

Munira Lokhandwala – Fore Essay
Artist Essay – Nicole Miller



“Dagging”, the Caribbean dance craze that lends its name to Nicole Miller’s video installation for Fore, has generated a mountain of moral panic in the past several years. The dance is seen as controversial enough that the Jamaican government has made attempts to scrub the airwaves of songs and videos thought to promote it. Dagging is already an established mainstay in dancehalls and nightclubs across the Caribbean, though its wider popularity is recent. Spread through the circulation of music videos and amateur footage, its notoriety likely derives from its explicit choreography, which often simulates sex. Dagging, Miller’s two-channel video work, captures footage from a club in Brooklyn, NY where the dance style has recently landed, and places it alongside a video of the artist in a ballet studio, where she revisits bodily memories from her childhood as a classically trained dancer.

In Dagging, Miller brings an autobiographically inspired fiction -- a disenchanting coming of age tale -- into the sparse and dimly lit mise-en-scene of a Brooklyn dance floor. What enables this unlikely meeting is the voice-over narration that connects to the videos at two poles: at moments with the intimacy of a radio drama and at other times with an almost ethnographic distance. Indeed, the clinical, disaffected voice-over belongs to neither image, instead creating affection between the starkly contrasted scenes through its alienation from both. This distance is most palpable when noticing the formality of the narration in contrast to the contingent and spontaneous movements of the Brooklyn dance floor. It is here that the viewer is asked to consider the tensions within ideas about

conventions, form, and bodily experience. The narration contains its own choreography, as it punctuates then digresses, moving toward and away from the images on screen. Undoubtedly, the strained relationship between images and narration in this piece brings two seemingly distant forms and discourses of dance and “culture” into proximity as a way to challenge ideas about desire, corporeality, and power in dance.

Dagging, like many of Miller’s earlier video works, engages with the concept of the mirror both as a surface for reflection (in all its potential meanings) and re-constitution of the self. The distorted image we gaze at in the mirror, like representations offered up in film and media culture, is one with which we often resist identification. The protagonist described by the narrator in Dagging sees in the mirror of the dance studio a reflection of blood pouring down her leg, refusing to identify with this humiliating image of herself. Similarly, the reconstitution of one’s self through the process of reflection is a question that remains generative in Miller’s video and storytelling process. This concept of mirroring and reflection is visible in the aesthetics and form of Miller’s earlier work. Her 2009–12 videos, *Untitled (David and Darby)* and *The Conductor*, use multiple channel and large-scale silent projection respectively. Miller frequently utilizes mirroring, whether through the use of actual mirrors, multi-channel or split-screen projections, or cinema screens, as sites of representation and offers them as surfaces for projection, reflection and reconstitution. Mirroring and reflection are key symbols that manifest both in the form and content of Miller’s work and serve as departure points for narration and narrative, featuring importantly in works like *Untitled (David and Darby)* and *Dagging*.

Reflection in Miller’s work also asks for and facilitates active engagement from the viewer. In *Dagging*, the three-part narration of a young dancer’s trials weave in and out of the 34 minutes of dance club footage, describing three distinct experiences of humiliation the young ballerina undergoes. The vivid detail and narration of the dancer’s dis-identification with the controlled experience of ballet training pushes up against images of the Brooklyn nightclub, where a less distinguished sociality of dance unfolds. Bringing together narration and image, two disparate representational forms, asks the viewer to consider how memory and experience, and the reconstitution of a subject’s relationship to the two, develop over time and with distance. Mirroring in Miller’s work operates in much the same way as the slow inscription of an image on a photographic plate, allowing time for reflection and reconstitution of representation -- and in turn, of subjectivity and relationships to past experiences never fully developed by our consciousness. The mirror, more than just reflecting, functions as a kind of window in Miller’s work; one that gestures at voyeurism while remaining a portal, transfiguring subjects and subjectivities in its solicitation of reflection, recollection, and storytelling. Miller’s mirrors allow for the gaze to turn inward and self-reflection becomes the catalyst for image making.