

# BODY BAGS: ADRIFT IN THE MEDIUM & THE FLESH

Gina Graham, [Esse Aficionado](#)

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REVIEWED BY RAINER J. HANSHE

Who, if I cried out, would hear me among the Angelic Orders? And even if one were to suddenly take me to its heart, I would vanish into its stronger existence. For beauty is nothing but the beginning of terror, that we are still able to bear, and we revere it so, because it calmly disdains to destroy us. Every Angel is terror. And so I hold myself back and swallow the cry of a darkened sobbing. Ah, who then can we make use of? Not Angels: not men, and the resourceful creatures see clearly that we are not really at home in the interpreted world.—Rilke, *Duino Elegies*, "Elegy 1"

Who are we, what are we without our faces? What is there to communicate or identify us by? Is there an idiosyncratic gesture that can signify the subject with any degree of particularity, or is subjectivity neutralized or rendered opaque with the 'erasure' of our

faces? In "I Sing the Body Electric," Whitman recounts how "the expression of the face balks account," instead locating the manifestation of thought and feeling in our "limbs and joints," and he further enumerates a host of parts which also express the same, imbuing the entire pulsing body with subjectivity, lending to flesh what all forms of monotheism denied it—a proud and vibrant significance, a sacredness equal to that of the 'soul.' However, if the face balks account, if it is perchance an impediment to communication, what of the body, too? What possibility is there of a clear signifying gesture if the entire body is 'eliminated'; that is, not in favor of 'soul' or 'spirit,' but what if the body were simply concealed? What possibility is there of communicating expression if the entire body itself were stripped of its identifying and identifiable markers and made anonymous? In Gina Graham's *BODY BAGS*, precisely these and other questions are physically enacted through the total containment of two dancers in separate nylon body sheaths, one black and pink, the second black and blue, and the contained and constricted dancers combat and struggle with one another yet also seek symbiosis or unification though, ultimately, whether unification is achieved at the end remains questionable; certainly, it is something fleeting, a momentary event devoid of permanence.

Atop a marble altar, against the backdrop of a bas-relief of two angels, an amorphous black mass rested in stillness, like some deformed bulk of matter or the shattered human form of a Bacon painting. After a prolonged period of silence, as the form pulsed upon the altar, the sound score commenced, but it was less 'music' and more simulated

wind, like a blistering gale breaking upon a sea crag and as the stormy tones howled in the air of the vast cathedral space, the black mass began to shift, twisting and turning as if some primordial entity seeking to define itself, struggling to emerge out of stillness—or death—into animate existence, each figure revealing at last a different and identifying color as the black mass separated into two distinct forms. Although the figures each remained enigmatic, not only anonymous but androgynous, perhaps even species indeterminate, in their combative struggle with one another, in their clashing, a clashing enacted with the bas-relief of the angels, against whom the figures each crashed, there was a differentiation, a desire or urge for each figure to establish itself, to express its impulses and instincts through strife, through a physical exertion that offered some form of definition.

And it is struggle which is an operative force, the test in a sense through which identity is perhaps delineated, or through which freedom is articulated, for it is in restraint, or more in the movement *against* restraint than in the complete absence of limitations of any type that whatever degree of freedom we believe we possess exists. Even the completely denuded body is not without its restraints, for it is a naïve fallacy that total freedom exists, that there are states of pure unrestraint—even chaos has its antipode or continuous opponent, thus the plea for a life or art without limitations is sophomoric. The acrobat has its restraint just as even the earth has its. What more pronounced restraint is there than gravity, a force against which the body as the planets weigh their velocity, rhythm, and movement? Without gravity, without restraint of some kind, we

are adrift, like astronauts floating weightlessly through space, incapable of refined movements, almost incapable of bodily control, desperately in need of some weight to enable us to moor ourselves to the earth, or matter of some kind. And this struggle with restraint is articulated with compelling force through Graham's total containment of the bodies of the two unnamed and anonymous performers, each who endure a near masochistic imposition, for not only are the movements of their bodies circumscribed, but in their near asphyxiation, which persists for 30 minutes, surely their lives are, too. Yet their struggles are not permanent for they shift from combat and strife to unification, or an erotic fusion where each delineated body is absorbed by the other in a primordial amalgamation, and the masochism is overcome, at least temporarily, for the erotic union is a moment of ecstasy, the real erasure of self into the other, each absorbing the other and vanishing in transformation.

But that unity does not persist and eventually the figures break apart, or are forced apart by warring impulses, whether the warring impulses of their own bodies, or the war between each other's impulses, hence Graham enacts through gesture the struggle and difficulty of symbiosis. Although longed for, real symbiosis is rare, fleeting, as fragile as the flesh of which we are composed, and we are rarely as united with ourselves and with others as we wish to believe; what prevails is the separation, the isolation, the near total alienation not only from others, but from our own bodies, an event also figured in the bodies Graham envelops, bodies whose vulnerabilities frequently do not permit them to achieve symbiosis; or rather, that symbiosis is

hindered by their inability to accept and reveal their vulnerability, which requires real strength. The masking and total containment of the body is also a delimiting of its perceptual abilities, too, for how is one to orient oneself in space and time if one's senses are almost completely masked? Graham seems to want to move beyond sight as the dominant orienting sense, one which, paradoxically, has blinded us, or she at least hints at redressing the balance between sight and our other senses, for it is Tiresias who knows more than Oedipus. Through the tactile senses, through those connected to matter, the senses all essentially abnegated and condemned by most philosophers and all theologians, through such senses and most especially touch, there is a restorative pathway; if not, it is simply a rich field which to pursue, an orienting faculty that can carry us through our blindness, a faculty which can enable us to sense, to move, to open another dimension of the body as we drift through space and time like astronauts without gravity boots, and it is dance itself that Graham is questioning as well in her concealment of the body, and it is dance itself which we witness undergoing an interrogation with itself through itself, by turning its very instrument against it and forcing it to reconsider its means.

In the culmination of *BODY BAGS*, the simulated naturalism of the sound scape changed to a more rhythmic, beat oriented passage which the bodies coalesced with just as they sought to coalesce with themselves and with the other. In this section, the movements of each figure became more defined, more finely articulated, perhaps shaping an identity as they spun, twirled, and turned, making more conventional fluid

dance movements. However, in such gestures, the acute observer could discern a clear distinction between each figure, an identity marked in the shaping gesture just as visibly as the painter's thought is marked in the brushstroke. And each revolution of the body was like a moment of evolution, a shift from the indiscriminate primordial mass which each figure previously was, a definite articulation also evident in the use of the fabric, which was during these moments pulled more taut against the body, permitting the spectator to detect the outline of a face, the shape of a breathing mouth, the rounded curve of a skull, to at last witness not some species indeterminate form, or some early stage of man, but the breathing human articulating more refined movements like arcs and parabolas. Contact still remained difficult though and while unity occurred, while desire seemed to meld each figure to the other, the separation remained, the strife persisted, and each figure eventually broke from the other, twisting away and flailing to the ground, ending in contortions, their bodies winding down as if fighting with life itself. A fight also with dance, but this is the medium in which life is seeking to establish itself for Graham, with each figure eventually perishing, their bodies trembling, mildly jerking, reaching a point of stasis, only breath sounding in the well-lit void of the cathedral, then:—nothing, total stillness, at which point four men in black rose from the audience and carried off the two figures, whose bodies were still, stiff as if dead, a return in part to the absolute stillness with which the piece opened, thereby creating a formal circle with itself, though it was not an amorphous mass which was carried off, but two bodies that had distinguished themselves, two constrained dancers struggling to communicate, to find anew their very medium, a medium which

Graham pointedly declares is at an impasse, or which must question the stage at which it is in order to define its identity afresh, for as with all the arts, dance, as life, is it seems now at a turning point—its identity remains or has become an enigma as never before, yet one which Graham is seeking to solve, like Oedipus struggling with the enigma of his being. Her wrestling with the medium may be as compelling and as dangerous as the confrontation with the sphinx, but her exigent questions and how she articulates them choreographically is evidence of the risks she willingly and boldly dares to confront, and this is a testament to her vision and to the possible pathway she is conceiving for the future of dance, or at least for what dance is to her and how she longs to reconceive it.