

(M)IMOSA

**Twenty Looks or Paris is Burning at
The Judson Church (M)**

**Cecilia Bengolea - François Chaignaud
Marlene Monteiro Freitas - Trajal Harrell**

PRESS REVIEW

Harlem drag-ball voguing meets modern dance in (M)IMOSA at Festival TransAmériques



Internationally-acclaimed New York choreographer Trajal Harrell's co-stars in (M)IMOSA, part of the Festival TransAmériques at the Cinquième Salle of Place des Arts, May 26-27 at 9 p.m. nightly (All photos courtesy FTA, unless otherwise noted)

If you were swept away by Harlem's world of drag ball culture in filmmaker Jennie Livingston's landmark 1990 documentary film *Paris is Burning*, then you will love NYC choreographer Trajal Harrell's five-part dance series *Twenty Looks or Paris Is Burning at The Judson Church*.

Harrell often wondered why the path-breaking post-moderns of the Judson Dance Theatre downtown had the respect of the dance world, whereas the voguing drag queens from Harlem did not.



New York choreographer Trajal Harrell (Photo courtesy Trajal Harrell)

So Harrell created a historical fiction: What would have happened in 1963 in New York if a figure of the voguing scene in Harlem had gone downtown to dance alongside the pioneers of post-modern dance?

(M)IMOSA – the third installment (size M) in Harrell's *Twenty Looks or Paris Is Burning at The Judson Church*, which was created in five sizes (from XS to XL) – attempts to answer that question.

"I've been working on the relationship between post-modern dance and voguing since 2001, but as my work started to tour internationally in 2007 and 2008, I realized that people who hadn't seen my work didn't understand where it was coming from, which is why I initiated this project," Harrell told me this week.



The cast of (M)IMOSA at Festival TransAmériques, May 26-27 at the Cinquième Salle of Place des Arts

Harrell met *(M)IMOSA*'s co-choreographers and performers Cecilia Bengolea, François Chaignaud and Marlene Monteiro Freitas – all of whom all had their own successful solo careers – in the DanceWeb program at the 2008 Impulztanz festival in Vienna. Two years later they joined forces to create *(M)IMOSA*, first presented in New York in 2011.

"I was very passionate about it because I wanted it to become an important part of the landscape of the international dance scene," Harrell says.

After wowing audiences overseas, *(M)IMOSA* will surely do the same here in Montreal at the Festival TransAmériques this weekend, when Harrell and his partners take the stage May 25-26 at the Cinquième Salle of Place des Arts.

"I am also not claiming that I am a voguer," Harrell says. "The work I do is completely contemporary dance. *(M)IMOSA* is influenced by voguing, especially the formal aspects of the voguing scene. Many [other projects] look at the movements but not the structure of the balls, the underpinnings, the formal ideas underneath voguing. We do."

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Trajal Harrell at The Kitchen

By Christine Hou

(M) is for (M)imosa, an unassuming, gender-bending, dancer. Mimosa transforms. S/he is multiple personalities rolled into one: a Latina rockstar, a ballerina, a student studying abroad, a butch queen, and Prince, amongst other things: “I am Mimosa.”

This is Trajal Harrell’s *Twenty Looks or Paris is Burning* at The Judson Church: Medium (M), which had its premiere at The Kitchen in February. It is the third in a series of performances [Small (S) premiered at The New Museum in 2009 and Extra Small (XS) premiered at Abrons Arts Center in January] derived from the question: “What would have happened in 1963 if someone from the voguing ball scene in Harlem had come downtown to perform alongside the early post-moderns at Judson Church?” Harrell is exceptionally smart in his approach to (M) aka (M)imosa, investigating what constitutes contemporary dance with glamour, humor, and wit. Despite what his starting question may make you think, the result feels nothing like an academic endeavor. In drawing from the voguing dance tradition, a performance subculture that emerged in the early 1960s primarily featuring gay, lesbians, and transvestites from the African-American and Latino community, Harrell calls upon a specificity in human experience that bore little presence in early Postmodern thought. That is, the universalist notion that everyday movement is considered dance and anyone can be a dancer.

Set in a formalized variety show cum underground beauty pageant, (M)imosa loosely weaves four personas together in a seductive, sometimes rambling narrative. A topless and sculpted Marlene Monteiro Freitas gives a memorable introduction. She moves through exaggerated fashion model poses and lewd references to her body with ease and fluidity. She tears extensions out of her black curly hair while her perky breasts bounce up and down. She vogues as if she were on a catwalk, giggles coyly, fondles herself, and then pulls down her black leggings, mooning the audience. Freitas’ frenzied, but distinctly fabulous persona sets the tone for the evening while also standing in stark contrast to the modest Harrell, coquettish and sumptuous François Chaignaud, and androgynously sexy Cecilia Bengolea. Cross-dressed Chaignaud, initially sitting in the audience, makes a beautiful, dramatic appearance as s/he descends onto the stage while singing an operatic melody about fucking. Other highlights include Harrell’s elegant New-Way vogue solo, which he choreographed while “studying abroad in Peru” and Bengolea’s creepy, toppling spider dance in a fully-covered nude body suit complete with stuffed phallus and monstrous heels à la Marilyn Manson’s *Mechanical Animals* album cover.

The pacing throughout the 90-minute performance is a bit inconsistent. There are a few too many predictable claims of being the real Mimosa and two similar back-to-back sets of lip-synching duets. However, (M)imosa climaxes with a compelling black light “fashion show”; replete with neon-glowing thongs, lips, eyelids, and bikini straps, it is an effective, visual critique on minstrel shows. Watching clips from old blackface performances is a visually jarring experience: the mask-like effect of pitch black faces painted against the lighter skin around the eyes and lips, along with offensively foolish personas, is appalling. Harrell’s brilliant criticism of this practice continues to the point of exhaustion on the performers’ and viewers’ part. But exhaustion, and even annoyance, seems to be what he is going after as he raises the obvious question: How could a social practice like blackface have been accepted for as long as it was? The evening concludes with final solo sets from all of the performers, including Freitas’ eerily faithful rendition of Prince’s “Darling Nikki,” and Bengolea’s cover of Kate Bush’s “Wuthering Heights,” both of which undoubtedly steal the stage.

The most unassuming, Harrell is nonetheless the most captivating of the four. He never changes clothes like the others, remaining in a black sweatshirt and corduroy khakis throughout the evening (with the exception of a few head accessories and makeup). In emphasizing the individuality of each performer, Harrell fosters a truly collaborative environment where identities subsume one another all while maintaining their own autonomy. Themes of gender, sexuality, and race are played out on the stage in a theatrical but unpretentious matter. In fact, the entire front row is dedicated to the cast’s wardrobe, an open public dressing room where identities are no longer magically transformed backstage. Nothing is hidden and nothing off limits. Instead, all four performers engage in a continuous process of scavenging, undressing, waiting, changing, undoing, and redoing. We watch wide-eyed as Harrell and his collaborators embrace this process and all of its uncertainty, with grace and vogue.

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Walter Dundervill and Trajall Harrell Give New Meaning to the Word “Show”

Dance Theater Workshop and the Kitchen host the choreographers

EXCERPTED

These days, Trajal Harrell's mission and his destiny are clear. He wants to imagine what might have happened had voguing infiltrated iconoclastic Judson Dance Theater performances in 1963. He's hot to mingle everyday movement, matter-of-fact presentation, process as performance, and queries about art with the splashy, gender-bending theatrics of voguing and the Ball competitions documented in the 1990 film *Paris Is Burning*. So far he's produced two "sizes" of *Twenty Looks or Paris Is Burning at the Judson Church*, extra-small and small. The version that lit up the Kitchen (alit on?) has an M after its name. I wouldn't, however, use the word "medium" to describe its impact. Devised and choreographed with three unusual and vivid French performers, the piece at times rambles and fusses around, then erupts with some fabulously theatrical image.



Paula Court
Gawky marvel: Marlene Monteiro Freitas in Trajal Harrell's (M)imosa aka
Twenty Looks or Paris is Burning at the Judson Church (M)

Harrell chats up the audience before the show starts. Costume changes litter a few of the seats. The performers hunker down in the front row or in the aisle to apply makeup and watch colleagues. Harrell himself seldom alters his attire: gray jeans and long-sleeved T-shirt. But the first solo is spectacularly weird. In front of five standing banks of four lamps each (lighting by Yannick Fouassier), Marlene Monteiro Freitas appears wearing only black tights and high-heeled boots. To an uncredited swatch of music that sounds something like a gamelan gone wild, she's a gawky marvel. Staring at us all the while, she twists and arches her back and swings her limbs around; she makes explosive jumps, falls heavily, and gallops around the arena. She pulls hanks of fake hair from her curly black mop. Then, simmering down into pseudo-Judson casualness, she approaches a mic, introduces herself as Mimosa Ferrara, and tells us that her tights keep falling down.

The other two guest collaborators are equally astonishing. François Chaignaud comes down the aisle clad in a gray satin evening gown and in a nimble, caressing contralto sings of which national and ethnic groups we can fuck. Stripping down to fake boobs and a sparkly g-string, this version of Mimosa Ferrara can also manage a raptly lyrical solo with uncanny balances on one leg. Cecilia Bengolea comes before us, strutting sinuously in a high-heels-point-shoe combo and covered from her feet to the top of her head in a flesh-colored body stocking. She also sports the outline of a discreetly restrained penis. In this garb, she arches into backbends and bourrées in a squat. Where have these people been all my life?

There's highlight after highlight as the evening meanders along. Harrell introduces and performs a solo—his first—made while traveling in Peru; it's a slow, serpentine, inwardly focused piece that barely moves from one spot. Ambiguities of race and gender abound. All four put on flamboyant fluorescent lipstick and eye makeup; when the lights go off, they look like lost minstrel show entertainers. Askew imitations of pop singers alternate with plainspoken snatches of autobiography. Monteiro Freitas fiercely lip-synchs and twitches through "Dance Little Sister," looking remarkably like Prince, her face manned-up by a five-o'clock shadow. Bengolea, freed of her body-suit, shrieks her off-key way through another song, as if channeling Kate Bush and Florence Foster Jenkins at the same time.

DANCE | DANCE REVIEW

Vogueing in a Playground of Gender, Celebrity and Fashion

By ROSLYN SULCAS FEB. 11, 2011

The postmodern choreographer Yvonne Rainer said no to rather a lot of things in her famous 1965 manifesto: “No to spectacle no to virtuosity no to transformations and magic and make believe no to glamour and transcendency of the star image.” And more.

That’s the blueprint that Trajal Harrell has addressed and turned inside out in “Medium (M),” also known as “(M)imosa,” the latest piece in his multipart work “Twenty Looks, or Paris Is Burning at the Judson Church.” Mr. Harrell has been working on “Twenty Looks” for several years, creating differently sized versions of a response to a not very simple question, noted in the news release: “What would have happened in 1963 if someone from the ball scene in Harlem had come downtown to perform alongside the early postmoderns at Judson Church?”

His idea of variously sized dances — so far there is “(S),” which he first presented in 2009, and “Extra Small (XS),” a solo that ran Thursday and Friday alongside “(M)” at the Kitchen — is taken from fashion, which is, of course, the point. Mr. Harrell’s seductive, seditious, subversive shows are as much a commentary on fashions in dance and spectatorship as they are on the industry of glamour and the cult of the star. (Doug Elkins’s 1991 “Where Was Yvonne Rainer When I Had Saturday Night Fever?” was a brilliant if more scattered take on the same idea.)



Cecilia Bengolea in “Medium (M),” also called “(M)imosa,” part of “Twenty Looks, or Paris Is Burning at the Judson Church.” Credit Ruby Washington/The New York Times

“(M),” as the piece is also known, offers the two extremes suggested by the “what would have happened” question. Over-the-top theatricality and matter-of-fact banality collide as the four performers (Cecilia Bengolea, François Chaignaud, Marlene Monteiro Freitas, Mr. Harrell) offer a succession of personalities, each insisting that he or she — and often it’s unclear which is which — is called Mimosa Ferrera.

“I am the real Mimosa,” each claims, but of course there is no real Mimosa. Mr. Harrell suggests that personality, gender and identity are fluid, slippery constructs, as each performer morphs before our eyes into a new theatrical construct, applying makeup and changing clothes in the audience, scratching about distractingly in plastic bags placed on seats in a (possibly over-obvious) refusal of performance etiquette.

At the confluence of the ordinary and the spectacular are both beauty and entertainment. There is a sensational scene in which ultraviolet light transforms the dancers into blackface voguers, and Ms. Freitas is brilliance incarnate in her bizarre lolloping, grimacing opening solo and later her uncanny impersonation of Prince.

But she isn’t alone: Mr. Chaignaud, near naked with pasted-on fake breasts, offers a quasi-religious vision of beatitude in a sculptural solo to slow piano music; Ms. Bengolea is a hilariously uncool Kate Bush; and Mr. Harrell is mesmerizing in a melancholy solo that alludes to voguing with subtle, sinuous charm.

The pacing of “(M)” is uneven, and the frequent references to the nonexistent Mimosa feel overworked. But you’re never less than happy to be there, watching Mr. Harrell and his ever-changing crew say yes to everything.

“Medium (M),” or “(M)imosa,” is continuing on Saturday at the Kitchen, 512 West 19th Street, Chelsea; (212) 255-5793, thekitchen.org.

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Cecilia Bengolea - François Chaignaud