

# The New York Times

## A Dance About the State of Emergency We're In

By: Brian Seibert

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*Ctrl + Click to watch video.*

When Jamar Roberts, the resident choreographer of Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, got a call from Works & Process at the Guggenheim Museum inviting him to contribute a video, he had been sheltering for a few weeks in a friend's basement outside New York, not dancing or feeling at all inspired to dance.

"They were going to pay," he recalled in a phone interview, "and at that point I didn't know yet if Ailey was going to keep paying me, so I said OK."

Since the museum closed, Works & Process, a long-running performance series, has been commissioning its alumni to make videos no longer than five minutes. Each Sunday and Monday, another installment is posted on YouTube. The playlist now includes more than a dozen, with dozens more on the way.

The list of contributors is distinguished, and many of the entries are charming, but Mr. Roberts's work stands out. Short as it is, his video, "Cooped," released last week, is one of the most powerful artistic responses yet to the Covid-19 crisis. And as that crisis changes shape, as the anxiety over disease and confinement is compounded by violence and protest, the resonance of the work only expands.

It begins with Mr. Roberts's bare torso and head, seeming to hang upside down in a dark, tight space: a basement, a cell. As it continues, the framing shifts but stays close, focusing on his gleaming body as it bends in ways both beautiful and uncomfortable. Arching his head back or staring at the camera, he shakes.



"I knew right away that I wasn't going to stand in front of the camera and dance for five minutes," he said. "I was completely out of shape." Thinking he might make something about his frustration at being stuck indoors, he started playing in the basement — playing with the ceiling and the floor and the light, filming himself on his iPad and editing the results.

"It was fun, tinkering with the editing software," he said. "Then things got heated."

He learned about how Covid-19 has been disproportionately affecting blacks, who have been hospitalized and dying at a much higher rate than whites. "I wasn't surprised," he said. "You hear about the disparities that black people suffer all day long these days. I wasn't going to make the dance about it."



But then, as he looked at what he was making, watching 30 seconds of it over and over for hours, he said he realized, "This is deeper than I intended." Following the feeling, he pushed the video further into a kind of fever dream. "The piece told me what it wanted to be."

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He thought about how "quarantine is not foreign to communities of color." He thought about segregation and redlining. He remembered how his grandfather, dying of cancer but wary of white authorities, avoided going to the hospital. "This

feeling of what it's like to be sick and suffering but not have resources — that all came out in a way I didn't anticipate," he said.

For the completed video, Mr. Roberts added a score by his friend David Watson, composed of bagpipes and the drumming of the renowned Australian percussionist Tony Buck. "The bagpipes sound like a drone," he said, "sort of mundane, like 'Here we go again with the terrors of black experience in America,' but then they sound like a siren, really showing the state of emergency we're in."

Commonly, when a choreographer tries to express a state of emergency through dance, the results are obvious, didactic or maudlin. An ability to avoid those traps seems to be part of Mr. Roberts's gift. In "Ode," his work for the Ailey company last year, he managed to evoke the pain of gun violence, harrowingly but delicately, without making a public service announcement.



"I'm very concerned with beauty," he said. "With these situations that are hard to speak about, I always try to make a point that there's something beautiful that sits side by side with it."

Working in video offered him different possibilities for expression. "I'm always trying to show the nuance, the blink of an eye or the turning of a hand, the change in body language in the second when you get really hard information," he said. "Making this film allowed me to invest in those tiny moments that are harder to make register onstage."

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#### Process at the Guggenheim

They do register in the film, concentrating and channeling the fears stirred up by the Covid-19 crisis but also tapping into currents of history deeper and wider than the immediate subject. Art like that can seem prescient. Although Mr. Roberts created the piece before the killing of George Floyd in police custody and before the video of the incident sparked an uprising, "Cooped" — with its images of a bent black body and its siren tone of emergency — now seems to speak to those events, too.

Works & Process acknowledged this resonance on Monday when, instead of putting up a new entry, it reposted Mr. Roberts's work. "When Jamar turned it in, we were completely taken away by its power," Duke Dang, the organization's general manager, said. "We've been releasing the videos pretty much in the order they were submitted, but considering how relevant his piece has become, putting it up again seemed the right thing to do at this moment."

Mr. Roberts also sees the relevance. In his artist's statement, he wrote about the effects of Covid-19 on black people as "a crisis within a crisis." Now, in recognition of the events of last week, he has added a paragraph about the black body as a source of controversy across hundreds of years. Using his own black body, he writes, was a way to make visible the psyche of a marginalized people and their resilience and their beauty.

"It's been an issue for a very long time," he said, "so it will always have relevance. I added to my artist's statement, because I wanted to speak specifically about the body. Seeing the destruction of the physical body gets people going. That's why I wanted my body up close to the viewer, so that you can feel it and really understand what I'm talking about."