

# GUARDIAN

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## **One of three Lily Cai falls prey to uneven collaboration**

Lily Cai clearly respect her collaborators – perhaps too much. Respect is the most basic ingredient in any partnership, but that shouldn't mean that one collaborator has to be subservient to another. That's exactly what happened in two of the three pieces the Lily Cai Chinese Dance Company performed last weekend at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts.

The concert found the Shanghai-born choreographer teaming up with two artists – composer Gang Situ for *Strings Calligraphy* and video artist Ed Tannenbaum for the new *Silk cascade*. *Calligraphy's* five sections were set so literally that at times the choreography looked like a sonogram of the music. During the second part of *Cascade*, when Tannenbaum's contribution kicked in, the stunningly deployed multicolored ribbons of Cai's latest ribbon dance became fodder for his real-time video work. The choreography was subsumed by the technology, losing whatever independent voice I aspired toward.

*Bamboo Girls*, the second premiere, set to a mix of traditional Chinese music by Situ, proved to be the most intriguing of the trio of works, showcasing Cai's individual sensibility and her ongoing immersion in Chinese folk culture. As a choreographer, Cai has much going for her, though she possesses a painterly rather than kinetic imagination; creating transitions from movement to movement may not be her forte, but creating images most definitely is. In some respects Cai harks back to dance pioneers Loie Fuller and Alwin Nilolai, who also referenced pictorial qualities in their works.

Cai's dances are both seductive and reserved, frequently embracing stasis. Small, tight gestures – the tilt of a head, an undulating arm, a leg stepping sideways – assume great importance. Also, no one in the Bay Area uses the female torso the way Cai does. Deeply sensual and extraordinarily strong, the spines of her seven women dancers become tools of expressive power and moral ambiguity. When the dancers languidly stretch their backs into an S-form (with energy crawling from the bottom of the spine to the top of the head), or when they sway their hips with the tiniest shifts of weight, you're never quite sure if you're watching a private ritual or an invitation to step closer. These women are strong athletes with considerable upper-body resilience, capable of throwing and manipulating yards of ribbon even as they take to the air.

The quasi-camp *Bamboo Girls*, not as self-consciously trashy as 1998's *Southern Girl*, neatly slithered between images of traditional femininity and an overt sexuality reminiscent of barebacked Vargas pinups. In the first (more kinetic) section, the dancers wore revealing miniskirts; later they switched into no-back jumpsuits, and their faces were hidden by the bouncing fringe of their large hats. You could still see the traditional folk dance pattern in the mincing steps, pulled-in elbows, and hands demurely rested on thighs. But when the dancers turned, their naked backs suggested that the cavorting and undulating was not as innocent as it looked.

*Strings Calligraphy* – beautifully lit by Matthew Antaky, featuring subtly colored shifting panels by calligrapher Lampo Leong - premiered last year with the New Century Chamber Orchestra. Situ's score, now reduced to four strings and erhu (the latter played by Jiebing Chen), worked just fine. The erhu's naturally high and pure sound rose above and integrated with the Western instruments. In addition to some imaginative work with ribbons (at times they looked like waterfalls emanating from a dancer's hand), the piece featured a slowly dissolving sculpture of piled-up bodies. But other choices – raising ribbons to crescendos and wiggling them to tremolos – proved trite.

The bouncy *Silk Cascade* was at least partly inspired by Jackson Pollock's action painting. Set to music from John Adams's "Century Rolls" – which sounded as if it aimed to mimic a player piano – the piece was a busy affair. Pollock's kinetic process may have godfathered *Cascade*, but the end result never came close to the complexity of his richly textured canvases. Tannenbaum's single camera blended and blurred images of the ribbon – whirling dancers; at one point he introduced a punctuating rhythm into his stream of visuals, which set it apart from the dancers themselves. More of that kind of counterpoint was needed.