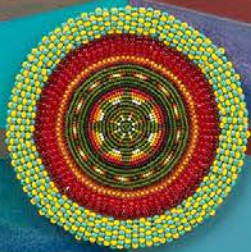


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Letting the light sneak in: ROCHELLE HALEY'S *A SUN DANCE*

VAULT was privy to a one-day choreographic performance exploring architecture and the serendipitous moments offered by daylight in a museum.

WRITTEN *by* SUSAN BEST

A Sun Dance is a one-day choreographic performance conceived by Australian artist Rochelle Haley. Commissioned by the National Gallery of Australia, *A Sun Dance* was staged in different spaces in and around the original gallery building on Saturday February 24, 2024. I attended the dress rehearsal two days prior, which was performed by choreographic collaborators Angela Goh and Ivey Wawn with dancers Lizzie Thomson, Niki Verrall and David Huggins. The performance began at 9.30am (before the gallery opened), outside in the Sculpture Garden. When the gallery opened at 10am the work continued inside, moving through various galleries and interstitial spaces until near closing time, when the five dancers left the building through the revolving doors of the old entrance to the gallery.

This site-harmonising dance work beautifully revealed the subtleties of the building – in particular the points where the building's architect, Col Madigan, was able "to sneak light in", as he put it.¹ Natural light is not a common presence in museums; generally, it is excluded or strictly controlled for conservation reasons, as well to reduce the distractions of the outside world. *A Sun Dance* took place in the various spaces of the building where Madigan intended light to penetrate – a feature I had never noticed, despite innumerable visits to the gallery over the years. Talking to curators from the National Gallery during the performance, they too

were surprised by the exquisite ways in which *A Sun Dance* drew attention to the architectural manipulation of light.

While early photographs of the building by Max Dupain emphasised dramatic raking light, *A Sun Dance* conjured softer, fuzzier forms of sunlight. Dupain's modernist sensibilities were no doubt engaged by the building's characterisation as brutalist, a style commonly associated with the stripped-back architecture of post-war Communist nations and British post-war reconstruction. Brutalism, as the name suggests, is an austere architectural style of bare materials, strict geometries, minimalist structures and a monochromatic colour palette.

That a brutalist building would encourage the gentle play of sunlight, albeit surreptitiously, is not an expected design feature. Rochelle Haley and her team have, however, cleverly revealed this aspect of the building's architecture. Haley consulted the Papers of Colin Madigan (held at the National Library of Australia) and the National Gallery Research Library & Archives in the development of *A Sun Dance*.² Combining archival research with her own careful observations enabled Haley to transform the gallery spaces. Through the framing of the performance, the building became ethereal and permeable, the spaces more interconnected and the walls far less concrete. For me, at times, the architecture almost melted away





as the dancers drew the audience's attention to the warming presence of soft late-summer light.

The first revelation of light sneaking into the building was through a window between Gallery 10 and Gallery 11 on Level 1. It was mid-morning, during the second act of the performance or "set", to use Haley's more spatially-oriented term for the divisions of the work.³ The dancers formed a line in front of a slit-like window that stretched from floor to ceiling and admitted

a long, thin strip of light at the juncture of the two galleries – a transient punctuation point I had never before noticed. When adjacent to the window, the dancers' movements suggested both being light and bathing in it. After exploring the sunbeam, the dancers moved from close engagement with the window to the adjoining galleries. Here, their



movements often reflected the geometric structures of the coffered ceilings as well as resonating, perhaps unintentionally, with works in the different galleries. Eventually, the dancers dispersed, reappearing periodically in sightlines across the vast spaces of the galleries below. Throughout the performance, the dancers worked both singly and as a group.

At midday on Level 2 in Gallery 25, the dance moved to the very large patches of light and shadow made possible by the skylights that are such a strong feature of the connective passages of the building. This part of the performance was accompanied by subtle sounds

produced by musician and composer Megan Alice Clune, who appeared in a gallery far above the space.

The final set, at 3pm, moved between strikingly different spaces across two floors. The dance started on Level 2 in Gallery 19, where a large patch of sunlight encouraged languid horizontal movements. Crisp shadows extended the dancer's limbs, turning their bodies into strange shapes across the floor. The tempo then picked up dramatically as they moved through a part of the building called the colonnade, an interstitial space between Galleries 20 and 21. Punctuated by a series of large rectangular arch-like columns topped by strongly sloping diagonals, when viewed from Gallery 19 the passage-like space is criss-crossed by light falling from above. The dancers darted in and out of this transitional space, pausing at times to emphasise this usually unseen threshold, then racing along the lengths of the galleries to swap positions.

From here the dancers moved to the downward-sloping ramp connecting Level 1 and Level 2, where they created an evenly spaced line of upright bodies. Moving in unison, the dancers' gestures drew attention to a dividing wall, highlighting a moment when the skylights admitted a zigzag of light along the concrete section above the handrail. This brief magical interlude of highly structured light was accompanied by Megan Alice Clune's percussive use of the handrail on the other side of the switchback ramp. The dancers then slowly moved towards the entrance on Level 1, with

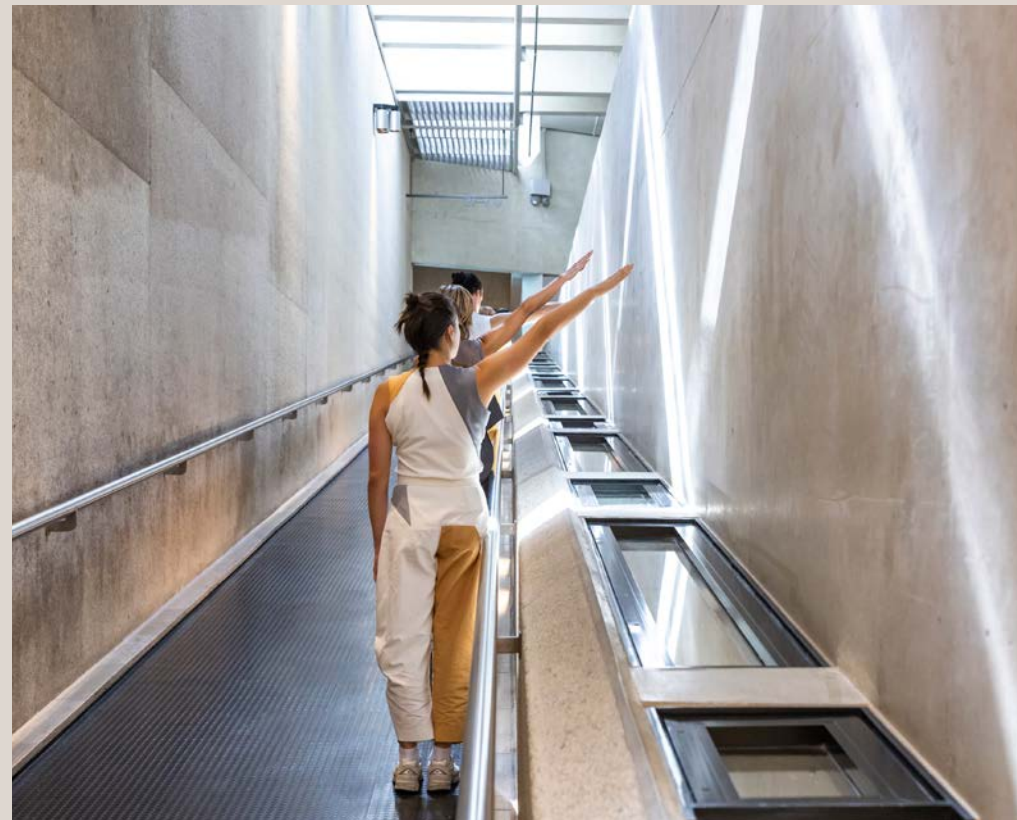
the red, orange and blue painted bays and platforms creating a series of cinematic cell-like backdrops. At this point, I noticed that the dancers were humming in concert with the ambient sound of the building itself – another low hum.

The costumes designed by Leah Giblin added to this careful resonance created between dancers, light and building. Comprised of coloured panels suggestive of rays of light, some panels were made of a translucent material suggesting porosity and permeability, while others echoed the subtle hues of the monochromatic interior. When the dancers were near the exit of the building, for instance, the soft pink sections of their costumes intensified the pinkness of the stone slabs skirting the foyer area. This interplay between dancers and surfaces conjured chromatic variety where previously there had appeared to be none.

A Sun Dance is one of the commissions made possible by an Australian Research Council Linkage Grant for the three-year project *Precarious Movements: Choreography and the Museum*, led by dance scholar Erin Brannigan. The project considers the recent choreographic turn in contemporary art and explores how best to accommodate and archive dance in the museum context. With this in mind, *A Sun Dance* is accompanied by a manual specifically constructed by Haley for the purpose of re-performance. With this instrument of conservation in place, we can look forward to future iterations of this supremely subtle and engrossing work. **V**

Rochelle Haley's *A Sun Dance* (2024) took place at the National Gallery of Australia, Canberra on February 24, 2024. *A Sun Dance* was commissioned by the National Gallery of Australia, Kamberri/Canberra, 2023, assisted by the Australian Government through Creative Australia, its principal arts investment and advisory body, with additional support from the Australian Research Council through research and commissioning partner *Precarious Movements: Choreography and the Museum*. nga.gov.au

1. Col Madigan cited by Rochelle Haley, conversation with the artist, February 22, 2024.
2. See Simon Underschultz, "Art Talk: Artists in the Archives – Rochelle Haley on *A Sun Dance*," February 23, 2024, nga.gov.au/on-demand/art-talk-artists-in-the-archives-rochelle-haley-on-a-sun-dance/.
3. Rochelle Haley cited on the National Gallery of Australia website, nga.gov.au/exhibitions/a-sun-dance/.



Opposite, above
ROCHELLE HALEY
A Sun Dance, featuring David Huggins, Ivey Wawn, Angela Goh, Lizzie Thomson and Niki Verrall with costumes by Leah Giblin

commissioned by the National Gallery of Australia, Kamberri/Canberra 2023.

Photo: Kerrie Brewer
Courtesy National Gallery of Australia, Kamberri/Canberra

Opposite, below
ROCHELLE HALEY
A Sun Dance, featuring David Huggins, Ivey Wawn, Angela Goh, Lizzie Thomson and Niki Verrall with costumes by Leah Giblin

Commissioned by the National Gallery of Australia, Kamberri/Canberra 2023.

Photo: Kerrie Brewer
Courtesy National Gallery of Australia, Kamberri/Canberra

Below left
ROCHELLE HALEY
A Sun Dance, featuring Niki Verrall, Ivey Wawn and David Huggins with costumes by Leah Giblin

commissioned by the National Gallery of Australia, Kamberri/Canberra 2023.

Photo: Kerrie Brewer
Courtesy National Gallery of Australia, Kamberri/Canberra

Below right
ROCHELLE HALEY
A Sun Dance, featuring Lizzie Thomson, Ivey Wawn and Angela Goh with costumes by Leah Giblin

Commissioned by the National Gallery of Australia, Kamberri/Canberra 2023.

Photo: Kerrie Brewer
Courtesy National Gallery of Australia, Kamberri/Canberra

Previous
ROCHELLE HALEY
A Sun Dance, featuring David Huggins, Ivey Wawn, Angela Goh, Lizzie Thomson and Niki Verrall with costumes by Leah Giblin

Commissioned by the National Gallery of Australia, Kamberri/Canberra 2023.

Photo: Kerrie Brewer
Courtesy National Gallery of Australia, Kamberri/Canberra

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