Her Fishtrap

A Poetic Reflection on Paloma McGregor’s *Building a Better Fishtrap* at Brooklyn Arts Exchange

by Ni’Ja Whitson

*Cold jar swings from the ceiling.*
*Coating its translucence interior thick off white spill.*
*A residue memory, and time.*

It is another of McGregor’s portals.

*Building a Better Fishtrap* commands its audience to receive and witness with the same stamina the soloist McGregor rigorously expels. The performance takes place between three floors of Brooklyn Arts Exchange, a spatial expanse that mirrors the vast locations of physical, object, and media vocabularies embodied. She is wielder/welder/poet/cyclone/octopus/child/magician/dreamer.

*Fishtrap’s* audience becomes her ocean-bound garden, toiled and rooted as the piece unfolds.

One of the work’s most striking and successful elements is the manipulation of object and/in space. Among all three floors, her unique world is made by the ways in which the calculated manipulation of objects installed in the performance space are activated. On the first floor, mason jars are rolled and spun, opened and emptied, carried with care, and abandoned. McGregor, at one point, makes a clever emptying roll of a jar, releasing a swell of aromatic ground mint, then proceeds to further make her/self a conjurer, shifting the air through the sense of smell. She then wafts the jar to the witnesses; putting mint grounds in hand, over body, head, and floor. She cleanses and reopens. The doing in this work is its magic. And McGregor *does* both the subtle and the grand with such intention, the magic hypnotizes.

*She breaks through time. Strung as a clothesline the years hang.*
*With back wing spread the ocean sorceress stops let light wonder over body.*
*She sings her birth. Dances a life from the deep.*
*It was born to her.*
McGregor is a masterful constructionist. Her choreographic structure is tightly considered; thus, where she “plays,” she too devises. Strategically and uniquely working within a grounded knowledge of African diasporic vocabularies (and beyond), Fishtrap makes meaning in the employment of improvisation as a virtuosic practice. And the lines between presumably “set” material and material set live through scored (or structured) improvisation exist here as wonderfully blurred. The dance of this performance is as much in the spaces of (brief) stillness as it is in McGregor’s turns, arm curves, undulations, and foot pounds. This is critical to the work; there are no disposable gestures.

Black mama joy
spin her.
Wave skirt and dive
into.
She wet.
We dry. But we all swim.

Black mama child girl
cross a net sea
to the other side.
We wait
at the shore
she our people
bones in the dark.

Paloma McGregor’s Building a Better Fishtrap is an embodied poem and slicing exposition of memory. It at times lullabies in quiet movement or task, then within an instant destabilizes through near-cinematographic staging and striking movement. Fishtrap gifts what it inquires: play and recall.

To contact the author:
Ni’Ja Whitson,
nija.whitson@gmail.com;
www.nijawhitson.com

For more information on Paloma McGregor and Building a Better Fishtrap, go to www.angelaspulse.org.