

Ready to Burst? Michael Clark at the Whitney

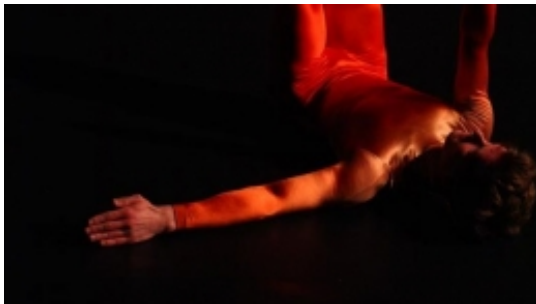
paul david young 04/09/12

Michael Clark's *Who's Zoo*, commissioned for the 2012 Whitney Biennial performance series on the fourth floor of the museum, did not live up to expectations. A legendary London-based choreographer and dancer, Clark famously worked with the late gender-morpher, costume-as-art performer and London nightclub habitué Leigh Bowery, and Y.B.A. star Sarah Lucas. His project at the Whitney, which ended yesterday, involved a live residency during museum hours and recruited volunteer participants. Though I saw the work on Apr. 5, apparently it changed immensely over the course of its run.



[VIEW SLIDESHOW](#) Photo by Kate Coyne; Photo by Benjamin Warbis;

Nonetheless, the resulting non-narrative program of six dances appeared to be purely formal exercises: dancers executing steps, sometimes in pairs, following cold routines. The principal dancers are admirable and clearly fluent in classical and contemporary idioms.



Who's Zoo was performed in the same space as Sarah Michelson's *Devotion Study #1—The American Dancer*, a re-investigation of her 2011 piece *Devotion*. Comparison was unavoidable. Michelson's composition set her dancers whirling backwards on the balls of their feet, in dynamic, interminable loops with tightly controlled variations. Michelson created a hypnotic effect of indelible unity. Clark's mixed program sampled the various styles in which he typically works—some relying upon the positions and toe work of classical ballet, others more distinctly personal or expressionistic. Perhaps the clash of styles once produced a profitable friction, but this choreography felt familiar,

and required a more coherent, fully articulated and executed structure to gain traction.

The opening sequences of choreography seemed generic and unexpansive. Reflecting the dissociative movements of different parts of the body that Merce Cunningham developed, Clark doesn't seem to be able to make the style sufficiently his own here. It appears to be an imitation, without fresh, coherent guiding thought and consequence. The classical vocabulary feels inserted, it would seem, for no other reason than to allow later on for some greater freedom in form—which, however, failed to arrive.

The six professional performers, including Clark's star protégé, the athletic, precise Simon Williams, were clad at first in orange unitards that fade to bronze around the neck (suggesting a firebird with its wings clipped? the spark of Clark's dance that no amount of rock music will cause to burst into flame?). Identical to those in Clark's 2009 *Come, Been and Gone*, they were replaced later by much sleeker black and silver versions as the music became more mechanistic. The stage was the entire open fourth floor of the museum, covered in soft black mats. Charles Atlas designed light projections for the wall behind the dancers: a stark thin purple stripe to start, followed by morphing geometry that seemed to echo the museum's trapezoidal Breuer window, which remained covered by a curtain for most of the dance. The lighting added something extra to look at, but rarely felt essential.

Clark's amateur volunteer dancers, approximately 50 extras dressed in black clothes from their personal closets, one suspects, stepped their way through a basic routine that would not be out of place in a senior center. Perhaps intended to signal a connection to urban reality, the volunteers were not additive.

Singer Jarvis Cocker's "surprise" appearance on Apr. 5 lit up the affair. Performing as Relaxed Muscle with a back-up band, Cocker played

three numbers with crazy swagger, costumed outrageously in a light leather jacket painted in neon colors, a skeleton shirt overlaid with green fishnet, and red shoes. His face and hands were painted black. Cocker prowled the floor, invading the dancers' territory and walking into the audience for a while before retreating to the corner to join the band. The singer has a cult following for his work with Pulp. His vivid stage presence overshadowed the dance.

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