

**Accompanying Paper to *mirage* Short Dance Film**

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My short dance film responds to the work of Annabelle Lopez Ochoa, Columbian-Belgian dancer and choreographer who has created many works for ballet, theater, and opera. She was a student with the Royal Ballet School of Antwerp and has choreographed original ballets on several professional companies including the Dutch National Ballet, English National Ballet, and Ballet Hispanico (Lopez Ochoa, Biography). Her work combines ballet with various styles such as flamenco, jazz, and contemporary dance, and embodies the stories of important female figures such as Coco Chanel and Frida Kahlo, honoring not just their successes, but also capturing their thoughts, values, and inner mental states (Nationale Opera & Ballet, “Frida.”, Atlanta Ballet, “Coco Chanel”). I was interested in engaging with her work as she strives to capture the inner worlds and minds of women in her choreography, and I am very interested in the intersection of psychology and dance as well. The main research question that guided me throughout the process was, how does Lopez Ochoa translate the inner lives of women to an audience? The main aim of my project is to explore how representational dance expresses the inner life, thoughts, and feelings of the creator/subject of the piece while enabling the audience to resonate with it and see themselves within the work.

When researching Lopez Ochoa’s career and choreographic philosophy, it was fascinating to hear how she gained experience within ballet companies through emerging female choreographer initiatives; for instance, Lopez Ochoa was commissioned by Tamara Rojo, director of the English National Ballet at the time to create a ballet based on a “strong, female character”, which became the impetus for the creation of *Frida* (Smith, Dance Data Project). She was also part of a mixed bill, *Unbound*, for San Francisco Ballet (Gaiser Casey). In Carrie Gaiser Casey’s “Reclaiming the Studio: Observing the Choreographic Processes of Cathy Marston and Annabelle Lopez Ochoa”, Gaiser Casey watched Lopez Ochoa create her work *Guernica* for San

Francisco Ballet's *Unbound* and observed her rehearsal process. Gaiser Casey emphasized how rare choreographic opportunities for women are within the ballet industry, and spoke of how critical it is that companies highlight "a woman who constructs a world out of her own vision and shares it in the traditionally male public sphere" (Gaiser Casey). Lopez Ochoa utilizes every element, including costume, set pieces, music, and lighting, to do so and creates works that are reflective of her vision while maintaining a connection to both her dancers and audience. Her ability to portray the psychological female experience within a male-dominated choreographic industry inspires me greatly, and I wanted to aim to do the same in my piece "mirage".

A mirage is an optical illusion where one's mind tricks them to believe an object is in front of them when in reality, there is nothing there. My film expresses the blurry, hazy, and opaque nature of our own minds that do not always allow us to see or perceive our lifeview clearly, often as a result of a past history of disregarding and misguiding the research of women's mental health (Nasser 10). Because I was the only dancer in the film, I utilized two different costumes to represent the "dual self" that Lopez Ochoa often uses in her work; for instance, in *Frida*, Lopez Ochoa had the male dancers portray different versions of Frida Kahlo through her self portraits, and often symbolizes different aspects of the same person (Nationale Opera & Ballet, "Frida"). The version of me in the eye covering and tutu resemble the mental "mirage" that can be created within one's mind; even in the absence of a stimulus, our minds can often create irrational fears or doubts about situations and events that are not representative of our lived reality. The other version of me is intended to reflect the "true", or in more psychological terms, the "experiencing self" that is attempting to walk through life and come to terms with the mirages that our minds can create.

When creating the choreography, there were two major elements of Lopez Ochoa's work that I wanted to integrate into this piece; the first being her use of various styles and using them as a way to evolve her choreographic technique and style by learning from multiple forms. I wanted to maintain a balletic groundwork as a basis to branch into more contemporary and flamenco stylistic elements within the movement. Similar to Lopez Ochoa, I have always admired flamenco dance due to its balance of beauty and power, and as Lopez Ochoa often integrates her cultural background into her work, I wanted to include these influences from my Spanish heritage as well. I used some of the footwork, or "zapateado", that I learned from flamenco classes I had taken during a summer intensive and twisted it to be danced in a more "classical" style by utilizing my pointe shoes to emphasize the feet striking against the floor (3:45 in the video).

The second element of Lopez Ochoa's work that I aimed to incorporate was her use of dynamic movement, embodying the balance between grace and intensity. When creating her work *Guernica*, Lopez Ochoa described her movement as being "confrontational", "fierce", and "combative" (Gaiser Casey). In my film, I attempted to incorporate these elements through using sharper, more intense jumps and references to Odile in *Swan Lake* for the version of myself representing the "mirage", while including more port de bras, longer extensions, and more "gentle" movements for the portrayal of the "experiencing" self. Lopez Ochoa also often has her dancers put their hands in claw-like positions or wear long nails as in the case of her piece, *Les Biches*, as an extension of the hands to symbolize the confrontational nature of her work. The "mirage" part of myself in the film similarly has my hands in more angular and tense positions, as well as uses the hands as a way to "trick" the other self. To cross one's fingers behind one's back means to not keep a promise and "deceive" our counterpart, but I wanted to demonstrate

how our own minds can oftentimes do this by tricking or doubting ourselves (3:09 in the video). Some of the most common symptomology in female mental health issues includes mental filtering and repetitive worry (e.g. checking/rechecking, doubt, excessive and irrational fear), which often manifest even in the absence of any particular “reason” or stimulus (Nasser 7). Nasser and colleagues speak of the socio-cultural contexts in which women’s mental health has been historically defined as “hysteria” or “madness”, and discuss the long line of misdiagnosis and misguidance that has affected how women think of their mental health today. At times, women disregard their own feelings or have worries that arise naturally that their mind “latches” onto and creates more spiraling self-doubt and a poorer self-concept than in actuality, contributing to this “mental mirage” (Nasser 13). Much of the movement in my film is cyclical through turns and circular arm movements or repetition of certain steps, demonstrating this rumination. The ending of the film illustrates that this part of the mind that creates mirages may never completely leave us, but it is possible to learn how to tame it and find moments of stillness and peace.

It was also interesting to think about the other elements such as costume, music, and lighting that would be utilized in the film and how they can best support my choreographic vision. The costumes were fun to create as I needed two different garments to emphasize the two selves, but I wanted to make sure there were elements of each to represent both the balance of movement dynamics itself (grace vs power), as well as to demonstrate that one version of oneself does not exist in the absence of the other. Thus, instead of having one self dressed in all white and the other in all black, I utilized elements of each color in each costume. The eye covering was an element that was an exciting challenge; I made it out of black tulle so that I would still be able to see through it, but it was still a bit difficult to spot when turning and find the ground as

my depth perception was affected by them. Lopez Ochoa often works closely with designers to create costumes inspired by couture and high fashion, and even choreographed for a Viktor and Rolf show in 2006 (Libbey). I have a similar love for design, so I wanted to integrate that into this film as well; the eye covering is inspired by the accessories used to emphasize the extremities of the body often utilized by Thierry Mugler and Alexander McQueen, whose collections are also quite psychological, and the visual represents the fact that a mental mirage can affect one's ability to see their reality clearly. Additionally, Lopez Ochoa often encourages her dancers to "speak with the eyes" and use their gaze to communicate the power and strength of their movement (1:23, Lopez Ochoa, San Francisco Ballet). With this in mind, I questioned how I could achieve the same intensity without using the eyes in this role, and where I would have to compensate, which resulted in utilizing quicker and sharper ways of moving.

Similarly to how Lopez Ochoa often incorporates music reflective of her culture, the music that I used in the film was composed by Swedish musician Vargkvint. I was drawn to the cyclical nature of the composition as well, as even though it is quite meditative it has a sense of eeriness that I wanted to draw out in this film. The chapel-like studio provided an interesting set for the film, as chapels are often associated with confession and are a place where the ultimate truth is sought. Additionally, my videographer suggested to change the lighting in accordance with each of the "selves", which added an extra visual dimension to the intention behind the movement. Lastly, Lopez Ochoa's dance films often switch between different dynamics, as in the case of her film version of *Guernica*, where the film is cut between the dancers completing more gentle port de bras and contrasting it with sharp and complex jump sequences. It was exciting to attempt to resemble those dynamics within my film through the way I edited it as well.

Creating this dance film in response to Lopez Ochoa's work was an exciting challenge, as it was a fun opportunity to take inspiration from her movement style as well as her overall choreographic philosophy. In an interview for San Francisco Ballet, Lopez Ochoa said that when choreographing a ballet, "the more personal I make it the more universal it becomes" (Lopez Ochoa, San Francisco Ballet). This statement resonates with me greatly, as I feel my own choreography is often fairly diaristic; however, my intention for all of my pieces is that while they are rooted in personal, autobiographical feelings and experiences, that my dancers and audience are able to see themselves in the piece as well. This process taught me a lot more about Lopez Ochoa's similar philosophy and the ways in which she accomplishes it, and I am excited to further harness this choreographic mentality in the future, as "when it (the ballet) comes on stage you're hoping it relates also to the people in the audience" (Lopez Ochoa, The Business of Being a Freelance Choreographer).

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