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Ronnie Clarke, *Sole Purpose*
June 21- September 12, 2017

Dance, like all your selves are watching

*"Every time I dance,
I'm trying to prove myself to myself".*

— Misty Copeland *Elle Magazine Interview, 2015.*

In her performance-based video installation, *Sole Purpose* (2015), Ronnie Clarke draws the viewer into the intimate moment of breaking by exploring her relationship with dance and art. The self-described “dance school drop out” is also a London/Toronto-based conceptual artist who began working on this project while completing her BFA at Western University.

“[*Sole Purpose*] was informed in the simplest way from a class at the time. I was given an assignment and our prof asked us to think outside of the box. I take things literally, I guess.”¹ Clarke chooses video as the prime medium for her interrogation of being a ballet dancer while confronting the moment just before she hangs up her shoes for the last time. This juncture is performed poignantly, dramatically, ceremoniously, spiritually and rife with tension. *Sole Purpose* begins with Clarke, the subject, approaching a small plywood stage with bright pink drywall covering its surface. She greets the board with ease, wearing ballet point

¹ Ronnie Clarke (artist) in conversation with author, May 2017.

slippers and begins a “loosely choreographed”² interpretive dance against the backdrop of wintery snow banks. The drywall that she performs against is still wet and the pink layering malleable, allowing her shoes to glide across the platform. Her movements are assertive and forceful — bouncing, slipping, stomping, flailing — and then switch to a more controlled and fluid sweeping motion. Here, Clarke’s work becomes a ritualistic reshaping of the body.

“This chapter of my history as a dancer was previously left unresolved.”³ When Clarke created this work, she had left the Martha Hicks School of Ballet three years prior. “I had to question why I left and what was left out of that process.”⁴ Often the only black ballet dancer in the studio, Clarke confesses she “felt weird in the room” and remembers feeling like she was “performing as someone else.”⁵ After having left dance school and currently pursuing visual art, the intention behind *Sole Purpose* is to examine what role ballet presently serves in her life.

“It was difficult. It felt like squeezing yourself in[to] a space, sometimes smaller, sometimes bigger, ballet tries to make you like everyone else.”⁶ From the shoes to the tights, the “uniform didn’t fit my skin tone,”⁷ and the demand to conform was imposed upon her body. Now in *Sole Purpose*, the viewer witnesses Clarke stomping out pent-up energies of perfection, confinement and structure.

“This is what is asked of you. Sameness.”⁸ Sameness, however, is an impossibility as a black ballet dancer. The leading question that guides Clarke’s meditation while performing her work was: “How do you break out of something you are not sure you can break out of?”⁹

² Ibid

³ Ronnie Clarke “Sole Purpose”. *Youtube*, accessed May 2017.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OqKEYbIAOTI>.

⁴ Ronnie Clarke (artist) in conversation with author, May 2017

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ronnie Clarke (artist) in conversation with author, May 2017

It is an uneasy task for the artist to challenge her life before, during and after ballet. *Sole Purpose* does so by existing within a time-lapsed landscape. Even the moment when the tripod enters the frame, the viewer is reminded that this work includes documentation. This is a hybrid performance, exploring both form and fracture; and yet the very space itself becomes atemporal; a dimension of contestation as Clarke pushes up against the regimented nature of ballet with liberating and complex gestures. By capturing the spirit of her transition, the work shifts between being aggressive, poetic, sobering and finally, a silent space(s).

Another marvel from the performance *Sole Purpose* is that it was created in one take. “[Originally there were] two cameras but one died because it was so cold...the second one died right after the performance was complete.”¹⁰ The chilled climate is evidence of discomfort in Clarke’s dance moves, and yet she continues, as if the action must be completed for closure sake. Immediacy and timing, the specificity of that captured moment, holds *Sole Purpose* within this in-between realm.

“There is always a mirror facing you,”¹¹ Clarke explains as she elaborates on her experiences during ballet school. “Standing in a mirror for several years...that is the atmosphere of dance. And for me, you are either the other or othered.”¹² Now, approaching graduating the school of visual arts and having created works beyond *Sole Purpose*, Clarke creates in a new space. “My studio is in my brain. I can’t be working or brainstorming sitting down. I’m making playlists...I’m dancing or blasting ‘90s or 2000s hits or obscure [songs] and I’m making playlists for the studio.”¹³ Movement clearly continues to inform her work and Clarke shares that, “I want to put myself into it.”¹⁴ Being visible in her videos, with a keen focus on her body, most notably in *Sole Purpose*, Clarke concludes that “ [the work] help[ed] me be authentic in what [artists] want to do – and pushed me to go

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ronnie Clarke (artist) in conversation with author, May 2017.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

beyond the [grading] mark.”¹⁵

The dynamic energy in which Clarke moves in *Sole Purpose* is a reclaiming of the self and arguably, in multiple selves. Situated outdoors, here the subject is fully participating in a new form of inner reflection, instead of spending hours seeing one’s reflection in a sterile dance studio. We are privy to close-ups of her feet, the contrast of her skin and shoes. The vibrant cement under her trembling movement suggests a struggle for release. Nearly the end of the performance, hunched over, hands on knees and head down, the viewer witnesses a conjuring of conclusions, an unspoken finale that explores how these shoes will be put to rest.

this is not ballet.

this is a breaking.

this is how one breaks ballet inside of them.

After the video installation, the ballet shoes were left for casting, serving as a physical monument to the artist arriving at a final relief, Clarke explains. In contrast to the dynamic movement of the dance, the shoes are suspended in time. This stillness offers solace for both the artist and dancer within Ronnie Clarke. “*Sole Purpose* signals a break, but [it also] choreographically borrows from the ballet I learned and I will never forget.”¹⁶

-Whitney French is a writer living in Toronto who is presently curating a collection called *Black Writing Matters* for University of Regina Press. She is also anthologized in *The Great Black North: Contemporary African Canadian Poetry*. More info: whitneyfrenchwrites.com

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ronnie Clarke “Sole Purpose”. *Youtube*, accessed May 2017.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OqKEYbIAOTI>.

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