

Dance

“I have the desire to fight”

María La Ribot on the Biennale Danza and Beyond

By [Emily May](#)



La Ribot, 2019. Photo: © Pablo Zamora.

While Venice’s Architecture and Art festivals have been postponed until 2021 and 2022 respectively due to the coronavirus crisis, the Biennale Danza is still set to take place from October 13–25—an impressive feat as many theaters and performance spaces around the world remain closed. At the center of the festival is the Leone d’Oro (Golden Lion), the award given to creators in recognition of their lifetime achievements. Previously awarded to choreographers including Lucinda Childs, Meg Stuart, and most recently Alessandro Sciarroni, this year the prize goes to Spanish-Swiss choreographer María La Ribot. Renowned as an inimitable feminist performance artist, La Ribot addresses wide ranging socio-political issues in her body of work. “I don’t go to the studio and then try to think of what to do. I go when I am enraged and need to question something,” she says on a Zoom call from Zurich weeks before the festival. “Once I feel like this, I may see an image, or something in the news that offers me an idea of how to start working. But initially, everything comes from the fact I have something to say.”



La Ribot, *Panoramix* (1993-2003), Tate Modern, London, 2003. Photo: Manuel Vason.

This outspoken spirit manifests in the artist's *Distinguished Pieces*, which she started working on back in 1993. Arguably her most well-known ongoing project, and the one that brought her to fame, the *Distinguished Pieces* are fragmented solos performed in succession in both theater and gallery contexts. "I think of everything—dance, theater, art, film, and performance—as contemporary art," says La Ribot on her tendency to create works that traverse boundaries between art forms. "The space [in which] I choose to present my work depends on the relationship I need to establish with the audience. For example, in a gallery, the audience is with you: they can move around and feel more intimately connected to the performance. Whereas in a theater, there is more distance. But it does offer the possibility to experiment with theatrical lighting, which, generally, you can't in a gallery."

Having choreographed 53 *Distinguished Pieces* to date and hoping to create 100 in her lifetime, La Ribot groups her short works together into series, or "shows," according to the topics and interests they explore, ranging from war and suffering to feminism and body politics. The piece that is most imprinted in my mind, for example, sees La Ribot wearing nothing but a cardboard sign reading "Se Vende" (For Sale). Sandwiched in between the hinge of a foldable wooden chair, she pumps its squeaking seat backwards and forwards against her lower body with increasing speed and ferocity until she ends up in a heap on the floor, an action that alludes to sexual violence and the objectification of women. "You often see very clearly the things I don't agree with in the *Distinguished Pieces*," she says. "But there are also some that are more poetic," she adds, referring to *Poema Infinito* (1997), which she created in order to help her son understand the concept of infinity.

In line with receiving the Golden Lion, La Ribot will be presenting two performances at the Biennale this month. The first, *Más Disinguidas*, is the second series of *Distinguished Pieces* La Ribot created back in 1997.



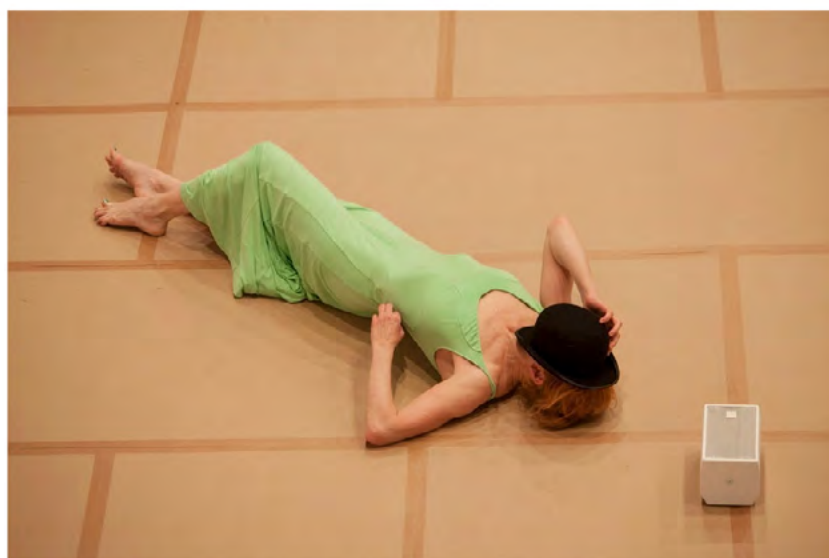
La Ribot. Photo: © Pablo Zamora.

This show replaces the originally slated *Panoramix*, the artist's 3-hour long reprise of pieces from between 1993 and 2003, as the opening of the Biennale, due to its better fit with coronavirus restrictions. The second show, *Another Distinguée* (2016), is a stark contrast to the first. The most recent installment of *Distinguished Pieces*, it sees La Ribot joined by two male performers and a "big, black, mysterious installation" in a dimly lit theater space. "All of the *Distinguished Pieces* in this show are related to relationships, sacrifice, and memories," she says, giving an example of one piece in which the light incrementally dims in concordance with the performers' increasingly minimal movements. "It's like something is disappearing or dying with the darkness. It could be love, desire, relationships, or life."



La Ribot, *Panoramix* (1993-2003), "Contellation La Ribot" at the Mercat de les Flors, Barcelona, 2019. Photo: Alfred Mauve.

Both *Más Distinguidas* and *Another Distinguée* are strictly set pieces of choreography: La Ribot has made no changes to them since their inception. She has, however, in recent years, had to make minor adjustments due to her aging body. "I'm much older and much less flexible, so of course I have to adapt some movements," she says, noting that maintaining her balance in particular has been a challenge. "I originally trained in classical ballet and contemporary dance. Now I just do yoga, and what I feel like I need to keep me trained for performance. There's one piece where I have to do around 20 balances in a row: it's a critique of classical dance. Last year in Paris I managed it, but I think it's going to be very difficult for me at the Biennale." Despite these hurdles, La Ribot also believes there are benefits to being a mature performer, including the fact that she feels stronger and more secure in her understanding of her work and the motivations behind it. She also believes it is incredibly important to maintain diversity in the type of bodies we see on stage. "Why should we just have young people on stage doing fantastical, beautiful things? We should keep things open so that everyone can do what they want."



La Ribot, *Panoramix* (1993-2003), "Contellation La Ribot" at the Mercat de les Flors, Barcelona, 2019. Photo:

While La Ribot is assured in her opinions and passionate when talking about her work, she is also incredibly modest. In fact, even in the face of receiving the Golden Lion, she admits that she doesn't feel like she's really "achieved anything" yet. "When I found out about the award, I thought it was impossible. I don't see myself as a very mainstream or well-known artist. My work is very experimental. I think the fact that I'm receiving this prize gives recognition not only to me, but also my colleagues and fellow artists who are working in order to understand the world, rather than to achieve money or fame. We are poets more than anything else."

When asked what we can expect next from her off the back of receiving the Golden Lion, La Ribot seems genuinely touched. "Thank you for asking this. Some people think that after you achieve a lifetime award, everything stops. But for me, it's like, thank you very much, let's keep going." Considering that she is approaching 60, and that many dancers stop performing in their mid-30s, this determination is particularly impressive. "You have to have the desire to keep going. A lot of people lose it. But I still have it. I have the desire to fight."

Contributor

Emily May

Emily May is a British-born, Berlin-based writer trained at Trinity Laban Conservatoire in London, and specialising in dance reporting and criticism. She has written for publications across Europe and America including *The Stage*, *Dance Magazine*, *Flash Art*, *SLEEK*, and *Springback Magazine*. www.emilymay.uk