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# Breaking Ground 2017 Put Storytelling Center Stage at Tempe Center for the Arts

BY LYNN TRIMBLE

MONDAY, JANUARY 30, 2017 AT 8 A.M.



Previous performance of Li Chiao-Ping's *Between Here and There*.

*Maureen Janson Heintz/Li Chiao-Ping Dance*

**Five dancers take the stage donning dark gray jumpsuits resembling prison garb.**  
Blending movement, poetry, historic audio, and objects referencing Chinese culture,

they tell the story of Chinese immigrants detained at Angel Island off the shores of San Francisco during the early 20th century, after the U.S. Congress passed the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882.

It's opening night for Breaking Ground 2017, the contemporary dance festival launched a decade ago by Carley Conder, founder and artistic director for CONDER/dance. People are gathered at Tempe Center for the Arts, where the main stage lineup includes 13 dances. Li Chiao-Ping's compelling piece, titled *Between Here and There*, is among them.

A first generation Chinese-American, the Wisconsin-based choreographer, who also performs in the piece, explores issues of race, ethnicity, home, place, power, and identity – incorporating the Emma Lazarus sonnet beloved for its inclusive “Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses...” language, along with poems written by Angel Island detainees and Franklin D. Roosevelt's Statue of Liberty rededication speech.

When *Between Here and There* premiered in 2016, Li couldn't have foreseen its perfect alignment with current events the day she performed it in Tempe. It was Friday night, January 27, the day newly inaugurated president Donald Trump signed an executive order banning citizens of seven predominantly Muslim countries from entering the United States.

The context of contemporary American politics only served to heighten the inherent power of Li's poetic piece, which perfectly balanced movement, sound, and set design. Bottom line: She's a gifted storyteller.

And storytelling was the strongest element of Breaking Ground 2017.



Joe Monteleone, whose *Exposition* was a highlight of Breaking Ground 2017.

*Courtesy of Conder/DANCE*

Several world-première productions – including Joe Monteleone’s *Exposition (of Liquid Fragile Perishable Philosophy)*, oneTON Collective’s *Reshaping Expectations*, and Carley Conder’s *Howard Hughes is dead. Howard Hughes is ill. Howard Hughes is in Las Vegas.* – creatively conveyed tales of self and other.

With *Exposition*, New York dancer Monteleone delivered a “movement and spoken manifesto” featuring his own choreography, words, and music. Taken together, they’re a window into his world view – both quizzical and quirky. Far and away the most moving and meticulous dancer to take the stage during Breaking Ground 2017, Monteleone exudes remarkable energy that radiates even through his thumbs.



OneTON Collective performed a piece developed through a [nueBOX] residency at Mesa Arts Center.

*Keyaanna Pausch*

For *ReShaping Expectations*, the oneTON Collective comprising dancers Kayle Tomooka, Lai Yi Ohlsen, and Jasmine Nunn used movement, video, and simple props to share their “self-perceptions as Asian Americans.” Each entered the stage carrying a small bowl for rice, as a video alternately showed a single hand delving into a bowl of moist rice and dry rice being poured out of a bowl. Its autobiographical foundation gave the piece extra power.

Carley Conder’s new work, inspired by a Joan Didion essay, uses Howard Hughes’ mythical persona to explore “the perils of communication and connection.” It’s a more abstract form of storytelling, fueled largely by Hughes’ eccentricities, which are reflected in movements that range from complete body tremors to a mime’s take on smoking a cigarette with faux sophistication. Conder often explores issues of identity, and her latest iteration is wildly entertaining.



Joan Rodriguez is featured in Carley Conder's dance influenced by Howard Hughes mythology.

*Chris Young*

So, too, were the 10 Tiny Dances chosen for Breaking Ground 2017. They're short dance works, all by local choreographers, performed atop 4-by-4-foot stages – one in the theater lobby and another on an outdoor patio – during intermission. This was the third, and best, year for Tiny Dances. Despite the small stages, choreographers created complex dance works, and dancers excelled at infusing them with humor and emotion.

For the Tiny Dance called *Perpetuating Victoria*, choreographed by Charlotte Adams in collaboration with dancer Dot Armstrong, Armstrong manipulated her white hoop skirt while delivering a sarcastic riff set against the backdrop of classical music by Franz Liszt. For another Tiny Dance, *Savage Abstractities*, choreographers and dancers Anthony James Kelly (Akellz) and Juan “Coel” Rodriguez coupled frenetic movement with slapstick humor.





Dot Armstrong performs the Tiny Dance *Perpetuating Victoria*.

*Lynn Trimble*

Most passionate was a Tiny Dance called *Disenchanted* performed each evening by choreographers Nicole L. Olson and Travis Richardson to mesmerizing music by Laura Marling. Tightly gripping one another as the dance begins, they end the dance alternating togetherness and separation by a slow, dramatic unclasping of their hands.

Taken together, both evening-length dance works and their shorter small-scale counterparts, did something more than just telling individual stories. They told the story of a dance scene growing increasingly creative, energetic, and diverse. And that's the most compelling story of all.