

- **Wild Womxn**

"Wildlife and the woman are both endangered species", begins Clarissa Pinkola Estés in her iconic *Women Who Run With The Wolves*. This book, and others, along with my organic discoveries both professionally and personally over the past two years, have led me to a belief in the urgent need for women to re-wild themselves in the context of self healing and feminist progress as well as a parallel need for society as a whole to cultivate appreciation of the wild feminine. In *Wild Power*, Alexandra Pope and Sjanie Hugo Wurlitzer assert that many of the worlds problems are masculinity 'run amok', a view affirmed by, among others, Grayson Perry in *The Descent of Man*. Pope and Wurlitzer offer an invitation to connect to feminine power as a cyclical rhythm, to nurture rather than master. To be clear this is not to blame or demonise men or to emphasise a gender binary or heteronormative roles. Far from it, if we see masculine and feminine as energies rather than genders, we can more effectively claim both those forces within ourselves and choose behaviours that serve us and our environment, or the task at hand, rather than be driven by externally imposed norms. These are not binary energies, but a spectrum that is nuanced. From an eco-feminist perspective, to embrace a more feminine way of life would be to reject capitalism and patriarchy and instead nurture and protect our ailing planet. "The powerful attraction between the body and the Earth offers sustenance and physical replenishment when it is consummated in contact" writes David Abram in *Becoming Animal*. To be with the Earth, and dance with her as a partner can create a healthier relationship between humans and our home. Valuing life over profit, personal growth over career development, community over individualism and nature over technology is the only thing that will save us now.

What I found so inspiring about *Women Who Run With Wolves* was its combination of story telling, poetry, psychology and politics. Estés beautifully compares women to wolves, describing how we suppress our wild nature in order to fit in or survive in society, but how in doing so we limit creativity and self-actualisation. She draws on fairy tales from various cultures to illustrate our ancient symbolism for life's processes. This powerful imagery and sense of magic lends itself to movement discovery. In the process of this research I have spent time outside walking, climbing, and being with nature as well as used my studio time to research the movement of animals and practice embodying various qualities. What is wonderful about improvisation is that it is a practice of tapping into instinct, so the challenge in performance is to be with an honest expression of where I am and what I need, whilst also honouring the score and dramaturgy of what I have

made. I don't pretend to have answers for any of my questions, only to be asking them in various ways and in the act of performing. What I have found though, is that this practice has helped me to shed self consciousness and embrace my own nature, to lose a couple of layers of 'shoulds' and go into a place of truth. "Does the wolf know how beautiful she is when she leaps? ...Learning from them, we just act in our own true way and do not draw back from, or hide our natural beauty. Like the creatures we just are, and it is right." (Estés, 1992) The hard part is trusting that the ugly truth is beautiful, and that embracing vulnerability can be a strength.

"I found a paradox of wildness in the glinting softness of its charisma, for what is savage is in the deepest sense gentle and what is wild is kind" (Griffiths, J. 2006, p3). Paradox is everywhere in this work, I am rejecting one binary in favour of a series of new ones: natural and glamorous, fierce and restful, grotesque and subtle. This is rooted in my desire to undermine the division of all of these dualities such as gender, body and mind, and strength and vulnerability. We have come to think of power in masculine terms and are so estranged from the innately feminine power of nature. Pope & Wurlitzer describe the power of the feminine as healing, cyclical, maternal, instinctive (2017, P3). If we can let go of the idea that this energy belongs to only half the population and see it as a necessary balance to our contrasting energies of direct action, efficiency and logic, perhaps we would all learn to take better care of our environment. I find paradox is both useful and poetic, I find it profoundly attractive, hence the title- *Fabulous Animal*. In combining opposites, we can find balance. But also, from the perspective of subverting gender, how exciting to combine features- physical, imaginary, decorative or otherwise- which are seemingly paradoxical. The natural world is full of opposing forces and balanced ecosystems. Something dies and something lives. And thus what presents as a paradox is in fact a harmony, begging to be sung.

- Space for sexuality

"If we try to address women's basic animal nature, we run the risk of sounding as if we are casting women as *only* animal-like, or as more animal like than men... as a feminist I believe that frank exploration of the potential animal and mystical elements of female sexuality does not in any way undermine women's rational, intellectual and professional capabilities." (Wolf, 2012)

In fact, in her book, *Vagina*, Wolf elaborates on the ways in which being sexually traumatised or threatened can undermine those highly valued elements of women's lives

and in which being sexually satisfied can nourish their creativity and productivity. Her research further proves the interrelated nature of body-mind or 'soma' and specifically how women's sexuality can affect their mental wellbeing. "If femininity resided anywhere, I would say it resided there, in that electric inner network extending from pelvis to brain" (Wolf, 2012).

For many years, sexuality (and the curvaceous female body) was banished from western theatre dance in the name of elevating it to a 'high art' and in order to distance ballet from its early culture which was rife with prostitution and exploitation. Of course now, arguably, sexuality has returned to the stage along with society's more liberal views of it. However, I would argue that what we most often see is a sanitised and commercialised form of sexuality, especially where women are concerned. Even some works which profess to be feminist, often in displaying a story of female oppression, fetishise the body and glamourise the oppression itself. Genuine sexuality is messy, it's personal, it's about pleasure. If we make room for a woman's subjective pleasure, in the act of performance or the act of love, it cannot be stolen or objectified.

Wolf describes a "growing conviction that women experience the vagina as integral to core self, and that it can also serve as the trigger or entry point to an awakening of sensibility that can, at fortunate moments, fuse the creative and the sexual." With this in mind, I have been deliberately including my sexual organs in my sensory experience of dancing. As I scan my body for sensation or movement that is calling to be actioned (as all improvisation calls for), I do not exclude any sensation from my awareness, I listen to everything and allow myself to feel whatever it is that I feel. If a dance were occurring in a contact situation, or in relation to another, this would require consent and consideration, but in solo practice and within the confines of my own thoughts, who's to say what is appropriate but me? Furthermore, commitment to pleasure might be a commitment to ease or to satisfaction that is sensory but nonsexual. I ask myself if, in the act of dancing, even in performance, can I respond to my own needs and desires and place them above the question of what the audience is receiving? And there again, dance imitates life- a woman placing her own needs above others' is a political act.

We often think of rural or nature based art practice as wholesome- or at least I do. I picture a sea scape painted by a rural artist in watercolour, or a dancer frolicking in a field or dancing naked, innocent and fairy-like in the woods. I've seen a fair bit of wholesome outdoor dance, film, poetry. I like a lot of it, especially as I get older and appreciate different things. I am also called to make wholesome work in beautiful places. So different to the urban dynamism of my early work. Perhaps we can attribute this to the calm and

quiet that comes over us in these landscapes. But what I think I was groping in the dark for with this title- this clash of themes and my reluctance to leave any shot of the film totally 'natural'- is the raw sexuality of wildness. In oppressing women we have oppressed sexuality and we have oppressed the very earth we stand on. I think it's all connected: earth activism, feminism, sex positivity. "We may think we are domesticated but we're not. Feral in pheromone and intuition, federal in our sweat and fear, feral in tongue and langue, feral in cunt and cock" (Griffiths, J. 2006, p2). I am trying to bring together glamorous and natural aesthetics to reunite different parts of myself.

- Function and freedom

In various parts of the world today, if a woman takes a stand politically, socially, spiritually, familiarly, environmentally, if she points out that a particular emperor has no clothes, or if she speaks for those who are hurt or who are without voice, too often her motives are examined to see if she has 'gone wild', that is, crazy" (Estés, 1992). As women we are all familiar with this problem. I once called out an act of completely inappropriate sexual behaviour and was laughingly described as 'feisty' as though it was unusually rambunctious to question his right to speak that way to someone he desired without regard for my consent or reciprocation. This was at the mild end of the misogyny spectrum, but reveals an insidious sexism that lingers in all parts of the world, the idea that being vocal or self-actualised as a woman is wild or crazy. Meanwhile men are expected to revel in their strength, comfort, success, sexual pleasure and anger- and those who do not display it are judged. Until we can allow all genders (I include non-binary and trans people in this statement) to live in ways that are true to natural instinct and unfiltered self, we will not have gender equality. To this end, the 'wild woman' movement encompassing cyclical living, sexuality workshops, luna celebrations, witch circles etc, is reclaiming wildness and celebrating femininity in its feral form. Tapping into this symbolism has been powerful for me in my practice because it offered imagery totally distinct from the neoclassical aesthetics of my training, forms and lines that privileged a small and compliant female body.

Throughout my undergraduate degree, I struggled with how I saw myself. I felt that I didn't fit into the correct shape or image to be a "good dancer" like some of my long limbed or more petit colleagues. In *Dance and The Performative*, Valerie Preston Dunlop wrote that "embodying a dance technique requires that the dancer identifies him/herself with the technique's culture", a statement that's stayed with me as I've attempted to find my place in the dance world. In my third year of training in ballet, Cunningham and

Graham technique, I wrote an essay entitled *Dualism, Dance and Female Sexuality*, which was when I began to question the sexual politics of dance. In recent years, I've rejected the didactic forms of more codified and formalised techniques in favour of somatic practice. I describe in my MA thesis, *Womxn In Motion*, why I believe somatic practice to be inherently feminist and mention many female dance artists who've paved the way for post modern dance to change the gender politics of our art form. Since running a huge community dance project for women in Cairo entitled *Dancing The Self*, I've been preoccupied with the potential for reclaiming the female body through dance and movement. That project began as a week-long research week and a year later I was working full time on it. To date, 152 women have participated in the week long workshop and all reported on its transformative effects. Later, after some personal struggles physical and emotionally, I used the methodology to empower myself and recover my agency.

I have approached this new project from the perspective that, by tapping in to my instinctive nature, and using my imagination to borrow movement qualities from animals, I can create movement in performance without being driven by the habits of my training to focus on how I look, or on assimilating into a traditional view of the female form in dance. In other words, letting go of trying to make it look pretty! In a workshop with Deborah Hay last December she asked us to write a sentence that might describe a solo. Without much thought I wrote "I would like it to be so honest, so raw, so utterly unfiltered that it is so ugly, it is beautiful." Later Deborah asked for one word, what would the solo have? And I said instinctively "teeth." I'd been experimenting with somatic imagining of tails, teeth, claws and wings for a while and so it felt as though these elements were beginning to call me to a new work.

It feels very important to me since working on *(Un)Covered* and the way it emerged into such a huge project with women in Cairo, that solo work also reach out and expand into group working. It also feels increasingly important to link all the elements of my practice together, and so I decided to embark on this research with the full understanding and acceptance of the fact it would underpin all aspects of my work. After all, alone I cannot go further than to see how the 'animals' land on a cis, white woman of my shape and history, but in a group we can really begin to ask questions. I want to share the work in more ways than simply performing, it is too multifaceted for that, and does not belong to me but to all of us. I was delighted to return to Cairo in April 2019 and again in January 2020 to share the practice with a fantastic group of women, some of whom have been dancing with me since the very beginning of this process. They consented for me to share some of their dances as part of the exhibition. I continue to use this practice to underpin

all of my teaching and facilitation. I also hope to create a group performance some time in the future.

- The Animals

When I was training, I used to draw butterflies all over my notes. I craved transformation. I imagined 3 years would shrink me and tone me and magically flip me into a body that could do all the epic movements I could create inside my head. I imagined it could make me fly. Then, when I was rudely confronted with the realities and limitations of my body, I became self critical to a dangerous extent. What I didn't realise is that for a caterpillar (and perhaps for everything) there can be no transformation without decay. Decay is brutal. I imagined the butterfly's colourful wings to be delicate and ethereal like the lithe little dancing girl I thought I wanted to be. But in reading Rebecca Solnit's *Field Guide to Getting Lost* I discovered that they actually emerge from the chrysalis plump, full of water, with wings folded paper-like at their sides. They then pump the water into them. Water gives them strength and structure. In fact, the beauty and flight they possess is actually full, fluid and volumous. So, who wants to be a delicate little girl, when you could be a strong, flying, butterfly woman?!?

I grew butterfly wings during a Skinner Releasing Technique class with Gaby Agis whilst studying from my MA at Independent Dance. I also manifested the sensation of a spiralling tunnelling tale... From there my animals evolved. I play with singular animal explorations sometimes like growing additional legs from my belly and stomping and rearing horse-like, or my floating jelly fish score in which I sink and rise, feeling my weight spread and imagining all my movement emanating from my vagina.

Other times I use composites of different animals, combining the playfulness of a monkey, with the restful nature of a sloth and gathering objects magpie-like, taking whatever I want and need in the moment. All of those feel like tiny feminist acts. Rest, in a world that praises exhaustion and prioritises productivity over health, is in itself political. When it comes to feminism this feels vital. As detailed in Soraya Chemaly's *Rage Becomes Her*, there are various labours that most often fall to women, and the work of existing in a system pitched against you is exhausting. Rest has been a theme for me in my life lately and also in this work. An animal does not ask if she has earned a rest, she simply rests.

The ultimate composite is the tail, wings and antlers combination. I draw on these often and have begun sharing them in my teaching practice. My hope with the installation, and

through teaching is to offer the freedom of expression and genderless physicality I find through dancing with the animals to as many people as possible. As Jay Griffiths writes "To the rebel soul in everyone, then, the right to wear feathers, drink stars and ask for the moon. For us all the growl of the primal salute" (2006, P4).