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Parsing Human Emotion

Tere Mathern shifts from her explorations of nature's patterns

By Catherine Thomas
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The question that hung over Tere Mathern's new dance, "The Grammar of Regret," last Saturday night at Conduit was this: How much of a departure is a dance about emotion for a choreographer whose investigations over the past decade have revolved largely around patterns observed in nature?

"The Grammar of Regret" isn't a radical shift from Mathern's oeuvre, but it does contain some magnetic surprises. So while her company easily deploys the abstract patterning and near-miss revolutions we've come to associate with Mathern's explorations of circadian rhythms and cycles of plant growth, they also dig into the meatier terrain of the human landscape.

Bodies collapsed and strewn on the floor, Picasso-esque shifts of perspective, movement that manipulates and arrests and aggressively strikes a human target: It's an uncommon mix (for Mathern) of fluidity and astringency, a lolling tide churned by martial arts attacks.

Danced by Mathern and her company of Jesse Berdine, Robyn Conroy, Jae Diego, Jennifer Hong-Berdine and Jim McGinn, "Grammar" unfolds in four parts.

"If," "Only," "Then" and "Now" suggest the wavering flicker between expectation and hopes gone awry. But the sections don't differ appreciably from one another. Perhaps that's the point: Memory's a chameleon, and a trickster. Mathern's dancers recede and surge and ambush. Over the course of the dance, that moody wash of movement skews more to lulling than riveting.

The dance's most arresting image is a frozen one, repeated throughout: the dancers in a clutch, bodies pointed in different directions, slowly turning their heads to the audience and suggesting a barricade breached.

Mathern's program also includes "Askew," a short duet for Conroy and Mathern by choreographer Gregg Bielemeier that's at its most effective when it wobbles, judders and tilts off-kilter.