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Review - *still*

Susanna Hood: Inhabiting the dark soul of the colour spectrum

**Deirdre Kelly, The Globe & Mail
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Susanna Hood
At Artword Theatre
in Toronto, on Thursday

It's a safe guess that *Somewhere Over The Rainbow* is *not* Susanna Hood's theme song. But, the Toronto-based dancer and choreographer has the spectrum at her fingertips. Colour is her world. She inhabits it fully -- its iridescent pools, its muted fields, its dark, forbidding caves. Colour for her has many emotional shades and hues. And since leaving Toronto Dance Theatre, she has thrown herself into a personal exploration of colour that, three years later, has yielded a dance work reflecting the dazzling prism of her jewel-like soul.

Still, which she debuted Thursday night at Toronto's intimate Artword Theatre, is a must-see event -- as precious, as rare, as that proverbial pot of gold.

Its presentation is so unique that, at first, you don't know how to handle it. This is no Crayola box of crayons inviting you to unleash the child within. Hood unearths colours that might even be called scary. She's angry, lonely, hurting from a breakup, bewildered by a childhood memory tinged with the awful hue of sexual abuse. The emotions are so complex, so intimately experienced, that you feel you can't begin to understand. But, slowly, you find yourself drawn in, consumed by the same flame of passion that burns within her. It is an extraordinary moment, like a rite of passage, that delivers you to a higher plane of awareness.

Hood is not describing life in any literal sense. She instead offers a series of vividly experienced impressions, like Degas or Monet, except here the medium is movement. Colour has vibration. It dances on the retina, and is its own image. In her hour-long performance, Hood draws attention to colour's kinetic energy with dancing that similarly vibrates within a prescribed space.

She uses repetition to give the piece a discernible shape and dramatic thrust. Lying on the floor, she moves her arms and legs rhythmically in frenzied, sweeping patterns that are entrapping and claustrophobic. When she eventually rises to her feet, an image that suggests rebirth, she repeatedly undulates her upper body, shoulders and head rolling, eyes closed, like an ecstatic. The most arresting section involves her rebounding through the gauzy curtain at the rear of the stage to confront the audience with words and body language -- sharp, strident, full of rage. She prowls the stage like a caged animal. Out darts her tongue to lick her arm and fingertips. The eyes are wild, desperate. Hood gives fresh meaning to the expression "seeing red."

The entire show is bathed in vivid hues that lighting designer Philip Beesley uses to augment the emotional tenor of the dancing. A wall of blue lights symbolizes the many destinations on the choreographer's inner journey. Violet streams in from overhead to describe the three faces of stillness: desire, wanting, wisdom. Set designer Phillip Barker also contributes an impressionistic film that, projected on the moving dancer, creates an otherworldly landscape in which colours flash and snap like fireflies in the night sky.

But as much as it is a multifaceted visual experience, *Still* is also forcefully aural. Hood talks repeatedly throughout the work. Her voice is made disjointed, fractured, by composer and close collaborator Nilan Perera, who turns it into a raw instrument of emotional expression. He sits to the side of the performing space, manipulating the controls on a computerized sound box that simultaneously amplifies and deconstructs Hood's verbal delivery. The sound score also includes the voice of a child symbolizing Hood at a younger stage in her life.

The work is a path of discovery. It begins in chaos and ends in repose. Hood concludes it by lying prone on the floor, a lightbulb, the colour of persimmon, dangling just over her body. Motionless, she chants "**still**," over and over. And everything is still. The colours have stopped their dance. The eye comes to a rest. All is calm. All is good.

Still continues through tomorrow at Artword Theatre, 75 Portland St., Toronto; 416-408-2783.