

Peripheral vision

Liss Fain melds active intelligence and full-bodied physicality
06.22.10 - 5:07 pm | [Rita Felciano](#) |

DANCE Liss Fain has been choreographing in San Francisco for the last 20 years. Her work has remained on the periphery, probably because it doesn't sync up with trends or the tenor of the times. Fain choreographs highly structured, emotionally cool works in which she shapes and shifts a ballet-based modern dance vocabulary as if to see where she can take it. This type of approach and Fain's type of craft are rare today. It's a pleasure to see an active intelligence engaged in such full-bodied work.

Fain also chooses high-quality collaborators. Her company's costumes — designed by Mary Domenicko and James Meyer this season — are elegant and finely detailed. Fain has worked with the excellent Matthew Antaky for years. His visual and lighting concepts place her dances into richly evocative environments.

Last weekend (June 17-19) at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, Liss Fain Dance presented two premieres, *How it Ends* and *Speak of Familiar Things*. Both were excellently performed by a sextet of new and veteran Fain dancers: Brendan Barthel, Mira Cook, Jennifer Beamer Fernandez, Shannon Kurashige, Alec Lytton, and Bethany Mitchell.

For *How it Ends*, Fain chose fierce percussion by Iannis Xenakis, a shimmering instrumental score by Marcos Balter, and a choral hallelujah by John Tavener. The piece showcased sharp shifts of energy within a single phrase. Fain also used strong gestural language to flatten or cleave space. A face-caressing gesture was as intriguing as it was repetitious.

Proceeding at an even pace, the piece developed a slight trajectory. Initially it elaborated on unisons, most interestingly when a trio for women stepped in and out of commonality. In the more lyrical middle section, two athletic duets for very different dancers took center stage. Barthel and Kurashige shaped each other in precisely calibrated interactions where Kurashige often appeared to take initiative. Lytton and Mitchell's mutual lifts and floats picked up speed until they found themselves — in a delicious moment — frozen side-by-side in a tiny plié. In the work's third and most affecting section, the dancers became hesitant. Before leaving the stage, they walked and stopped, as if waiting for something to happen.

A similar instant occurred in the somewhat loquacious *Speak of Familiar Things*: after his partner walked away, Barthel stood watching a female duet defined by parallel moves. Overall, the piece presented a stream of variably captivating solos and duets. A strong, compact dancer, Kurashige was commanding. Throughout, Beamer Fernandez impressed with her upper-body work, and Mitchell with her speed and power.

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