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DANCE REVIEW

Shattering in a Space of Healing

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Underwaters (we is ready, we is ready) The latest piece by Taisha Paggett in the lobby of the Whitney Museum on Wednesday entranced a 2-year-old girl, who proceeded to follow her. *Andrea Mohin/The New York Times*

In her works that bridge dance and visual art, Taisha Paggett has deconstructed the fitness craze Zumba, blindfolded herself while drawing on the walls of a room and performed as Fila Buster, a character inspired by the filibuster of the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854. For her latest piece, “Underwaters (we is ready, we is ready),” Ms. Paggett, shifting among four personas, holds the floor — for hours on end — as part of the 2014 Biennial at the Whitney Museum of American Art.

On Wednesday afternoon, the sound of crashing ceramics reverberated throughout the museum's lobby. Ms. Paggett had been whipping plates against the wall of the Whitney's lobby gallery, where, by Sunday, she will have clocked in five days of performances. For her, "Underwaters" is not simply an endurance test, but a way to turn an ordinary space into a ritualistic site of magic and healing.

For the plate scene, a barrier was set up at the entrance of the gallery to protect the crowd. Ms. Paggett, sitting in a chair with her back to us, marked time based on her breath, which afforded a chance to study the décor: stacks of black folding chairs, a rack of clothing, plates, bananas — a dancer's sustenance or a darker reference to a racial stereotype — and bottled water. The handwritten line on a piece of paper on the floor read, "Black until I am no longer." In "Underwaters," traces of the past and hints about the future coexist in real time.

Eventually, Ms. Paggett, hunched over with her eyes obscured by a generous Afro (it was a wig), rose from her chair and moved through the gallery with scuffling, slow-motion paces in a pair of too-large black loafers. When it was time for the next transformation, she changed into a dress and white pumps and swept the broken plates into a tidy pile.

The clearing of the shards signaled that we were free to inhabit the space with her. Once inside the gallery, the air was different: Ms. Paggett's tasks were less weighted with obscure meaning and more a reflection of her unflinching control and trancelike concentration. Was she conjuring spirits? As she took small, shuffling steps while using her broom as a partner, she held onto a side of her skirt or tapped out a rhythm by pricking the broom's bristles on the floor.

Amazingly, a 2-year-old girl — the spit and image of Cindy Lou Who from the 1966 animated TV special "How the Grinch Stole Christmas!" — became entranced with Ms. Paggett. It wasn't that her obsession was so surprising; Ms. Paggett is a magnetic dancer with a rare ability to control the space around her as if she were protected by a force field while consumed by motion. The strangeness had more to do with the unquestioning manner of their relationship.

Taking brave little steps, the girl trailed Ms. Paggett, who bounced forward and back with ceremonial intent as her skirt bounced against her hips with increasing velocity. It was an absorbing, unpredictable duet that moved far beyond cute. With bodies as tools, they filled the space with life and light, enclosing us all.

Taisha Paggett continues performances through Sunday at the Whitney Museum of American Art; 212-570-3600, whitney.org.