

# Art Intercepts

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## **RAD Fest's first night of short works puts American gender and race politics front and center**



By [Lauren Warnecke](#)  March 9, 2019

 [#Epic Center](#), [#Midwest Regional Alternative Dance Festival](#), [#RAD Fest](#)



Ashley McQueen, photo courtesy of RAD Fest

**K**ALAMAZOO, MI – Two rows of chairs form a semi-circle around a projection screen hung at the front of the Judy Joliffe Theater. A third ring of audience members stands behind these chairs. On the screen, a video flashes footage of current events – the Women’s March and various other protests, and the Access Hollywood Billy Bush tape, for example. Also there: CNN chyrons, Senator Maxine Waters, a young boy yelling at a tall man dressed in military garb.

The images, legible but digitally fractured into tiles like a patchwork quilt, are the backdrop for “Existing,” a solo by Chicago’s Alexandra Stilianos. Stilianos is the final performer on the first of two short works programs Friday at the Midwest Regional Alternative Dance Festival (RAD Fest).

I feel a pang of excitement on entering the space and discovering this video already in progress, having spent the rest of the performance in the Epic Center’s black box

theater across the hall. Does it matter, I wonder, where we sit, or if we choose – or are forced, like a game of musical chairs – to stand?

Turns out it matters, since Stilianos, once she starts dancing, spends the majority of her time on the floor. The second row of spectators are the losers here; that's not sass – Stilianos laces her floor work with an extraordinary sense of propulsion as she tumbles about the room near the feet of that first concentric circle of guests. In fact, "Existing" is pretty amazing – if you can see it.

"Will you help me?" she asks one of those guests, on rising to her feet. Consenting, this guest is escorted to the tech table, though it's not clear what "help" actually means. It's something to do with the audio, perhaps, which is largely a mix of then-Presidential candidate Hilary Clinton recounting her experience at an infamous debate in which then-candidate Donald Trump loomed behind her, pacing. Clinton explains why she chose to keep her cool, rather than confronting Trump to say, "back up, you creep." Stilianos, in her dancing, offers an alternative narrative, in which a woman intentionally takes up space, rails against creepy men and holds her ground. She reaches beyond her outstretched extremities as the words "fatigue" and "money" flash across the screen. Her white tunic whirls around her, and the audio, now (presumably) controlled by a second volunteer, devolves into distortion.

"Existing" is a jumble of unfocused ideas, but I think that's the point. After all, the nouveau Women's Movement is an

intertwining of intersectional, often disparate political ideals and world views. Some might feel, because of this, it's a political movement destined to failure, but like "Existing," the intention is for women to cut through the noise, and to take and hold space – and that's worth finding a chair from which you can see it.

Following "Existing," the first piece of the 9 p.m. show is Elijah Alhadji Gibson's "The American Dream," an athletic, rough and tumble trio blending dance and gymnastics, or maybe martial arts. Vincent Calleros, Brandon Fierro and Joel Rivera parkour off one other, summersaulting and vaulting their bodies into flight. But there's enough space between these events to rest my eyes and process recorded text overlaying a cinematic sound score. It is an excerpt from a 1965 debate between James Baldwin and William F. Buckley, which explicitly details how American progress is almost wholly the result of African-American labor.

Hailing from Ohio, Robin Prichard made "The Art of Making Dances (Not About Ferguson)" for Kweku Bransah while he was a student at the University of Akron. I've seen this solo once before [as part of the Spring to Dance Festival](#), coincidentally, about a mile from downtown Ferguson, MO. Presented here as an excerpt mid-way through Friday's 9 p.m. show, the piece grapples with Bransah's urge to understand the importance of dance while living in a country where black people can't safely drive cars or walk down the street. "Does it matter what my pirouettes look like when people are dying?" he asks, as he practices double pirouettes with a fake smile on his face. I missed the more

shocking bits of the work which were left out, particularly when Bransah lunges out of the wings with a noose around his neck. But the point is still crystal clear in the closing moments when he grasps his stomach, as if shot, and then folds himself into a lifeless puddle on the floor.

Closing the night, Ashley McQueen anchors her solo “Refusing to be Disposed” with video of “Sufferin’ Til Suffrage” from School House Rock, and images of red and blue splotches echoed by paint-soaked American flags placed on the perimeter of a tarp on the stage. McQueen appears, wrapped in more American flags sewn end to end. In a captivatingly obscene tug of war with an audience member, she asks a guy in the first row to hold one end as she unravels her flag toga, revealing her naked body. The tarp becomes McQueen’s canvas as she then smears the saturated flags around and dives like a Slip-n-Slide, splashing paint on her body and face. Turns out, democracy is messy.

Tucked neatly among these bold works are little gems of “just dance.” Abi Elliott of Elizabethtown, KY has the formidable challenge of going right after “The American Dream.” Her solo, titled “Shifted, Shift, Shifting,” is a rather academic nugget presented in silence with unremarkable lighting and costume. Like Stilianos, Elliott spends most of her time on the floor, playing with the facility of her joints — feet, knees, elbows and wrists — and daintily flopping to the floor every time she arrives on her feet.

Elliott’s piece shares some things in common with “Two,” an

adorable duet by Katherine G. Moore, danced by Claire Melbourne and Brianna Johnson to the beep-beeps of Michael Wall's ping-ponging electronic score. Melbourne and Johnson lean on choreographic devices, thrice resetting at the back of the stage and bouncing their bodies off one another on a tear toward the audience. They do this with a playful competitiveness which looked to me like the Atari game Centipede.

Mid-way through the first show is Nekeshia Wall's "O," a measured, hypnotic solo channeling West African dance. Wall travels diagonally downstage and retreats several times, her ecru frock and garnet wig glowing against a brightly colored backdrop. What's interesting to me is the absence of a rhythmic beat until the very end of the piece, as reds and oranges in the projections shift to blues and greens. Instead, the drone of a didgeridoo and meditative ocean waves wash over Wall's otherworldly dancing.

Before "Existing," there's a bumbling duet by Gierre Godley and Jeremy Blair of put-on machismo called "Cheeky Bastards." And Godley appears again in the late show as the lone performer in Dmitri Peskov's "Fleeting Things." Like Peskov's ["To Hear What Never Has Fallen Silent,"](#) which he performed at last year's RAD Fest, this is a work which sent chills up spine. I'm not sure if the two works are companion pieces, but they look to me like part of a series. Godley whispers a monologue into a microphone – I can't tell if his story actually happened, but it feels like it. It's the tale of an old man Godley becomes close to, who later dies. The only "move" in the piece is at the end: Godley leans back with a

gorgeous, gentle sway side to side, arms outstretched as the lights fade out. But because this is a dance show, I also notice the tiny flicks of his fingers as he talks, the subtle shift in his face as the story gets heavier. I sense a change in the space under his eyes and above his lips, and a slow, soft sinking in his chest.

Having been through all that, little ditties like Melanie Swihart’s quirky “Chicken Coop;” Angela Dennis’s bombastic “Queen of Bones;” lovely contemporary dances like Cori Terry’s “Reciprocus” and Jennifer Glaws’s “Touch Code;” and a rudimentary tap duo by Heather Trommer-Beardslee called “For Larry Craig” didn’t bubble to the surface. Maybe that’s because the last thing we saw was the sloppy remains of “Refusing to be Disposed’s” painting party. But it led me to wonder: Do these less serious dances suffer most from their placement? How do I view these as part of an evening which poses the legitimate question, “Does it matter what my pirouettes look like when people are dying?”

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*Header image: Ashley McQueen, courtesy of RAD Fest*



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