

ART FORGERS

Art in Progress

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MAIDA WITHERS - THE DANCE OF BEING: EARTH, WIND & SKY

A woman, bent by wind, climbing dunes. Sun bearing down, black shadows in white sand. The impressions of feet, quickly swallowed. Maida Withers' *Sands Cycles* is a visual poem whose media, instead of words, are an environment, Withers, and the video camera eye. Her art is a result of the collaboration of these elements.

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Withers is the Artistic Director and founder of Maida Withers' Dance Construction Company, a professional dance company residing in Washington, DC, and a Professor in the Department of Theatre and Dance at The George Washington University, where she teaches undergraduate and graduate courses in dance and choreography. She has been enormously active in the arts, locally, nationally and internationally, for over 27 years and is dedicated to the intellectual pursuit of the creative and performance art processes of dance and applying them to relevant social and cultural issues.

On stage at Marvin Center Theatre, at George Washington University, Withers and video artist Verabel Chiff recreated the environments of the White Sands of New Mexico, and the Coral Dunes of Utah. These are the earth-site sources for *Sands Cycles*, where Chiff brilliantly videotaped and photographed Withers in an "act of being".

A backdrop screen and a stage set of constructed inclines, draped in cloth, served as projection surface for Chiff's mobile images of sand and sky. Withers also performed live in this space, accompanying her screen image with movement and vocalization. The live performance unfolded the structure of the taped piece as the video had used the environment of the desert as a starting place.

This desert landscape is a starting place for Withers in an even more fundamental sense; the Coral Dunes are the site of her own origins in the Four Corners area of Utah, where her family has been rooted for six generations. She even looks like the landscape there. Her face is that of a hawk or eagle, certainly a bird that soars in those desert skies, at home in vast spaces.

In a conversation I had with her a few days after her performance, Withers elaborates on the philosophy that underlies her work. Talking with her, it soon became evident that she is as fluent at expressing her visions in words as she is in movement. She's the kind of speaker who need only be asked one question to prompt a deluge of thoughts and insights in response.

"Everyone has a story about living a place on earth. They are all unique and particular, and yet they follow a pattern. The earth has memories, it records the presences that inhabit a place. That history and knowledge can be revealed by living there and employing natural forces".

Withers links those forces by being there, working within a set of environmental givens: light, heat, wind, sand, the human

body in its aspects of vigor and fatigue... using what is available. She explains that Chiff's camera "captured the authentic moment when I discovered something while doing what it was possible to do there; finding a weed or a desert insect, or discovering the impressions and shadows my feet or fingers made in the sands. As in any media, the materials are the essence of what you can do".

In Withers' way of working, the rela-

tionship between the materials (the land site) and the artist becomes the process and the content of the piece. In addition to the element of struggle, more and more parallels emerge between artist and material; the wind and human breath; the sensuality of dunes, and the curves of the body.



Maida Withers, still from *Sands Cycles*, video by Verabel Chiff

I saw in *Sands Cycles* a person determinedly struggling to coexist with a demanding environment, and was reminded of that great teacher: *Difficulty*. Embracing trials helps us to see and emerge into our next stage of growth. While the consumer culture teaches us to avoid any kind of difficulty, going so far as to offer us such nonsense as easy to start toilet paper, many other cultures emphasize the value of struggle in their rituals, for example, the Native American Vision Quest, as well as in day to day life.

Withers does not downplay the difficult nature of the environment. Climbing 100 foot dunes, fighting for her breath under a blaring sun, she was tested on many levels. The spirit of curiosity and discovery she demonstrates is rooted in man's basic techniques for survival. When she finds a stone and a stick and uses it to tie her robe, flexing her hands, she has developed technology out of available resources. This is the aesthetic arising from the work. And it is this process that Withers says is the whole point of her work.

Sands Cycles also demonstrates Withers' emphasis on the earth as healthy. Shot close to a nuclear test site, the video piece

does contain images of missiles but they are very few, and do not disrupt the sense of wholeness.

Many of the apparent symbols seemed to be cryptic milestones on a spiritual journey through physical trials. I asked Withers about the dynamic of her piece, whether or not there was an intended progression, a personal or even an heroic journey symbolically expressed. Withers insists that it all occurred in the process, and was never staged. Given Withers'

belief in the earth forces as a connector to our own spiritual forces, it is no wonder that a mythic structure emerges above and beyond any artistic intention. In addition, video artist Chiff states that the final structure of the video *Sands Cycles* is "influenced by writings on myth by Joseph Campbell, Carol S. Pearson and Marion Blumlock on the journey of the Self, the hero's journey".

Maida Withers is a great believer in the ways of nature, and sees our reinstatement in it as a way in which we can come into contact with our ancient selves and ancient knowledge. She noted that in programs about nature and wildlife, man is always absent from the landscape, and she searches for ways to include human beings, to put ourselves in the landscape, in context, and thereby in communication with our own natural myths and symbols. She insists that knowledge resides in nature, and that it is up to us find ways to receive it. Artistic energy can be a powerful facilitator.

"Art has become comfortable being a commodity, and there is nothing wrong with expressing value in monetary terms. But it raises the question of whether an artist, and art itself, can develop its own value in society". In a tribal community, there is a place for one who brings universal messages, but in our own, so much art is already "a museum piece as it is made, it is not connecting to a larger, participating audience".

Part of the problem, Withers believes, is that art is too cloistered in this country. She

points out that America exports its entertainment all over the world, readily embraces new technology that brings about greater and greater potential for shared experience, and yet stingily meters out its art. She points to the recent inaugural celebration as an example — the music, the poetry there. Why isn't this accessible all the time? Why don't we have access to the best of our civilization?

Whatever the future of the artist and audience may be, Withers is an optimist who sees our modern western culture as being at a juncture where the knowledge of indigenous peoples is coming to light, perhaps because of our need for a "simplicity and an authenticity that reflects our real beliefs in life". She sees us longing for integrity and in search of those universal messages, our myths and symbols, the earth whose story we all not only share but contribute to, the holistic consciousness that unites "all people, all species, all elements".

This longing is being expressed everywhere, in art and literature, and on the streets of D.C., in signs reading "thou shalt not kill". Withers suggests that we are tired of thinking in purely practical terms, and that even the scientific method, going deeper and deeper, ultimately reveals naught but the Zen-like paradoxes of quantum physics. We are hungry for knowledge expressed in poetic terms, rather than scientific terms, and we want practice receiving knowledge in an intuitive manner.

We spoke about Withers' group: Art Science Spirit, and how the boundaries between those areas are blurring. I am intrigued by holography for that reason: it is an artistic medium, a scientific phenomena, and a model of spirit, a universal oneness. Withers suggests another model can be found in shadows on different types of sands: in gypsum or quartz, varying angles, temperatures, solubility; conditions producing differing phenomenological and aesthetic results, as well as reverberations in the spirit of earth, presence and memory.

She participated and performed in the conference of The Brazilian Movement of Artists for Nature, as well as in the 1992 U.N. Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro. As Withers formally commented at the Conference: "Many artists are activists, expressing the continuity and interconnections between ecological and social realms, increasing awareness and assisting in breaking down the systems that destroy, inhibit and control. Ultimately, for us, however, artists are a positive and empowering force, a force for creation. Working with the most advanced technology and the simplest performance and rituals, we are joining with others and with the forces in the universe, to bring about transformation through the spirit."

There are many artists, working in both new and traditional media, who are part of this wave of environmental thinking. Withers is confident that what is now considered to be an alternative point of view, will soon become mainstream — "Transform the spirit and new systems will evolve to support the vision".