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***Sylvia Palacios Whitman, Pacific Standard Time Festival:  
Live Art LA/LA***

Exhibition: January 11, 2018–January 21, 2018, REDCAT, Los Angeles, CA

*Reviewed by Maya Gurantz | University of California, Santa Barbara*

REDCAT's *Live Art LA/LA*, a performance festival curated for the Getty's *Pacific Standard Time Festival: LA/LA (PST LA/LA)* initiative, opened with the West

Coast premiere of the spare, surrealist-minimalist works of Chilean-born artist Sylvia Palacios Whitman.

Palacios Whitman, formerly a dancer in Trisha Brown's company, actively showed her own works of live art—described at the time as falling somewhere among dance, happenings, and theater—in New York from the mid-1970s into the early 1980s. During that decade, the *New York Times* acknowledged her as silly—formally slippery—a magic conjurer of unforgettable images. She created works with nontrained performers, ephemeral objects, and light. Notably, she took over the spiral of the Guggenheim for a large-scale performance of her scores.

She then disappeared from an active art practice for over thirty years.

Recently, curators have decided that her performance works deserve reconsideration. Palacios Whitman, who had never before shown in LA, feels “rediscovered” during *PST LA/LA* and was featured in the *Radical Women* show at the Hammer Museum as well as at REDCAT’S festival.

History and time bestow new validity on her work in unexpected ways. Palacios Whitman’s work emerges, mythically, as if from a time capsule, refreshingly simple, direct, playful, and effortless. The dances—some new, some restaged—do not try too hard to *be* something, to *brand* something, to say something, to *achieve* some theoretically articulated elevated task. They are simply aware bodies, interacting with simple props, suspending time for the viewers as we witness images emerge into being and then evaporate.

A dancer enters the space and assiduously wraps herself in a large brown craft-paper coil. The point is not her physical dexterity, nor is it the final picture in which she and the coil become something together. Wrestling with the material is a sort of impossible undertaking, one doomed to failure. Even as the failure is humorous, it is not exaggerated into vaudeville physical comedy; it remains deadpan, simple. We are left with the rustling of the paper, the strangeness of the task, the awareness of the body underneath making adjustments we cannot quite imagine or picture.

Palacios Whitman enters wearing a black shirt, slacks, and, incongruously, a foxtail. She holds a teacup steaming with dry ice and walks around the stage with it. She places the teacup and saucer on the ground—the saucer has a long string attached to it—and then she pulls the teacup and saucer after herself, as if walking a pet.

Three performers in suits and ties walk onstage, carrying flags in front of them emblazoned with silk-screened men in suits and ties. The performers walk forward and backward in configurations with no discernable logic or building rhythm or structure, their dress pants and shoes rendered even more crisp against the viewer's eye as their bodies are dimly obscured by the fluttering fabric.

Palacios Whitman enters and exits the stage repeatedly, each time bringing with her a mummy-like figurine, child-sized, fashioned out of newspaper and tape. There's no emotion or tenderness or sense of pretend as she stacks the figures in a pile one by one. Then props them up against the wall. Then lays them down on the floor. Then lies down with them. Then we all lie down with them—the audience wordlessly but clearly invited to join Whitman and these figurines.

Six people walk onstage with a thirty-foot length of thin white rope and deliberately, not making too much of a fuss about it, play full-body cat's cradle. Are they dancers? It does not matter. They are bodies and perform their actions without comment.

Palacios Whitman's works do not follow the improvisational "task-based" performances or structured "chance operations" that remain the legacy of postmodern and minimalist dance of the era. They do not require the dancer's physical expertise, nor do they access some emotional life. They are not meant to "represent" or explain, bearing the weight of metaphor that so often characterizes surrealism.

They are doing something else. Perhaps in their moment, that was not enough. Perhaps Palacios Whitman was not part of the dance's movement of the time. Perhaps she was too personally idiosyncratic without being overly concerned with emotional issues or identity politics. Perhaps she did not explain enough. Or perhaps she did not tell stories or hew her narratives, and yet she was not purely abstract enough. So now, on the other side of history, what do her works do?

Inasmuch as Palacios Whitman would have to play her "biggest hits," she of course performed *Green Hands*, a photo of which keeps appearing in advertisements for the Hammer's *Radical Women* show and on Instagram, posted by attendees of the show. Palacios Whitman walks onto the stage wearing giant green paper hands. She slowly moves her hands up and down, opening and closing her arms, lifting and lowering.



Figure 1 | Sylvia Palacios Whitman, *Green Hands*, January 11, 2018, REDCAT. Photograph by Steve Gunther.

Imagine having hands so big and so green. Imagine the crease of men's suit pants and shiny dress shoes coming in and out of focus. Children made of newspaper. Bodies becoming hands playing cat's cradle. A human with a foxtail and a teacup and a saucer on a string.

Ultimately, Palacios Whitman's works operate not like dreams but like the fragments of dreams left rattling around in your body the day after, conjuring a relationship between a simple object and simple architecture: imagination and the body. They hold the space for a brief moment of consideration. Then they move on, but the images remain.

In the final piece, five people emerge from backstage. They walk over to a wall at the far side of the gallery that the audience has not even noticed or looked at. They get on the floor and slip into rectangular cuts between the wall and the floor we have not even noticed. They *disappear into the wall*. In this present moment, the simplicity of Palacios Whitman's approach and the complexity of the poetic visual language is enough. More than enough: It is a relief.

#### **CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS**

Maya Gurantz is an artist working with video, performance, installation, and community-generated projects. Her work has been shown at the Museum of Contemporary

Art Denver (solo commission), the Grand Central Art Center (solo commission), the Greenleaf Gallery (solo commission), the Utah Museum of Contemporary Art, the Oakland Museum, Beaconsfield Gallery Vauxhall, the Art Center College of Design, the Goat Farm Arts Center, High Desert Test Sites, Autonomie Gallery, Pieter, Navel, and Movement Research at Judson Church. She has written for the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, *This American Life*, *The Frame* on KPCC, *The Awl*, *Notes on Looking, Avidly, Acid-Free, Baumtest Quarterly, RECAPS Magazine*, and an anthology, *CRuDE*, published by the École Nationale Supérieure d'Art, Bourges, France. She received her BA from Yale University and her MFA in studio art from the University of California, Irvine, and currently teaches in the art department at the University of California, Santa Barbara. Visit her website at [mayagurantz.com](http://mayagurantz.com).