thINKingDANCE

Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Photo: Milo Yeung

Being in Lasso Belly

by Jenna Horton

Towards the end of her work *Lasso Belly*, Christina waxes poetic-casual about the Hudson River School of painters. The phrase "sometimes there's one man, one cow" falls out of her mouth. I laugh. Christina, it seems to me, lives this mantra in and outside of the studio—the I-am-not-the-center-of-this-constellation or the I-am-but-one-man-or-cow-chewing-cud-amidst-a-landscape.

I know Christina a little.* I have walked with Christina. My body has sat beside her body as we munch on chips or cabbage or granola. I have ***grazed*** with Christina. Maybe it's weird to say, but I know her as a member of my herd. I think of us as cousins who feel very comfortable brushing their teeth next to each other on vacation, but we don't talk all that much.

Running into *Lasso Belly* is like trying to run head on into an amoeba. You can't. I tried.

In galoshes.

*

See that woman hauling ass through the rain from the Berks Stop on the Market-Frankford Line? That 5'5'' woman careening around the corner of Mascher Avenue and Cecil B. Moore? That woman, in galoshes, B-lining for the Mascher Space Cooperative? That's me trying to get to *Fresh Juice,* Mascher's annual show of works by resident artists, which has an open dress rehearsal scheduled to start *five minutes ago*. I'm aiming for the door before it closes, for cover before the rain gets worse, for the show before it starts—

Heeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyy,

Christina Gesualdi lassos me, mid-sprint, with her informal greeting. From her gentle stance in Mascher's parking lot, she brings me to a

slow trot, an antsy standstill.

So good.

Well.

It's already started,

she says to me and the other audience members already gathered around her. She doesn't have an umbrella. Her body, small and tender against the asphalt, twitches ever so imperceptibly where rain hits her skin.

The whole piece, I'm thinking of it like a collage,

she says.

Sort of,

she qualifies.

I'd like each of you, individually,

to imagine you're an old Italian couple.

You've lived here,

in this neighborhood,

for years.

You take this walk

every night.

So you know where you are.

You don't need a watch or anything.

Maybe it's after dinner,

Just a brisk 10-minute walk. But also gentle.

Like, maybe you're digesting.

When you come back,

come upstairs,

and take a seat.

—and I'm walking through Kensington as a resident Italian couple.

I'm surprised by how easily I acquiesce. I walk south. Others head in different directions. I listen to water rush down the drains. I pass three mounds—two of grass and one of dug- up dirt. I reflect on how few walks I take when I'm single, to just, you know, take a walk. My stomach begins to feel better. I pass where they keep the horses for tours of Old City. A guy freestyle raps to his coworker. Christmas lights hang around a mural of a young woman, "way more than meets the eye."

I don't know what your experience was/is/will be like. Your walk. You will draw the perimeter of your own psychic and geographic space.

*

When I return, Mascher's door rests open. Newly conscious of my time signature, I note my own entrance, how I've shifted from rush to reception. My eyes drift across the space, basking in a soft mid-level light. *Lasso Belly* has already started, but I am no longer late. The lights don't tell me where to look. Or rather, they do, but in a way I am unaccustomed to in performance. My eyes feel like they do when scanning someone's living room, and Christina happens to be moving over there by the middle window. I've lost my lens of ENTERTAIN ME WOW ME. Perhaps I lost it to the small stream of rain, now careening around the corner of Mascher and Cecil B. Moore, and falling down a drain to the sewer below.

I sit in the bank of blue chairs and watch. Christina opens her palms often as if they were receivers, collecting subtle cues and shifts in the atmosphere around her. I don't necessarily feel them, those shifts, but it feels like she does. She rests her head against the electrical line—my eyes follow it running to the outlets around the room as Christina rests.

She rolls, making a huge circle just inside the square perimeter of the space. I've never actually seen a human organ roll across the floor before, but Christina's movement evokes the image. A heart thudding and flopping, a water balloon rolling—its full membrane making contact with the floor's surface, the body being propelled by an effortless engine of momentum. She embodies a steadiness, an organic quality: she *is* fluid. Combining the energy of her organs rolling-pressing-sloshing against her skin with the potential energy of the floor, she propels her body forward.

Entirely unwound, she grabs this bundle of string, picks it up, shakes it in the air, endows it with some ritual meaning—no more important or less important than what you might whisper to dice before you throw down in Yahtzee. She throws the lasso, letting it land where it will—in a collapsed circle. She re-guides it gently-lightly, encouraging an amoeba-like shape and invites us, in her typical poetic-casual lingo, to get up and gather around her and her lasso on the stage.

We, herd-like, attentive but tentative, rustle and galumph out of our seats to circle around her. Christina's movement doesn't *stop,* but rather shifts to secondary, as she supports the more primary movement—ours. She talks to underscore our slow arrival at our new perspective. Her orchestration slips by, nearly imperceptible.…

So if you look up, you see these geometric squares?

…flowing over us like a lullaby or a wandering bedtime story.

They're holding up this insulation. We did this soundproofing project this summer.

She has the tender adeptness of a mother...

You stuff it in there, this insulation, which is sort of like cotton candy.

…readjusting her baby's sleeping body in bed.

Tonight, because it's raining, you can sort of imagine the rain seeping in

and all those wet guts.

You know, the other thing to mention are the Hudson River painters,

including Thomas Cole.…

And again, we've settled into our new formation with Christina at the center. And again, true to pattern, she removes herself from it. Christina/Mom grabs a stool, leaps up behind me onto Mascher's countertop—a space I'm sure many brains had edited out as 'not included' since it sits off stage left and typically serves as the tech booth—and places the stool there. Mom! You can't do that! That's out of bounds!

In the background of the painting, sometimes there'll be a huge mountain…

She places her laptop on top of the stool, on top of the counter. She tilts the screen down for us to see.

…or a glimmer of light, usually pinkish…

It's Master Liu He, who appears on Christina's laptop courtesy of YouTube, beginning to do a Qigong exercise. Look, see, a nice nightlight, Christina seems to say. She leaves the laptop, returns to us, and replaces herself not in the center, but

…somewhere in the frame.

in our self-made perimeter around the lasso. She begins to follow the guiding of Liu He. I take in the new and dynamic diagonal across the space between her, the countertop-stool-laptop-mountain, the lasso, us—an expanded constellation. My eyes travel from place to place—to Master Lie He on the laptop, to the other audience members, to Christina—my focus again, readjusted from hard to soft. I'm newly aware of my own body and the space that surrounds it (the curtain, the blue seats, the electrical outlets…). Christina's talking slows, her breathing continues. She completes the exercise, which bleeds into a quiet continued cycle.

Not always, but often, there'll be a tiny man or cow or puff of smoke

off in the distance.

I don't know whether I pass through *Lasso Belly* or *Lasso Belly* passes through me. I sense what resonates, what collides, catches. I chew my cud. I let the rest go.

___

*Jenna Horton is currently performing with Christina Gesualdo in Annie Wilson's *Lovertits.*

Fresh Juice: Lasso Belly, Christina Gesualdi, Mascher Space Cooperative, November 20-21.

By Jenna Horton
January 17, 2016