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Laura Schandelmeier asks the question and offers unexpected answers.

What Is Dance?

By Cheryl Pallant

Laura Schandelmeier has a mission: She wants to know what's possible in dance. She wants to know what remains when expected classical and modern dance moves are omitted or reconfigured. In her upcoming Artspace show, "Bare Bones Showing," movement-based soloist Schandelmeier pursues her ongoing preoccupation with self-imposed limits upon the moving body.

"I think it's important to ask, 'What is dance?'" she explains. "It's one of my constant investigations. I have many ideas about what it is, but those ideas change. What I do is pure dance." Her idea of purity, however, doesn't always correspond with others' definition, a difference she's well aware of. She frequently embodies a character or an idea, her gestures and antics advancing the story. Relying on a narrative, not necessarily linear, her movements suggest cultural icons or popular beliefs, though she erodes or reconstructs them often with humor so they can be seen anew. Her sharp wit emerges through simple, often contained, fluid movements and the use of a prop.

In "Mademoiselle," which Richmonders saw part of this past May in "Yes Virginia, Dance," she stands atop a box and never strays very far. The pedestal limits the range of her movement; at the same time, it accentuates the moves she performs — at its edge or as she totters off. Boxed-in, she explores a woman's expected behaviors, the slight turn of a leg or gaze capturing seduction or vulnerability.

The constraints of the box become "territory worth investigating" and appear also in "Holiday Suite," a series of holiday-inspired fantasies. She explains, "It's interesting to impose strict, concrete limitations. It forces me to reach greater clarity and get more specific. ... Generally, I let the idea of the work dictate the form."

In the debut of "Ballad II," a surreal and violent duet, she partners with a life-size doll made by Richmonder Eleanor Ruffy. In this work and the others, a single movement is layered with meaning. She intends the movement "to resonate on at least three different levels. ... I aim at truth — not The Truth, but a truth that resonates with human nature. ... My work is like a sculpture that you look around from different angles. The different angles make it whole."

The truth according to Schandelmeier is refreshing in her tackling of issues, her witty playfulness, and movements that cover much ground, though she never steps far from her box. Richmonders have seen a scant selection of her work in the past few years; this concert provides a larger and welcome view.