly addressing societal or global concerns. Has she helped us understand the Iraq mess any better by having dancers hit the floor and crawl on their bellies?

In lead dancer Taisha Paggett, *Not About Iraq* at least has a solid core. Paggett—with her strong, lean frame in plain, no-nonsense slacks and a short-sleeved shirt—reminds me of no less a star than Bill T. Jones. Like Jones, her command of space is often quiet but always firm and dignified. She knows her own mind. She dances sometimes alone, sometimes with Marks nearby, and the church's sanctuary—astringently bare, filled only with velvety silence or the recorded voices of children—never dwarves her. Her bare, blade-like arms radiate from her torso and, when she makes clean slashes with her limbs, she becomes the work's entire focus, Marks' entire project. It's fruitless to look anywhere else.

In moments when Paggett melts into the chorus, dancing heartily to the throb and rush of Glenn Branca's guitar work, we know she is, in spirit, woefully out of place. The surrounding women soon show that they are other than they seemed, with smiles draining away, postures crumpling, and hands deformed. This is, fair to say, not about Iraq but about, perhaps, how desire can turn to ash.