Mei-mei Berssenbrugge & Teddy Yoshikami

"feeling something as luminous": an interview with Michelle N. Huang

I first encountered Mei-mei Berssenbrugge's work in graduate school, where her poem "Fog" became something of a touchstone for me as I worked through my dissertation on molecular aesthetics and posthumanism in Asian American literature. When I learned the poem was part of a triptych on the transitional states of water—the poem "Fog" preceded by "Mizu" (water) and "Alakanak Break-Up" (ice)—and that all three poems had been created as poetry/dance performances during the early 1980s in collaboration with the Basement Workshop, the foundational Asian American Movement organization in New York, I wanted desperately to see them. My search led me from the Raymond Danowski Poetry Library at Emory (where one of the 80 copies of the artist's book containing "Mizu" can be found), to uncatalogued boxes at the Beinecke, and eventually to the choreographer, Theodora (Teddy) Yoshikami, of Morita Dance Company, who still lives in New York. She had given the VHS tapes to the Asian/Pacific/American Institute at New York University, where they waited in a box, for me (I felt) to find.

I belabor this archival journey because in revealing the scattered artifacts as well as origins of this collaboration, what appears as a singular, self-contained, (deservedly) celebrated poem emerges as something rather more ecologically constituted. Watching the grainy images flicker across the screen, it's impossible to deny the feeling of an event horizon, of seeing something at the edge of a future world.

Thank you to the A/P/A Institute at NYU and Laura Chen-Schultz for all their help. The following interview was conducted over email in July-August 2019. Questions and answers have been lightly edited for clarity. — MNH

A note on titles: the performances *Mizu*, *Break-Up*, and *Showing What They Are (Without Revealing What They Are)* [referred to below as *"Showing…"*] correspond to the poems "Mizu," "Alakanak Break-Up," and "Fog," respectively.

Michelle N. Huang: How did you meet, and how did the collaboration come about?

Mei-mei Berssenbrugge: It's almost 40 years ago, but I think Fay Chiang, the director of Basement Workshop, enabled our introduction to each other. Basement had produced my play, "One, Two Cups," directed by Frank Chin. Teddy had the vision of creating a work using *Urashima Taro*, a Japanese fairy tale about a boy who lives underwater, and asked me to write a text for her dancers to use instead of music. I was unfamiliar with the process of collaboration, but I liked the idea of dancing to poetry, instead of music. I studied the fairy tale and read about underwater life and created my retelling of the story as *Mizu*, water. Teddy was very much the moving force and inspiration.

The next text, about ice, titled *Break-up*, was informed by my trips to Alaska where I taught poetry in Yupik villages and in prisons. I remember, attending rehearsals, that Teddy was serious, strong, subtle, and very open in her choreography process and in her response to my texts.

Teddy Yoshikami: Fay was able to obtain funds from various places such as the New York State Council on the Arts, the National Endowment

for the Arts, and private funders, and so was able to invite established and emerging artists of various mediums. She invited Mei-mei to conduct workshops and to develop her writing, and during one of these visits, Fay suggested Mei-mei and I might collaborate together. Water was an exciting form that had such changing qualities that I always wanted to pursue choreographically and when I met Mei-mei, this became the perfect opportunity.

MNH: Walk me through the collaboration process, both logistically and intellectually. How did you think and work together if you weren't living in the same place at the same time? How did you weave your different ideas and sensibilities into one project? What were some of the challenges and pleasures of combining dance, music, and poetry?

TY: Mei-mei and I had worked off and on together at Basement Workshop, but when Mei-mei had other commitments elsewhere in New Mexico or Rhode Island, etc., our letters kept the creative process moving forward. Some of the letters you found are evidence of this process. At times I would receive Mei-mei's words, read, then work on movements and discuss whether what I was choreographing was okay and/or asked various questions or possibilities of changes. Yet on the whole, it was an ongoing process of continuing letter exchanges that would be defined and finalized during on-site rehearsals together. With limited time together, we always had to be very focused on the work(s). But we both generally accepted one another's manner of communicative exchanges.

MB: I was living in New Mexico, but would come to New York for a month or two, whenever I got funding, or maybe Basement had grants for the production. I remember one continuous process, but reading Teddy's account, I see much of our collaboration happened through let-

ters. I provided the text, the "story," and my voice to help Teddy realize her vision, which became a vision we shared.

TY: It was a terrific to visit Mei-mei in New Mexico, where I could experience the spaciousness of nature, openness, and the beauty of the skies and environment. I think I became more aware of her background of living there that I feel is revealed in her writings.

I found *Showing…* to be the most difficult for me to choreograph, but proved to be the most successful, I think, overall with the vague and changing spaces demarcated by the Sheffield scrims, allowing and emulating the fogginess of mind and movement.

MB: By the time we made "Fog" [*Showing…*] three years later, I was more experienced, and had learned to use rehearsals to generate the next sections of text, and I learned to use repetition as a kind of chorus, because I was reading the text over and over as the dancers worked out the steps. I was studying Wittgenstein, and used fog, varying densities, as a way of expressing relations between people. I had forgotten that the original title was *Showing what they are, without revealing what they are*. The artist, Sheffield Van Buren, created a set of ephemeral scrims, and Jason Hwang improvised music. Teddy added an amazing solo of herself making intense faces. I remember this was the most ambitious work, and that the dancers were abstract and beautiful.

Video stills courtesy of Asian/Pacific/American Institute at New York University.

MNH: What I love about the triptych is that through the molecular transformation of an element—water—what we think of as elemental in the sense of core or essential identity is also troubled and shown to be contextual (even ecological) and dynamic. Each poem and performance have a distinct aesthetic, but also shared concerns. What are key considerations when representing the relationship between the material and immaterial in a concrete, embodied form? What is the relationship between landscape and bodies? Do you think there is a concordance between poetry and dance, versus other literary and aesthetic forms?

MB: Your description is beautiful and apt. I think the energetic process of collaboration, the process of realizing a vision into art, inspiration, the reception of art by the audience, are all considerations of relations between material and immaterial. In more recent work, I use quantum reality, particle and wave.

Landscape was my subject at this time, so it was natural to use it for water, ice, or fog. The space of a body is interior, or defined by your skin, but also as large as your perception of space around you, like the large scale of the West or the tundra, ocean, horizon.

Concordance between poetry and dance is exquisite and elicits the music in them both. Also, two halves of your brain are called for, verbal and visual, and that makes a kind of collage surface of experience for the audience.

TY: Water in its many forms allows the juxtaposition of elemental styles of movement, as well as contextual. Just as the movements flowed, contexts also arose in me or through Mei-mei's poetic phrases or words.

But movement is not a form of words, it is dance—a nonverbal form traditionally with and without accompanying music. The challenge was to weave poetry (words) and movement (silence/no words) together to create an artistic end. I had to learn how to juxtapose words and silent movements, trying at times to synchronize them, separate them and for it to have a rhythm that flowed, was jarring, or even awkward. My setting movements were often instinctual to complement in some way with Mei-mei's poetry. No standard logic can be used. This was a creative collaborative process, not a logical one as in addition or subtraction.

MNH: Can you say more about the last bit about instinctual movement and logic?

TY: It was an "instinctual" method of immediacy while choreographing. I didn't have a pre-set series of movements, but decided moment by moment. Plus, the choreography did not follow verbatim directly from Mei-mei's spoken poetic words, but the movements related within the context of her poetic phrases and her timing and recitation of the poetry. There was always a quality of balancing movements and poetry that worked in harmony with each other. I guess I was also reading a lot of Asian or Zen Buddhist books on philosophy to understand oneself in coping with life with its vicissitudes. Be in the moment—this I guess could be my style or approach to choreography.

MNH: When scholars have taken up this work, the Asian American context of its production is often elided. How did the 1980s shape this work and its relationship to Asian American identity and/or politics?

MB: After finishing my MFA at Columbia, I immersed myself in the multicultural movement of the late seventies, which I recall as more established at that time on the West Coast. It was a thrilling time of expressing cultural identity, discovering forgotten writers, empowerment, new magazines, friendships, cross-cultural inspirations, stories. Basement Workshop was a pioneer in Asian American cultural consciousness in NYC.

Basement Workshop provided a warm, open forum for developing Asian American arts and community, many creative people coming through of various Asian backgrounds, all identifying with each other, many pioneers. The emphasis was on shared creativity, discovery of Asian

American identity, and a feeling of empowerment. Even so, I did not realize until now that Teddy was the first Asian American choreographer. It was more an atmosphere, than any clear credo or message.

TY: When I began choreographing, the Movement had not begun here in New York. But, knowing of the West Coast movement from the start I think peripherally influenced me, although I was not consciously aware of it. From 1966 or so, I wanted to dance and eventually choreograph. I had been in a contemporary dance company and a children's dance theater group, but I was never fully fulfilled performing with them. I knew I wanted to make a career of dance, which gave more impetus to begin choreographing using Asian influences—tai chi, Japanese folk and classical dance, and Asian philosophy. I did everything for Morita Dance Company—budgeting, raising funds, publicity, coordinating schedules, looking for new dancers, etc.—so it was a 24/7 "job." Joining Soh Daiko (the New York-based Japanese drum group) was a fresh breath of air, as I had fewer responsibilities. As pieces were created, some of which are still performed today, my dance influence was used to guide how the members should jump and move without injuring themselves. Traditional groups never leave the ground.

MNH: Readers may be more familiar with Mei-mei's background—Teddy, how did this project fit into your choreographic vision and personal journey?

TY: My choreographic goal was to create my new and unique style of choreography based on Asian performance, culture and philosophy and to become the first Asian American choreographer. Like my friend Meredith Monk, who I met in Daniel Nagrin's classes back in the 70s, I began to break rules of mainstream dance styles, challenging space, time

and aesthetic, but with an Asian/Asian American focus. But as Asian America was considered an insignificant group, I never received support or recognition from the avant-garde except in minimal ways, as was similar for all peoples of color.

Despite Basement Workshop help, CETA Arts support, and a NEA Japan Exchange fellowship, my personal life as a single parent necessitated my leaving the dance world and my further choreographic development. It was a difficult decision to make, as choreography of my Asian American style was my passionate aim!

After leaving dance, as the first Asian American consultant at the American Museum of Natural History, I travelled and met individual leaders and organizations from around the world—from the Bering Strait areas of Alaska, then Siberia, and to Mongolia and more—all places seldom seen or experienced by most. At times I wonder if I should return to choreography now that I have retired. It could be an intriguing adventure with so many more experiences to glean from.

MNH: This triptych includes many forms—the accordion book of "Mizu" (published in a limited run artist's book) the three dance performances, and the published poems. How does refraction through different media affect your understanding of your poetry?

MB: I love remembering the repetitions of sentences in the performance of "Fog" [*Showing…*], to accompany certain dance gestures, and a sense of extension and scale I learned from a long performance.

I don't think I was consciously aiming to work in different media. It was natural to include these texts in the books of poems. Also, the artist

Kiki Smith used "Fog" for a beautiful portfolio of crystal drawings published by Rutgers. I made an assemblage of text from *Hello, the Roses*, which the artist Davide Balula made into an atmospheric sound piece for the Lyons festival. Also, *Hello, the Roses* was used in an installation at the Munich Kunstverein with Richard Tuttle, my husband. I read the poems to him, and he used that energy to determine how to construct his works. It was very moving to see that this installation emitted the same quality of light that was in our first collaboration, when we met, that the spirit of our collaboration had an identity. In the same way, though our trilogy evolved, I feel that Teddy and I express a certain continuous relation of water, fluidity and spirit. Also, cultural expressions of each of us as Asian American.

MNH: I came to this series through "Fog." While scholars have noted the other poems and the performances, I have not found any scholarly work on the triptych as a whole. Why do you think "Fog" is the poem that seems to "float" alone, so to speak?

MB: As a poem, "Fog" is the major poem of the group. And as dance, also I think it was a culmination of our work together in scale, choreography, concept and atmosphere.

MNH: The relationship between color and density is a recurring trope in these poems—for example, "A white glass of water is hard to conceive of, because we cannot depict how the same thing would be white and clear, and how this would look" in "Fog," "Sometimes in your path you see darkness that looks like smoke" in "Alakanak Break-Up," and "water's color and weight" in "Mizu." I also see other ways in which density, surface, and depth are confounded by invocations of "glitter," mirrored in the shimmering mylar strip in the *Break-Up* performance. How does this language of material density and the concatenation of surface and depth relate to identity?

MB: Because I was born in Beijing and came to the US as an infant, I experience my language and identity as relational. But I think identity "as such" can be a limiting goal or a limiting ideal. Maybe "the language of material density and the concatenation of surface and depth" are good tools for navigating and expressing the dynamics of identity. Also as metaphors for what one can know.

MNH: To me, the triptych troubles the idea of singular entities in that it shows how different states co-exist and overlap (i.e., ice in fog, fog

over water) as well as in its thematic exploration of seasonal change and elemental transition. I'm thinking about the working title of "Fog"—*Showing What They Are (Without Revealing What They Are)*. Can you say more about clarity and obfuscation in your work?

MB: Maybe it's not so much how about clarity versus obfuscation, but about change, fluidity, which Teddy's choreography expresses with such beauty. Reading her answers, I feel her mystical bond with water. I strive to be clear, but accuracy, perception call for articulating change, flow, mistiness, invisibility, relation.

> "As you continually generate the transparency of flowing space, it must continually unfold matter that shines."
>
> "You appear all at once, as if opening my eyes, I see a window, because your body's transparent."

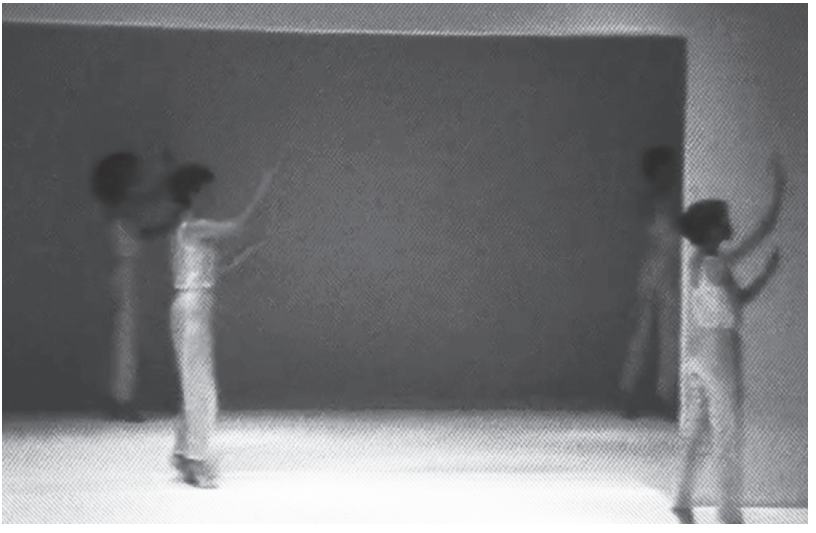
TY: Nothing is static. We as humans want stability so we seek the concrete to feel we are in control, but even the concrete changes just as life always changes.

MNH: What about dance and form—how did you decide which dance techniques and styles to use for each performance?

TY: It was a style of movement that I developed on my own with improvisatorial direction to the dancers. I did not want to copy or use Graham, Cunningham or Nagrin techniques as I wanted to focus on my Asian movement training in tai chi, Japanese folk and classical dance and Asian philosophy. Of course, if others trained in tai chi or Japanese dance should see these works, they probably would not recognize this connection.

Perhaps tai chi people might see a connection as so many of the movements are slow and grounded, but this may be a projection on my part.
MNH: Both "Mizu" and "Alakanak Break-Up" start with the language of speculation—"If the boy goes under the water" and "To find out the temperature," respectively. Can you speak about the relationship between scientific experimentation and literary-formal experimentation in your work?

MB: Around this time I was interested in "feminizing" scientific language. I like that science breaks patterns of knowledge for new paradigms, or perceptions. I like the sense of discoveries and the urge toward a universal field. Perhaps there is a sense of abstraction in science that correlates to abstraction in a poetic form. For me literary forms are spiritual and generative, not speculative or analytic.



MNH: Tell me about the other elements of the production: the costumes are beautiful, and very different—the golden silk of *Mizu*, the bundled neutrals of Break-Up, and the translucent plastic of *Showing…*—how did you conceptualize them?

TY: Am so glad you appreciated my costumes. I used to sew my own clothes, and being on a small budget for myself and for the dancers, I would shop around in the fabric district looking for fabric that would work. For *Mizu*, the leotards we had used in a previous work, *Tsuzureori*, and I sewed the pants to balance with the leotard. For Break-Up, the taiko drummers used medical outfits as one of them was in residency as a physician and he was able to obtain them at no cost. The only items bought were the sponges the Soh Daiko drummers wore, which had large holes throughout to hold the drum sticks. For *Showing…*, the translucent costumes were created by Linda Taoka, with whom I had discussed my concept of the piece—reflections, light, flexibility—as in fog.

MNH: What about music and set design?

TY: Jason Hwang was also coming and going through Basement Workshop, and he worked often with Will Connell, a flutist. I had met J.D. Parran through the CETA artist network and asked him if he would compose and create music for my pieces. My favorite instrument has always been flute or shakuhachi, the Japanese end blown flute, which is why I often used flutes in my choreographic works. The sound of the flute continues to move me.

Mei-mei's friend Sheffield van Buren was looking for another outlet to explore beyond his painting. Through Mei-mei, he agreed to create pan-

el screens for *Showing…*, evocative of shoji, to demarcate parts of a space that also created spaces for the dancers to interact and utilize.

The set designer Atsushi Moriyasu saw *Mizu* at St. Marks and became interested in working with me, so for *Break-Up* he suggested the lights and reflective mylar that replicate the reflection of the icebergs. My entrance was on the diagonal walking into the depth of the earth below. The sound of the taiko added a depth of sound I felt was needed in this piece—strong and powerful. The movements and sounds of my solo were loud sounds emanating from my core and led to the dark, perhaps angry, ground below. The kachi kachi clappers used are Japanese instruments I owned and had performed with in Japanese dance. And of course, Mei-mei's poetry could also be thought of as music.

MNH: What are you working on now?

TY: Having retired from performing either in dance or taiko, I now teach taiko to students from age 6 to adults every other Sunday from mid-October through June at the New York Buddhist Church. I have been asked by the Church for several years now for my students to perform for the outdoor New York Obon festival in July—the adult group could, but as the newest formed class, they're not ready to perform yet, but maybe next year.

MB: For seven years I've been writing about stars as beings, trying to express our earth and stars as one ecosystem. The poems, *A Treatise on Stars*, will be published by New Directions Press in February. Now, I'm exploring the growth process as a matrix that somehow connects all things, thinking about plants and the rain forest, and fractals and energy grids in space.

MNH: What is it like to revisit the work over thirty years later?

MB: I didn't realize how beautiful this trilogy was, or how much I had learned about poetry and about performance, while we were making it. I don't think I realized the significance of Basement Workshop as a cultural institution. I was in my thirties, intense, and had no distance from each day. My process of collaboration has been to create a space in front of myself for the other person to inhabit, which I don't assess at the time. I think Teddy deserves most of the credit for unifying all the elements with her vision and her choreography, her seriousness. Today I enjoy very much remembering these dances and feeling my respect and admiration for Teddy's artistry and the artistry of the dancers and Jason.

TY: My experience viewing the videos now after so many years, brought back many memories as well as still appreciating my work with Mei-mei during those years. I appreciate it even more. It was many years of collaboration, which to this day, I have not experienced since. What captured me about dance was before video, it was impossible to have a concrete dance to hold as something to show; different from a piece of visual art, sculpture, literature or music. Even if it was repeated, there are always slight changes. Each performance is not an exact copy of the original, and the quality of videotaping then did not capture the quality or nuances of the dance.

It was a wonderful experience and it is only through hindsight can I see that it was a very special and unique experience. Watching the videos again inspires me to see my own choreography and Mei-mei's collaboration, which I appreciate even more than ever. I will cherish it.