

Confronting Mortality With a Smile

By JENNIFER DUNNING

Published: November 25, 2004

How to define the art of performing? Karen Bernard, a New York solo dancer and producer, and Nathalie Claude, who works in dance, theater and television in Montreal, came close on Saturday night at Dixon Place on the Bowery.

Their material was decidedly offbeat. Ms. Bernard burrows into a middle-aged female self in "Removed Exposure," performed to music that included songs by Cher, Etta James and Outkast, with a film of her performing what looks like a striptease, except she is clothed. There is no easy feminist self-celebration here. Instead, Ms. Bernard's choreography, directed by Maureen Brennan, probes unlovely flab and all that comes with it with an interest that is strangely tender. The solo is sensual, too, as when the live dancer slowly strokes her leg with a mirror - a family heirloom, she says.

Ms. Claude tackles loss and melancholy in her three-part "Sadness Trilogy," performed to popular and classical music, a soundtrack by Isabelle Lussier and a spoken excerpt from Sophocles' "Electra." She plays three characters in the dance's segments.

First Ms. Claude is a plump, white-suited angel, with a large, bleeding wound over her heart, from which she extracts a tomato that she later crushes with a mallet. Next comes an over-the-top mourner, followed by a game-show contestant in a red space suit. The contestant is challenged to depict sadness vibrantly, and she does, in clowning that is breathtaking in its funky audacity.

Ms. Bernard and Ms. Claude share an interest in themes that are most often treated with violin-accompanied seriousness. But they also inhabit the stage with such fearlessness, adroit timing and quiet authority that they draw in the audience to live, with them, in their performing. We follow them wherever they go.