



Woman, do you fear? by Jenny Gerena performed during Breaking Ground 2018. / Michael Simon

Breaking Ground 2018 Channeled Women's Strength and Resilience

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As women across the U.S. and beyond participated in marches designed to elevate their political power, artists and community members gathered in Tempe for a dance festival that channeled women's diversity, strength, and resilience.

The two-day Breaking Ground dance and film festival, presented by CONDER/dance at Tempe Center for the Arts on Friday and Saturday, January 19 and 20, perfectly captured the present moment in American life – when women are reaffirming their rights to shape and share their own stories.

Breaking Ground is the brainchild of Carley Conder, founder and artistic director for Tempe's CONDER/dance. She launched the festival in 2008, and it's become a staple of the metro Phoenix dance scene, by consistently showcasing an intriguing mix of contemporary dance works by local, national, and international artists.

The 2018 festival was particularly strong, primarily because a significant number of choreographers championed women's agency over their bodies, emotions, ideas, and actions.

A black-and-white dance film called *Floating Chronologies* helped set the tone for Breaking Ground 2018. Dmitri von Klein filmed choreographer Mary Fitzgerald and six additional dancers moving through a desert landscape.

Representing three generations of women, their sweeping movements and shifting pairings conveyed strength, freedom, resolve, and sisterhood. Like several of this year's offerings, the film was, in part, a meditation on aging.

For *Hybrids of Plants and of Ghosts*, choreographer Rosanna Tvarez chose a sound score that included a taped conversation with her mother, Lelia Tvarez, on the topic of her late grandmother's Alzheimer's disease.

Tvarez, a Los Angeles-based artist who uses the moniker La Dansa Dansa, performed the piece with Jen Hong. Tvarez's choreography culminated with the unraveling of a yarn head wrap symbolizing her grandmother's shifting identity, and reflected the agonizing push and pull of competing emotions experienced by family caregivers.

Each piece spoke to women's strength and resilience, as did a pair of works exploring the experience of death.

Saturday's program opened with *Wake*, in which Sarah Haas channeled emotions she felt as a 12-year-old attending her mother's wake. Danced against a stark black background, with silence punctuated only periodically by Haas' angst-ridden screams, it conveyed the intertwined feelings of wanting to give up and resolving to press on.

Breaking Ground 2018 also included *Dust to Dust* by Tucson choreographer Shelly Hawkins, which was danced by Natalie Clevenger to an old American folk tune. The work imagines a woman coming to grips with her own life choices, even as she approaches death. Clevenger's graceful, sweeping arm movements mirrored the woman's graceful acceptance of the trajectory of her life. The beauty of Hawkins' dance was compounded by a large palo verde branch suspended in air above the stage. Although several works addressed loss, that certainly wasn't the sole aspect of human existence explored by this year's lineup of choreographers.

Jay Carlon's *Dance Film Selfie*, comprising a montage of videos he's filmed of his own spontaneous dances undertaken in unconventional settings on several continents, revealed the human drive toward wonder and play. And the artist collective Tales Between Our Legs used animal masks and snippets of comments by self-indulgent artists and audience members to poke fun at the human tendency towards grandiosity — with a piece titled *A Dismal Glimpse at a Script We Created to Keep Us Moving Forward*.

New York-based choreographer Pamela Pietro considered the narratives individuals create for their own lives in a work called *all the things i thought i knew...*, a piece commissioned by Carley Conder as part of her ongoing Flying Solo project. Conder danced the piece on Friday night, demonstrating her gift for marrying strong, clean technique with subtle expressions of emotion that enhance rather than overshadow her movement.

Phoenix-based Jenny Gerena created work with a whole other feel, which was inspired in part by the instincts of wolves. Gerena choreographed *Woman, do you fear?* with the five dancers who perform with her in the piece, assuring that it included each one's "individual feminist perspectives on dominance, protection, solitude, and solidarity." The resulting dance elevates women's impulses toward being wild and free – and protective of other women. It's one of four works that premiered during this year's Breaking Ground festival.

Although several of the best performances focused on women's experiences, Breaking Ground 2018 also included broader perspectives.

For example, Los Angeles-based choreographer Julio Medina performed his own work titled *I Gotta*, which blends breaking and modern dance as it questions what Medina calls "the relationship between masculinity, sexuality, and vulnerability." Picture a man told to improve his break dancing by drawing on the feeling of dominating a woman during sex. Then imagine that's not even close to being this man's thing, and you see the dilemma.

Liz Casebolt and Joel Smith, a pair of California-based artists who perform as casebolt and smith, premiered a piece called *(the) More i see*, which reflects the gender expectations in male/female relationships, aided by a record player, a long row of album covers, and several interludes of slow dancing.



Joel Smith and Liz Casebolt performing at Breaking Ground 2018. / Michael Simon

Two additional works premiered during Breaking Ground 2018, including *Perception of Separation* by Shauna Meredith and *Ruined Places* by Carley Conder. Both are elaborate pieces choreographed in collaboration with dancers who performed them.

Meredith's piece was developed through a Breaking Ground residency with [nueBOX], a new works development organization founded by Julie Akerly, who dances in the work along with Meredith and three other dancers.

Perceptions of Separation merges “quantum physics and the psychology of identity and perception” to address the importance of human connections. *Ruined Places* “explores how it feels to be directly outside a circle of what is known,” according to program notes.

Unfortunately, both were out of place in Breaking Ground 2018, which included such a rich array of visceral dance tackling the vast depth of human emotions. Both were more conceptual and abstract than their counterparts, which delivered a raw, relatable emotional charge.

Still, the festival was a success on several fronts.

Breaking Ground continues to elevate the importance of artist collaborations within and across disciplines. It exposes Arizona audiences to the world of contemporary dance beyond its own borders. And it provides a platform to showcase Arizona's own talented creatives.

The fact that so many of those creatives happened to be women, especially during a period of cultural upheaval marked by renewed focus on women's power, is just one more reason Breaking Ground still resonates.

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