

DANCE

Force field

Choreographer Dean Moss and artist Laylah Ali bring a series of paintings to life **By Gia Kourlas**

When Dean Moss first suggested to Laylah Ali that her paintings might make a great dance, it wasn't in his capacity as choreographer, but as a curator at the Kitchen. "Her work was really interesting, with a kind of inherent drama," he says. "I thought that somebody could bring this to the stage, and I wanted her to have options. Of course, I really wanted to do it." Moss, who is black, felt a kinship with Ali's paintings before he even met her. "I knew that this person probably grew up in a white neighborhood, and I could connect with that," he explains. "I recognized similar strategies—I insist on a kind of visceral toughness in my work. She has that in hers, but her approach is really cool and distant: A weapon is a belt, a rope, a look, a circumstance, a hand at the throat."

Ali, a 2004 Whitney Biennial artist, watched Moss's choreography and found it to be "mesmerizing, foreign, funny, alienating and resistant," she says by e-mail from Australia, where she is traveling. "The chance to work with him seemed too special to pass up." The resulting collaboration, *figures on a field*, which opens at the Kitchen Thursday 5, explores issues of race and power, as well as the consumption of art, and is inspired by Ali's captivating series of "Greenhead" paintings. While *figures on a field* manages to be as provocative and darkly creepy as her work, which depicts cartoonlike characters as both victims and culprits of violence, it is not, mercifully, a danced version of Ali's distinctive imagery. "The performance is so transformed from the paintings that inspired it that while I recognize the ancestry, the performance doesn't really need the paintings anymore," Ali says.

In *figures on a field*—conceived and directed by Moss in cooperation with Ali—there are scenes and characterization, yet the work doesn't follow a linear trajectory. The cast, including remarkable performers such as Okwui Okpokwasili and

David Thomson, is purposely, as Moss puts it, "brown," to match the stick figures in Ali's paintings. Kacie Chang, a longtime dancer in Moss's work, is the exception; she portrays a museum docent. Before the piece begins, Chang stands in the Kitchen's lobby, asking ticket-



SPEAKING IN TONGUES Dancers perform the new *figures on a field*.

holders if they're interested in taking a tour (it costs a dollar).

As select audience members wander among the performers—in one particularly harsh instance, they seem to hang from the back wall with belts strapped around their necks like nooses—Chang encourages her tour group to pose with the art. "If they have their own cameras, they can bring them onstage," Moss says. "If not, Kacie has a cam-

feedback and alternate ideas. "At first, she wondered why I needed her as a collaborator," Moss recalls. "She said, 'Why don't you just look at my paintings and make something based on them? Why do I need to do this?' What I was looking for wasn't really material, but a way of thinking. What makes somebody *think* like that to make that work? I wanted to access those techniques, to be able to generate them through myself. I wanted that understanding. And I couldn't ask for that."

Moss contends that the collaboration garnered him a deeper trust of his own sensibilities. And for Ali, the project got her out of her

cloistered studio environment. "I am accustomed to the relatively autocratic safety of a 2-D practice," she notes. "Living, breathing, three-dimensional dancers who eat lunch and have opinions? That's been new for me." Moss, laughing, recalls Ali's initial reaction to working with people instead of paper: "Normally, she doesn't have to deal with the physicality, the emotions, the negotiating with performers," he says.

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era, and we will e-mail pictures to you. I wanted this dance to be about framing: Just as you are watching this piece, you're watching people in the tour learning about this piece. So the work is a reflection of you in a way, and how you absorb and assimilate culture. That play of duality runs through all of my work."

As the piece developed in the studio, Ali's unusual contribution was not that of a set or costume designer; instead, she attended rehearsals, took copious notes, and offered

"She just draws them, and if they're in the wrong place, she moves them. So there was a running joke about being nice to the dancers."

figures on a field is at the Kitchen Thursday 5 through Saturday 7, and May 12 through 14.

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