

Stitching Time in Mohiniyattam Indian Classical and Western Contemporary dances

By Coman Poon

“Repertoire can be a history of a form, a cultural lens, a history of bodies, spaces and aesthetics. It can also be a coded way of talking about power structures in our field and the inclusion or exclusion of bodies/spaces/aesthetics through canons that dominate.”

-Brandy Leary, Founder and Artistic Director, Anandam Dancetheatre, *Symposium On The Potential Of Repertoire In Contemporary Dance (hosted by TDT)*, March 9, 2017,

Co-curated by emerging curators Nithya Garg and Tanveer Alam, [Engaging in Repertoire](#) took place from June 12 to 23, 2023 at Gerrard Art Space (GAS) and Collective Space (CS) in Toronto. At the end of a two-week choreographic research residency centring the two lead artists Sanjukta Bannerjee and Marie Lambin-Gagnon, an invited public gathered with Garg, Alam and residency co-dramaturgs Harikishan S. Nair and Brandy Leary.

This paper primarily focuses on the macroscopic-the collaborative journey of the residency. In borrowing from the structure of reports on research experiments, I start by acknowledging that artists, audiences, participants, and shared interest ecologies/communities differently contribute as cultural knowledge keepers of dance repertoire. *Stitching Time in Mohiniyattam Indian Classical and Western Contemporary dances* attempts to trouble the binary of analytical subjectivity and objectivity and serves as an incomplete (knowledge keeping) record of a groundbreaking community-led co-curatorial initiative supported by the evolving and newly decentralized Dancemakers.

INTRODUCTION

As part of the inaugural call for Guest Curators adjudicated by Dancemakers selection committee, comprised of Ravyn Wngz, Leelee Oluwatoyosi Eko Davis and Jenn Goodwin, Co-Curators Nithya Garg and Tanveer Alam were invited to develop their project, subsequently entitled **Engaging in Repertoire**.



Residency Co-Curators Nithya Garg and Tanveer Alam. Photo by Coman Poon

I entered as a witnessing-participant tasked to write about the residency. As an initial orientation, I received this curatorial framing from Garg and Alam:

Curatorial Concept/Thinking

Our curiosity stemmed from considering the space of repertoire in dance, and how it is often seen through the lens of canonized material passed down from teachers and choreographers, or one's choreographic work becoming repertoire material. In that sense, both the language of repertoire, as well as its structure, varies across forms and contexts, and we were interested in having artists of different contexts and forms explore established 'repertoire' work - or established choreographic material, and create a space of dialogue and exchange with each other. We were interested in artists having the opportunity to deepen an inquiry into an existing work, and offer opportunities for artists to be exposed to different questions and thinking.

This two week residency brings together two artists, Marie Lambin[-Gagnon] and Sanjukta Banerjee, who are both exploring repertoire material anchored in ideas of slowness —both in form and choreography. We are interested in how these two artists are approaching the concept of slowness within their personal practice and work, and we are curious to see how they can invigorate each other's work through this residency.

With the presence and direction of the dramaturges, Brandy Leary, and Harikishan S. Nair, who will be working with each artist independently, have space together with each artist, and have group discussions and sharing of the work and what is being discovered.

We are working towards creating a space of dialogue and learning, for both artists and audiences, in how to hold different lenses of contemporary expansion and artistic references. We are interested in exploring how repertoire is considered differently across diverse contexts and forms, and open the discussion of holding work over time.

As I discovered, the two lead artists began with the following proposals which either: 1) never manifested (prior to the start of the research in consultation with the co-curators, Sanjukta Banerjee elected to work on another segment from her Mohiniyattam repertoire) or 2) radically evolved (Marie Lambin's original research aims were redirected/transformed in the course of the residency):



Marie speaking with Jessica and Megumi. Photo by Akshay Moncy

“Marie Lambin-Ganon (lead artist) is a choreographer, dancer and visual artist. Her practice combines dance, photography, sculpture and installation. As part of her residency, she will develop her current project, *Still Life*, a series of performances and exhibitions composed of large-scale photographs and sculptural movements.

Inspired by the still life genre, she explores the ephemeral nature of the body and investigate how its shape and movements relate to living and non-living matter. She will be working with dancers **Megumi Kukoba** and **Jessica Germano**.

Resources/Writing on *Slow Death* (the current manifestation of the still life project): <https://marielambingagnon.net/slow-death-1#solo>

Responding to the dramatic setting of AGO's European Masters galleries, *Slow Death* is an installation performance engaging with the idea of perpetual transformation. Juxtaposing found objects, electronic music and colourful fabrics against the 16th century artworks, Lambin-Gagnon creates an eclectic tableau. The performance, consisting of a duo and a solo performer across two different galleries is a deliberate, slow-moving show that brings the viewers on a visual and emotional journey, creating in the process a constant moving image that dies and rebirths in front of the viewers eyes.”



Sanjukta sharing research. Photo by Akshay Moncy

“Sanjukta Banerjee (lead artist) is a dancer-actor and educator specializing in Bharatanatyam and Mohiniyattam. As part of her residency, Sanjukta will be performing Mohiniyattam, a traditional dance practice of women in the state of Kerala, India.

The dance technique has a unique movement quality. Nature inspires the circular pattern of movements—with the sway and gentle hand gestures, undulations of the torso and the knees, which she intends to explore through solo dance practice in her choreographic work based on river Ganges.

Writing Material on Ganges Piece

Through the Ganga Stotram, I explore the symmetry between characteristic features of river Ganga and Mohiniyattam in terms of speed and tempo. I am looking at the movement of Ganga as it equates with a dancing body encountering multiple turns and bends, leaps and sways, embodying juxtaposed movement qualities. I explore the story of life’s cycle-birth to death and after death reflecting the concept of kundalini shakti, which is foundational to Mohiniyattam. The rasa delves into the feminine qualities of the river through emotions such as joy, melancholy, meditation and mourning.”

Prior to my single pre-residency meeting (June 11, 2023) with both Co-Curators, Marie Lambin-Gagnon offered a clarification on how her iterative research and choreographic interests manifest in different creations.

What I will be working on during the residency: