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A Ballet Inspired by a Western Finds Shape in Artist Elana Herzog's Layered Designs

A new ballet in Brooklyn invited artist Elana Herzog to work in the theater for the first time, and the multifaceted work premieres this week.

Elena Goukassian | October 26, 2017



One of the dancers performing with a design by Elana Herzog in rehearsals for *Martha (The Searchers)* (all images courtesy Norte Maar)

This weekend at Brooklyn's Mark Morris Dance Center, choreographer [Julia K. Gleich](#) and visual artist and 2017 Guggenheim fellow [Elana Herzog](#) present the premier of their new collaborative project, a full-length ballet titled [Martha \(The Searchers\)](#).

Inspired by a strong female character named Martha in Alain LeMay's Western novel, [The Searchers](#) (1954) — and John Ford's [1956 movie](#) based on

the book — the new ballet is allegorical, “a series of refractions of imagery from the American West and the Martha story,” Gleich told Hyperallergic. “The name Martha conjures up a grown woman, sturdy and productive. I think of all the Marthas in history and literature: Martha Graham, Martha Washington, Marthas in *The*

Handmaid's Tale (cooks), Calamity Jane (real name Martha Jane Canary). And most of all, Martha Sherman, whose death at the hands of the Comanche in 1860 was a tipping point in the violence and genocide of the Comanche.”

Martha (*The Searchers*) is a product of a very deliberate interdisciplinary collaboration. Every year, local arts organization [Norte Maar](#) presents a project called CounterPointe, pairing female choreographers and visual artists, who work together to create new works for the stage. When Herzog was paired with Gleich last winter, it was the first time she'd ever worked with a choreographer. “I'd never done theater before either,” she told [Hyperallergic](#). “My work has potential to be theatrical, but I've always made a point of keeping it open, non-narrative, and non-specific.”



A scene from one of the rehearsals of *Martha* (*The Searchers*)

Gleich, a co-founder of Norte Maar, was introduced to Herzog's work through the organization's other co-founder, curator Jason Andrew — who is also a [contributor to Hyperallergic](#). When she visited Herzog's studio, Gleich says she was particularly drawn to the artist's visual style. “Her fractures of fabric spoke to the fracturing of Martha's life,” Gleich says. “And there is a ruggedness in Elana's materials and the way she

de/constructs them. The textiles I saw were connected with interiors and yet gave the feeling of a rugged landscape.”

For *Martha*, Herzog says she specifically created décor that “hovers between interior and exterior landscape.” Gleich and Herzog first presented the result of their collaboration — excerpts from what would later become this weekend's full-length ballet — last April at [CounterPointe5](#). For the 15-minute performance, Herzog created a floor piece consisting of layers of carpet and a couple of moving clothing racks. For the full-length ballet, she made a few more racks, each with different textiles. “They're all configured in different ways,” she says. “Utilitarian, drapery, and landscape.” But Herzog's décor is more than a mere backdrop. The dancers often interact with it, wheeling the clothing racks around and removing textiles from them and draping them over themselves as they dance.

Gleich says that she hopes her unique melding of ballet and the old West will make us think about the history of immigration and race, war, and ideological conflict, and, of course, “traditional” gender roles — both in history and the present day. “The

present is the past, but with more tech. The stories of humans don't change as much as we might think," she says. "History is to a nation, what memory is to an individual. It defines who we have been but not always who we are going to be."



One of Elana Herzog's set pieces for *Martha (The Searchers)*

For Herzog, collaborating with Gleich has opened up a whole new perspective. She says she was never particularly interested in Westerns, but she could appreciate their pastoral nature. When she watched Ford's film for the first time, Herzog was struck by the simplified characters and their stylized drama ("how choreographed it is"), as well as by the vivid Technicolor. She notes that as a native New Yorker, she was always much more fascinated with Appalachian culture than with the Old West. "I have learned so much about myself, my identity and interests,

and how culturally specific my take on the world is," Herzog says. "In the last few years, I've been examining the connections and relationships to global culture. Now, it makes me more aware of how much there is to explore here at home."

Martha (The Searchers) takes place Friday, October 27 and Saturday, October 28 (7:30pm), and Sunday, October 29, (4pm) at James & Martha Duffy Performance Space, Mark Morris Dance Center (3 Lafayette Avenue, Downtown Brooklyn). Tickets are \$12-\$25. [More info here.](#)

