

Close Encounters

The Always In-Search-Of Erika Chong Shuch Sends Her Talents Into Orbit

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Love is more than metaphor in *Orbit* (*notes from the edge of forever*). Love is like the intractable need connected to the exploration of space – especially when the search is bent toward the hope of some ultimate encounter: that contact with somebody, out there, who knows who you are. It's as if an inner wilderness were turned inside out and projected to infinity.

And so *Orbit* starts with the mutual seduction of two lovers onstage, and with flickering TV screens (the sets dangling from long vertical skewers loaded with books and the occasional table lamp) tapping classic sci-fi movies like *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, and *Alien*, with their mix of rapture and terror. Here promise and betrayal collide with gravitational conviction, at the point where the yearning for communion meets the blind panic of a self dissolving; a body waylaid, violated, no longer your own (if it ever was). "That transmission? Mother's deciphered it," says Sigourney Weaver. "It doesn't look like an SOS.... It looks like a warning."

But *Orbit* itself is never warned off. Rather, as the title implies, it's continually reapproaching. A new dance theater work from the Erika Shuch Performance Project – the brainchild of San Francisco-based choreographer, director, and performer Erika Chong Shuch, and the resident company at Intersection for the Arts – *Orbit* spirals around our obsession with UFOs, extraterrestrial life, alien abduction, and other moon-age daydreams. The piece pulls a variety of texts, media, and simulacra into its elliptical trajectory (including recorded interviews, pop music, original songs, and some wonderfully transporting interactive video segments designed by Ishan Vernalis and Ill), and is a playfully eclectic, moody, and deeply romantic whirl, danced and acted by Shuch and cocreators Melanie Elms and Danny Wolohan. Joining them is an ensemble, dressed in street clothes and postal uniforms, composed of

Kieran Chavez, Joseph Estlack, Daveen DiGiacomo (also responsible for the live music and sound design), Courtney Moreno, and Erin Mei-Ling Stuart.

Elms comes on as the extradimensional counterpart to Shuch's and Wolohan's young lovers – whom we've seen alternately drifting over the sensual ridges of the lunar surface projected behind them (luxuriating in the exploration of personal space), helping one another (with a touch of comic strain) to moonwalk off the walls, or defending favorite metaphors for their place in the cosmos and their search for ETs. Behind them Elms's retro space alien glides around as if invisibly in mischievous blue gloves, the show's intergalactic pixie, puppet mistress of hapless earthlings.

At times, moving about the stage in an idiosyncratic way coolly reminiscent of some ray gun-toting go-go dancer, Elms seems no more than a figment of the collective imagination. (In one eerily comic scene, the strange hands rooting around in a panicky Wolohan's sweatshirt turn out not to be blue-gloved, but the hands of his lover.) From other angles, however, she becomes an active force of violently erratic potential, like a galactic succubus. The chorus, meanwhile, in alternately trancelike and frenetic motion, do everything from dance, sing, and play instruments to operate the ropes and pulleys that rearrange those TV-and-book kebabs around the stage. With Elms they circle the lovers as forces of nature both internal and external, mercurial ones too, capable of imparting a gentle caress one minute, a savage abuse the next. One or two segments veering toward the madcap – like Wolohan's admittedly hilarious puppet-show narration of his rescue by a friendly lighthouse (Shuch) – can be funny at the cost of some subtlety, and in truth the parts don't contribute equally to the whole. But the surprises in store are several, and there's a cumulative force to the loose but inspired patterning of movement, theme, and image. If part of that pattern is the idea of lives in eternal orbit around some elusive whole, always approaching and never landing, Shuch and company manage a not insignificant union all the same, joining the passion of the true believer with the wry alert eye of the perennial searcher.

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