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A Two-Person Exhibition With Someone Who Isn't Here

Sharon Lockhart/Noa Eshkol, at the Jewish Museum

by MARTHA SCHWENDENER JAN. 31, 2013



Sharon Lockhart/Noa Eshkol, at the Jewish Museum, includes a film triptych by Ms. Lockhart of dances choreographed by Ms. Eshkol, who died in 2007.

Alex Slade, Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels; Blum & Poe, Los Angeles; and neugerriemschneider, Berlin

Museums have changed significantly over the last several decades, so that they showcase more contemporary art but also try to balance their budgets by bringing in larger audiences. This sets up a challenge for artists, who must operate on multiple registers, speaking to aficionados as well as to the uninitiated. Sharon Lockhart's show at the Jewish Museum does this beautifully.

What you encounter on the first floor is a spare, gorgeously minimal film installation. Along one wall are three projected films showing black-clad dancers performing in an art-gallery-like space with a few colorful textiles set up like simple screens behind them. Their movements are slow and measured, like those of tai chi practitioners, accompanied by a simple clicking drumbeat soundtrack.

Two similar films are on the opposite wall. In an adjoining room are photographs of abstract spherical constructions suspended against a plain gray background and a display case with diagrams and other ephemera. On the third floor there are more photographs of the spheres and, laid out on rectilinear plinths, two colorful fabric works made by cutting up found textiles and stitching them together.

Despite the appearance of simplicity, there are a multitude of things going on here. The last decades have seen a spike of interest in performance, overlooked art from the mid-20th century and the esoteric, quasi-scientific systems that modern artists developed to create their work. Ms. Lockhart's films are based on the dances created by Noa Eshkol (1924-2007),

a little-known (in this country) Israeli choreographer who was also the daughter of Israel's third prime minister, Levi Eshkol. Along with Avraham Wachman, an architect, Ms. Eshkol developed Eshkol-Wachman Movement Notation, a system that uses numbers and symbols to record body movement.

Ms. Lockhart discovered Ms. Eshkol's work on a research trip sponsored by the Jewish Federation of Greater Los Angeles's Tel Aviv-Los Angeles Partnership, and dancers from Ms. Eshkol's company perform in the videos. The photographs, taken by Ms. Lockhart, are of spherical models designed by Ms. Eshkol and Mr. Wachman as instruments for teaching their notation system. The ephemera on the first floor include actual notation, posters announcing Ms. Eshkol's performances and historical photographs. The textile works in the videos and on display upstairs were made by Ms. Eshkol later in her life.

What those familiar with recent contemporary art will see immediately is that Ms. Lockhart discovered in Ms. Eshkol a body of work, virtually unknown in this country, that mirrors that of John Cage, Merce Cunningham, Buckminster Fuller, Yvonne Rainer and Trisha Brown — practitioners and theorists who have garnered a great deal of interest in recent years. (Eva Diaz, an art historian who has written about Black Mountain College, the experimental art institute where several of these artists studied or taught in the 1940s, contributed an essay to the catalog.)

Beyond this, however, pulsing throughout the show, are the polemics of Ms. Lockhart's generation (she was born in 1964): the lingering influence of Minimalism (the Jewish Museum mounted one of the benchmark exhibitions devoted to Minimalism, "Primary Structures," in 1966); the postmodern obsession with photography and video as highly artificial mediums rather than purveyors of essential truths; and questions of authorship.

It is this last proposition that is most complicated, but also grounded in the title of the show: "Sharon Lockhart/Noa Eshkol." For while the project is described in the press materials as a showcase of Ms. Lockhart's "latest body of work," it is also framed, both by the artist and in the exhibition's title, as a two-person exhibition. Ms. Eshkol's works, from textiles and notation to choreography performed by her dancers after her death, forms the core of the project — although you wonder what dance purists or Ms. Eshkol might think about Ms. Lockhart's turning individual dances into a film triptych, a kind of collapse of modern works into a postmodern pastiche.

And yet, on the whole, Ms. Lockhart has performed her own delicate choreography in creating this show: a combination of homage and appropriation that both recuperates a "forgotten" artist (or introduces her to new audiences) and respectfully presents her work and ideas, while simultaneously mining them to create a new body of artwork. It is a subtle but virtuosic move.

And whether or not you care about these historical and theoretical debates, or the sleight-of-hand methodological moves Ms. Lockhart has performed in making the work, the exhibition is exceptionally handsome, meditative and, at times, mesmerizing.

"Sharon Lockhart/Noa Eshkol" continues through March 24 at the Jewish Museum, 1109 Fifth Avenue, at 92nd Street; (212) 423-3200, thejewishmuseum.org.