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From four choreographers, one bold balancing act

By Karen Campbell, Globe Correspondent

What do you get when you mix four adventurous choreographers, one of whom is also a new media artist, with a raft of contemporary and historic influences, from Hieronymus Bosch to Louise Bourgeois to traditional magic acts, all addressing the challenges of self-expression and identity in our fast-paced world? On Saturday night at the Institute of Contemporary Art, what we got was “The Disappearing Woman,” an ambitious world premiere collaboration sponsored by Summer Stages Dance and the Baryshnikov Arts Center between New England choreographers Nell Breyer, Alissa Cardone, Lorraine Chapman, and Bronwen MacArthur.

A tight 50-minutes long, “The Disappearing Woman” is a rich, sprawling mélange of ideas and images, a little messy and puzzling in spots, but totally engaging and visually striking. The central theme emerges in two voiceovers. The first, a monologue of serio-comic philosophical musings, addresses our “age of anxiety” and the issues of having children and understanding identity while under constant assault by the media.

The second, a recorded phone message from Chapman to Breyer near the work’s inception, brings it home on a more personal level. It’s a poignant, funny, rambling message tinged with panic about how she wasn’t going to have movement ready in time for rehearsal because she was obsessing about a grant letter and an impending family vacation and feeling swamped and overwhelmed and maybe she could find time on the cruise to work, but. . . You get the idea. And onstage, Chapman lays sprawled on her back, her head tucked inside a box, while the quicksilver Cardone and loose-limbed MacArthur create their own frenetic worlds. Jagged, slicing, tumbling, curling phrases in hyperdrive are captured in individual pools of light (beautifully designed by Tim Cryan).

Chapman also alludes to the challenges of a balanced life in two vivid solos that beautifully utilize the ICA space. One, set outside the theater’s back window, with boats passing in the distance, features precarious



Maisie Crow for the Boston Globe

Steps in Solitude: [Lorraine Chapman] performs during the dress rehearsal for a multimedia piece, “The Disappearing Woman,” last Friday at the Institute of Contemporary Art.

balances pressed against the glass. In another, a marvel of resolution and confusion, she seems to fall apart and pull herself back together again and again, restrained by a corridor of light set behind a series of bars.

Breyer’s sophisticated, eye-popping video comes and goes on a variety of screens—the back wall, set designer Caleb Wertenbaker’s translucent white screen cubicle, small boxes that suggest both safety and confinement—and it mirrors, masks, and complements the women’s movement. Sometimes, as in MacArthur’s dazzling solo with her own shadow and prerecorded images, the dancer disappears into the video, her luxurious lunges, stretches and reaches sending her in and out of darkness.

The work’s poignant ending alludes to one possible answer for some of the central issues—community. As Breyer pulls a floor to ceiling scrim across the stage, the other three dancers finally come together, arms linked. Their movements fluidly suggest the camaraderie and support their individual moments lacked—an arm around a waist, a head resting on a shoulder. And Breyer’s ghostly video images stunningly capture their synergistic energy. Unlike the black and white videos of earlier, these final images pulsate with vivid, saturated color.