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‘Matthew Lutz-Kinoy: Filling Station’ Review: Ballet at the Pump Staged at a New York gas station, the artist’s reimagining of a 1938 work proved less engaging than the accompanying gallery show at The Kitchen that explores the original production, including its arresting designs by artist Paul Cadmus.

By Robert Greskovic



Kris Lee, Mina Nishimura, Maxfield Haynes, Ayano Elson, Bria Bacon, and Niala in Matthew Lutz-Kinoy's *Filling Station*. Photo by Walter Wlodarczyk

Having drawn on research begun in 2020, with collaborators in Paris, Vienna and Berlin, American multidisciplinary artist Matthew Lutz-Kinoy is now presenting, following interruptions due to the Covid-19 pandemic, his reinterpretation of “Filling Station,” a “Ballet-Document in 1 Act” first given in 1938 by a short-lived troupe called Ballet Caravan, with choreography by Lew Christensen. The Depression-era ballet—a collaborative effort by Christensen, writer Lincoln Kirstein, composer Virgil Thomson and designer Paul Cadmus—inspired Mr. Lutz-Kinoy with its queer aspects. Prominent among them remains the homoerotic dimension of Cadmus’s costumes, most notably the transparent plastic coveralls for Christensen as the ballet’s leading character, Mac, the gas-station attendant, “beneath which,” as Kirstein recalled in his 1984 Cadmus monograph, “glowed this brilliant classic dancer’s splendid physique.”

The original ballet’s narrative told of a crossroads gas station—overseen by Mac, whose choreography often consisted of air-filled jumps—and the types of Americans who pass through such places. The tone was that of a comic strip, with choreography sometimes borrowing the moves of vaudeville acts; the characters included two truck drivers, a state trooper, a gun-toting gangster, a motorist and his family, and a rich couple following their night on the town. After the scenario’s individuals arrive and intermingle before a climactic stick-up, a shooting and an arrest, Mac remains alone with his newspaper.

With sometimes improvised-feeling choreography by Niall Jones, Mr. Lutz-Kinoy's "Filling Station," which he states "explores a spectrum of queer expression and experience," was recently performed twice at the Horatio Street Gas Station, a functioning Mobil site in Greenwich Village. It will be repeated on Saturday at Dia Beacon, the museum in Beacon, N.Y.



Niall Jones and Kris Lee in Matthew Lutz-Kinoy's *Filling Station*. Photo by Walter Wlodarczyk

Following the initial performances, a gallery exhibition of artworks and historical items related to the two ballets opened at The Kitchen at Westbeth, where it continues through Nov. 3.

The project amounts to two shows—a performance and an art display. The former, arranged for seven dancers as nine individual characters, is accompanied by intermittently jaunty and droning recorded musical segments by James Ferraro. It plays out as locomotive excursions for its cast without much of a through-line. Its impact is more incidental than dramatic.

In piecemeal fashion, the action arranged for Mr. Lutz-Kinoy's reimagined "Filling Station" offers a notable Mac in the subtle performing of Kris Lee, who, in two-piece, translucent coveralls—designed, like all the costumes here, by Eckhaus Latta—maintains an almost contemplative manner that notably contrasts with the more outgoing, one-note modes of the rest of the cast, including Bria Bacon as the brash, careless Rich Girl and Mina Nishimura as the driven Activist I. There is horseplay for the characters named Ray and Roy, who at times roll or spin tires as part of their choreography, as well as some street-dance-cum-ballet moves, in sneakers, for the Rich Girl and her Rich Date who arrive and depart on a moped.

With only minimal information given on the postcard-size handout, and its QR code needed to access fuller program material, it's difficult to say what observers unfamiliar with the history of "Filling Station" will take away from the performance component of Mr. Lutz-Kinoy's contemporary take on his subject. To be sure, the gallery display at The Kitchen is the more intriguing offering.

The full-floor exhibition takes its viewers into the back story of the original ballet collaboration—reproductions of Cadmus's costume sketches stand out—and, through video footage on monitors documenting recent rehearsal sessions, into some of the inner workings of the 21st-century re-creation. Most striking here, especially in The Kitchen's light-filled space, are five large-scale, translucent canvases that emulate theatrical backdrops. Composed by Mr. Lutz-Kinoy, they are reimaginings of Cadmus's set designs; a still larger canvas will be part of the Dia performance.

Elsewhere in the gallery show, samples of the current work's costumes look as conventional and street-



Matthew Lutz-Kinoy, *Mac's big day in The Castro*, 2023. Acrylic on canvas. Installation view in Matthew Lutz-Kinoy, *Filling Station, The Kitchen* at Westbeth, September 16–November 3, 2023. Photo by Jason Mandella.

fashion familiar here as they do in performance, with nothing as witty as Cadmus's often arch takes on 1930s small-town American garb. But high-quality reproductions of George Platt Lynes's studio-lighted photographs of both Christensen (in 1938) and Jacques d'Amboise, who took on the role in the 1953 New York City Ballet revival, are among the show's more vivid items as they document some of Mr. Lutz-Kinoy's vital inspirations for his new work.

Christensen's "Filling Station" entered the repertory of San Francisco Ballet in 1951, the first year of the choreographer's artistic directorship there, and was last presented by that company in 2008. NYCB's 1953 staging was shown the next year on national television—one of the first ballets to be so presented. (There is a YouTube posting of that telecast.) Mr. Lutz-Kinoy has brought new awareness to this piece of ballet Americana. But it's his gallery display, not his live production, that better honors the original ballet.

<https://www.wsj.com/arts-culture/fine-art/matthew-lutz-kinoy-filling-station-review-ballet-at-the-pump-3c29b21c>



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Kris Lee in Matthew Lutz-Kinoy's *Filling Station*. Photo by Walter Wlodarczyk



Bria Bacon and Niala in Matthew Lutz-Kinoy's *Filling Station*. Photo by Walter Wlodarczyk



Maxfield Haynes and Niall Jones in Matthew Lutz-Kinoy's *Filling Station*. Photo by Walter Wlodarczyk

<https://www.dance-enthusiast.com/features/impressions-reviews/view/Matthew-Lutz-Kinoy-Filling-Station-The-Kitchen>