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Maria Hassabi, *The Kitchen*, New York – review

By Apollinaire Scherr

A visual rhythm emerged from the five performers' variations of stillness and motion



Maria Hassabi's slow, sculptural, exacting work appears in white boxes as often as black: it owes as much to art as it does to dance and theatre. Indeed, the New Yorker's latest piece, co-produced by *The Kitchen* and performance art biennial *Performa 13*, defines itself in that gap, deriving power and poignancy from the tension between the aesthetic and the theatrical – the art object and the human subject.

Premiere (which will tour Europe in 2014) began with its five performers facing away. They stood or reclined in harmonious asymmetry between two walls of blazing lights. Each posture was distinct, each person as still as a body could be. Over the course of 75 minutes, those on the floor rose and those standing sat or lay down, once or several times but always by incremental adjustment. The configurations of the five gradually rotated from stage width to length – all the arrangements beautiful without underscoring the fact. In the unpredictable variations of stillness and motion a visual rhythm emerged that knitted the scene together.

The drama was not simply visual, though. Knees shook and rubber-soled shoes squeaked with every effort to move more slowly than the body would allow. The lights' sudden lowering to an amber glow or the surreptitious return of the hiss and creak of Alex Waterman's sound score may have marked time, but the performers in their slowness resisted it vehemently.

The very minimalism of their tasks emphasised their differences. Hassabi's face was turbulent with an occluded emotion provocatively at odds with *Premiere's* concerted transparency. Andros Zins-Browne's hyper-alertness brought out the show's microscopic eventfulness. Silky even at a glacial pace, Hristoula Harakas gazed at us with a blushing brashness that reminded me I was staring too. Biba Bell preserved the imperturbably willowy neck of a ballerina no matter how stiffly her arms pressed against her side, her head erect with defiant elegance. Longing seemed to drive Robert Steijn (of Hassabi's *Robert and Maria*) even at the most physically trying moments, as in a harrowing aria of ascent to standing, in squeaky shoes on wobbly legs.

Each moment was a tiny premiere. The performers began again with every lapse in stillness until – back where they started except in reverse, facing us – they stopped for good.

