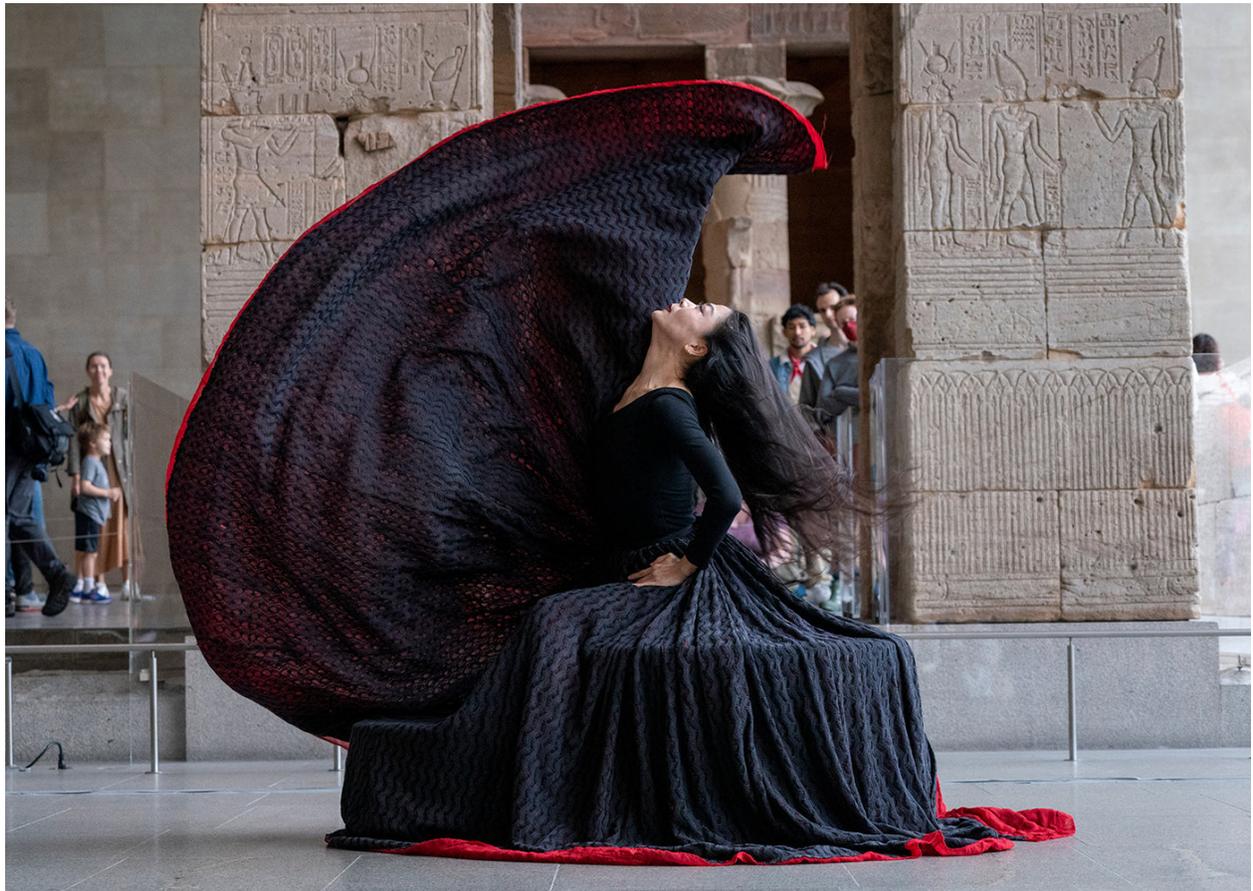


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Radical Dance for Now



Xin Ying in "Spectre: 1914" by Martha Graham. Photograph by Stephanie Berger

Performance

Martha Graham Dance Company at the MET

Place

Metropolitan Museum for the Arts, New York, NY, October 2023

Words

Karen Greenspan

The Martha Graham Dance Company filled some of the Metropolitan Museum's most impressive spaces for two full days with pop-up performances of six Graham solos choreographed in the 1930s. The works were presented in dialogue with the current exhibition "Art for the Millions: American Culture and Politics in the 1930s," an exploration of how artists expressed political messages and ideologies through a range of media. The nation, during that period—much as it is today, was polarized with political division and social upheaval, and artists used their craft to connect with the public and transmit ideologies. Martha Graham held strong opinions on social

issues and the human condition. These inspired much of the work she created in the 1930s, not long after founding her company in 1926. Many of the solos presented at the Met were either lost or forgotten after a period of not being performed and are skillful reconstructions by former company members from photographs.

General Manager for MetLive Arts Limor Tomer is always looking to use live performance to bring museum visitors into a multi-layered conversation with the exhibitions they are seeing. As the exhibition includes footage of Martha Graham's 1935 masterwork "Frontier," with its vision of promise, courage, and widening horizons, it was not a stretch to want to integrate the live performance of all the Graham solos from the 1930s. This resulted in the complete cycle of six solos performed twice daily with two separate casts in four galleries throughout the museum. Those of us who attended all six enjoyed multiple aerobic sprints through the museum corridors trying to avoid collisions with other visitors and the artwork. Although the dances were staged in extraordinary spaces, it is unfortunate that they could not be seen in direct relationship to the exhibition images filled with similar gestures of struggle for survival and revolt. Alas, this was impossible as most of the artwork is relatively small, and the exhibition space is too tight for presenting dance.

The morning began with one of the most recent and affective reconstructions, "Immediate Tragedy." The solo from 1937 was a reaction to the atrocities of the Spanish Civil War and considered to be lost. In 2020, Janet Eilber, reimagined the choreography using recently discovered photos of Graham in a 1937 performance and other archival references and commissioned a new score by Christopher Rountree. The costume—white t-shirt and long, full black skirt with a red lining that flicks into view with every kick of the leg—is eloquent with its unfussy simplicity. Initial somber piano tones provide a wash of sadness as the dancer, seemingly overpowered by a great force, skitters backward into an unsupported (no arms) backbend to the floor. She rises defiantly moving in one direction, then another, until turning around in circles, she raises her arms with crossed fists. Setting a forward course on her knees, she is thrown backwards. Again, she comes to her feet with fists crossed overhead and continues her push forward in a stirring portrayal of determination. The defiant solo was movingly performed by Xin Ying alternating with Anne Souder.



Xin Ying in "Immediate Tragedy" by Martha Graham. Photograph by Stephanie Berger

“Lamentation,” choreographed in 1930, is Graham’s timeless portrait of grief etched onto a purple tube of stretchy fabric encasing a dancer. The tension inscribed on the fabric as the dancer twists and stretches within it creates a searing expression of lament amplified by Zoltán Kodály’s strident piano score. Backdropped by an epic Roman marble sarcophagus in the Met’s Greek and Roman Art Wing, the solo took its place among the classics. So Young An alternated with Leslie Andrea Williams in performance—each fully inhabiting the intensity and tension that “Lamentation” demands and displays.

“Satyric Festival Song” is a strange creation. The Graham Company website describes this 1932 solo as “inspired by American Indian Pueblo culture and the clowns who satirize and mock the sacred rituals.” I had difficulty finding a connection from this idea to the reconstructed solo that teased with quirky shakes, skitters, and hip thrusts performed in a form-fitting, bright, striped dress. The dance disappeared from the repertory for many years and was reconstructed by Diane Grey and Janet Eilber in 1994 from a series of photographs by Barbara Morgan. The solo flute score by Fernando Palacios, commissioned for the reconstruction, sounded like animated birdsong, and was reflected at times in the staccato footwork. Marzia Memoli and Laurel Dalley Smith each performed the piece with their own irresistible, flirtatious energy.



So Young An in “Lamentation” by Martha Graham. Photograph by Stephanie Berger

“Spectre-1914,” a solo created in 1932, became the opening dance to the larger work “Chronicle,” Graham’s response to the menace of fascism growing in Europe at the time. Saturated with a sense of foreboding, the solo features a dancer wearing all black as she manipulates her long, full, black apron with red underlining. Seated on a round stool with tension visible in her cupped palms, the dancer rises like an angered goddess—fists crossed overhead. Moving outward, she maneuvers the apron into a solid red cloak, a frame, a basket of sorrows, a bed, a grave. With swirls, powerful kicks, and pounding fists, the dance portends the specter of another world war that

was coming into view. The solo was danced with fierce emotion by Xin Ying alternating with Leslie Andrea Williams in the magnificent Egyptian Wing with the Temple of Dendur as the backdrop.

Graham's discovery of a pelvic thrust and her ensuing exploration of postural distortion led her to create the solo "Ekstasis" in 1933. The body's bends, twists, and thrusts poke and stretch against the costume—a narrow, flaxen, knit sheath. Virginie Mécène reimagined the current version of "Ekstasis" in 2017 based on sparse documentation that included a few photos of the original solo. To Ramon Humet's score of echoing water drips, the dancer thrusts her hip laterally and opens her arms and chest in a spacious gesture that reaches beyond confining strictures—including her attire. So Young An alternated with Anne Souder dancing the solo in the serene Astor Chinese Garden Court in the Met's Asian Wing. Souder brings to it a noticeable sense of sensual inner enjoyment.



Anne Souder in "Ekstasis" by Martha Graham. Photograph by Stephanie Berger

"Deep Song," a solo that premiered in 1937 as a response to the Spanish Civil War, felt like an expression of the current moment. With its embodiment of distress and torment, Graham conveyed the experiential tragedy of war. The dance later disappeared from the repertory and was reconstructed by Graham with Terese Capucilli in 1989. Marzia Memoli performed the choreography of contractions, falls, and gestures of hands clutching the face and beating the thighs with anguished immediacy. Completing this scene of helplessness is the use of a long bench that the dancer rolls under as if hiding from attack, carries on her back like an injured victim, and finally beats her fists against in utter grief. The bleak picture set to Henry Cowell's score of plucked piano strings resounds with unremitting doom.

Janet Eilber, artistic director of the Martha Graham Dance Company, pointed out that Graham's early solos of that decade focused on pure emotion and for sure, they feel like an instant infusion of human distress. It's key that we reconstruct the expressions of the past and discover an expression of this moment.