

BROOKLYN RAIL

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Filling Station Rebooted

Competing with city life presents a high hurdle.

By Susan Yung



Kris Lee in Matthew Lutz-Kinoy: Filling Station, Mobil gas station, 8th Avenue and Horatio Street, New York, September 15, 2023. Photo by Walter Włodarczyk.

If a ballet is remounted eighty-five years later with new choreography, music, costumes, and (obviously) a new cast, but in the same basic setting, is it a revival, or an entirely new production? Matthew Lutz-Kinoy's *Filling Station* raised that question in two performances at the Mobil on 8th Avenue and Horatio Street in Greenwich Village, presented by The Kitchen. With his collaborators, Lutz-Kinoy created a new entity connected only by title and rough structure to the 1938 ballet by the same name choreographed by Lew Christensen, with libretto by Virgil Thomson. The old and new productions showcased how public amenities such as gas stations act as common spaces where all kinds of people intersect. Interestingly, the older version included armed robbery, whereas the new one featured activists protesting and confronting the police as a representation of civil disobedience.



Matthew Lutz-Kinoy, *Mac's big day in The Castro*, 2023. Acrylic on canvas.
Installation view: Matthew Lutz-Kinoy: Filling Station, The Kitchen at Westbeth, New York, 2023. Photo: Jason Mandella.

Lutz-Kinoy, primarily a visual artist working in ceramics and painting, found inspiration for the project in Paul Cadmus's 1938 costume design for gas station attendant Mac, a recreation of which he saw at the Whitney Museum. Cadmus patterned the coveralls after the old-fashioned uniform, form-fitting but functional, with piping to accentuate the seams—but see-through, so the body's shape emerged. Lutz-Kinoy perceived it as a “glimmer of queer liberation,” as he noted recently in the *New York Times*. Mike Eckhaus and Zoe Latta (of fashion label Eckhaus Latta) designed the new costumes, utilizing for Mac (Kris Lee) a lightweight white fabric—sheer, but still sturdy enough to have functioning pockets, and runway worthy. Shorts and jackets for Roy (Niall Jones) and Ray (Maxfield Haynes), in brown and orange broadcloth, bore the characters' embroidered names as well as many detailed stitching and utilitarian elements that eluded me at a distance. All wore sneakers.



Kris Lee, Mina Nishimura, Maxfield Haynes, Ayano Elson, Bria Bacon, and Niala in Matthew Lutz-Kinoy's *Filling Station*, Mobil gas station, 8th Avenue and Horatio Street, New York, September 15, 2023. Photo: Walter Wlodarczyk.

Lee proved a worthy central performer—quietly commanding, focused in her athletic dancing, some of which required her to snake between bollards. She found nobility even while wiping down equipment, sweeping clean the lot after dousing it with buckets of water, or making peace with disruptive interlopers

While a contemporary sense of gender fluidity suffuses *Filling Station*, a contrasting nostalgia also underpins the new production, primarily because where, other than New Jersey, do people actually pump gas for you? Also, amid the dense urbanity of Manhattan, a gas station is an increasing rarity, and for most residents, less an amenity and more an obstacle as vehicles line up to buy gas, blocking the busy sidewalk. The original ballet's look evoked heartland America as well, not the bustling cityscape of twenty-first-century Greenwich Village.

Some years ago, site-specific performances occurred regularly. Noémie Lafrance staged works in a stairwell, parking garage, and swimming pool. Doug Varone utilized the Tenement Museum and Mammoth Caves as performance sites. Yanira Castro set her dancers in bathrooms and the Brooklyn Botanic Garden. It seems that, due to economics, COVID, and whatever else, there have been fewer site-specific events. So it's remarkable that *Filling Station* occurred at all; a family owns the station, and presumably they were compensated enough to offset any business lost—or they are generous art patrons. In the hours leading up to the 5:30 p.m. performance, vehicles were still lined up to fill their tanks.

For the event, stanchions fenced in the station shortly before it began, and attendees filtered in, with the first group lucky enough to grab seats on small bleachers. Others stood; some got in the way of performers entering and leaving the mini-mart, which served as a staging area. The availability of beverages and snacks in the mini-mart offered a quality amenity.

The show began with Jones and Haynes wrassling some tires into the shop, but not before hacking around with them, rolling, stacking, and standing on them. Jones choreographed the dance (with Raymond Pinto), and Haynes specializes in ballet. Unfortunately, a playful, athletic duet by the two needed more rehearsal, as did their interactions with the tires, even if they emanated an adolescent sense of abandon. No doubt that groundwork on their hands and knees is uncomfortable given the concrete surface, and might limit their range.

The Tourist (Ayano Elson) emerges from the mini-mart with a disposable camera and a six-pack of Liquid Death (canned water), the contents of which she proceeds to dump and spray all over the lot can by can, perhaps a commentary on disregard by tourists and material waste. Rich Girl (Bria Bacon) and Rich Date (Niala) pull up on, ironically, an electric Revel scooter—not to fill up (or even act out filling up) but to amble around the lot, tossing around some hip-hop moves and their hair (Niala's is waist-length).

Two activists clad in black (Haynes and Mina Nishimura), and a cop (Elson) pass through. Nishimura runs in circles around the lot with urgency, yelling at phantoms as Lee attempts to assuage her. (I saw an eerily similar real-life scenario earlier in the day.) Later, Haynes jogs alongside her; they loop in-between the gas pumps (which were oddly unincorporated—maybe it was a condition for safety reasons?), and she rolls on the pavement, log-like. Her desperation and freneticism lent an authenticity otherwise lacking. Smoke billowed from hidden packets on their backs and a cop (Elson), dressed like Neo, intervenes. Five dancers lift Haynes overhead and carry him off, ostensibly a victim of the violence. (In a program note, the collaborators acknowledge the recent killing of dancer/choreographer O'Shae Sibley at a gas station in Midwood, Brooklyn—a reminder that gas stations can be flash points of movement and violence.)

For all the buzz around the site and event, the choreography lacked cohesion and a framework of technique. Drawing diverse talent from far and wide possibly prevented a common kinetic sensibility. The brevity of each section also didn't allow a given style to make an impression. James Ferraro wrote the new score,



Maxfield Haynes and Niall Jones in Matthew Lutz-Kinoy's *Filling Station*, Mobil gas station, 8th Avenue and Horatio Street, New York, September 15, 2023. Photo: Walter Wlodarczyk.

which ranged from minimalist, percussive, and symphonic, but which fought with the ample street noise. The coup de grâce: a brass band across the way began to play partway through, assembling the procession of participants of a mass dining event taking place in the Meatpacking District. Among other distractions—a mobile billboard advertising FlashDancers and ambulances—it was impossible to vie for attention with the cacophony of Manhattan life.

The performance reprised at Dia:Beacon, with poetic, painted drops by Lutz-Kinoy on view at The Kitchen's temporary space in Westbeth, in addition to ephemera from the original and new productions. The scenes are painted in a lovely, washy style—quite a contrast to the urban tumult of the real filling station.

Susan Yung is based in the Hudson Valley and writes about dance and the arts.

<https://brooklynrail.org/2023/10/dance/Filling-Station-Rebooted/>