

Performing Arts: Susie's Lee's "Swimming the List"

By [Roxanne Ray](#)

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Dancer Ying Zhou, titled "Arms".

How can we ever find the time to pursue our creativity?

This is a common question in a society busy with work and family, but the Susie Lee Ensemble hopes to provide an answer. In their new dance piece, "Swimming the List", the ensemble features solo dancer Ying Zhou in an exploration of how creative and mundane daily activities intersect and overlap.

Earlier in 2011, says ensemble leader Susie Lee, Zhou "had just delivered her second child and was worried that she was not really a dancer anymore, since she would have limited time to get to a studio." From this concern arose the inspiration for a new work.

"It made me wonder if that generative, creative space was mostly inaccessible for those who didn't have the luxury of time and resources," Lee says. "But that seemed ... not right. So I asked Ying to pull from her own life. And so, the movements are inspired by her daily life and thoughts."

In "Swimming the List", ensemble members Susie Lee, Ying Zhou, composer Emily Greenleaf, costume designer Christine Tschirgi, lighting designer Mandi Wood, and digital artist Keeara Rhoades work together to embody Lee's concept of a "moving sculpture," with digital projections.

Lee's goal in this work is to distinguish the mundane from the boring. "Boring might be stuck in a conversation about home repairs and one-up-manship vacations," says Lee. "It feels inaccessible and therefore, uninteresting. However, mundane is accessible because they're universal and continuously micro-transforming: getting older, making hard decisions, wanting more, getting over loss."

An irony encountered by the ensemble is how the everyday has both inspired and frustrated their creative efforts: "The biggest challenge has been to try to coordinate, motivate, schedule and accommodate four busy lives and everyone else associated with the project," Lee says, "and not to succumb to the idea that high-caliber generative projects can only come from a place where people do this full-time."

Lee says the ensemble deploys their concepts of time in numerous ways: "I employ new media technologies because of their inherently time-based nature, their programmed obsolescence (paralleling the physical body) and potential and continuous transformations of space and objects over time."

Concurrently, Lee seeks to convey the importance of time for both the artist off-stage and her character on-stage in other design elements. "The costume design has to fulfill a few purposes," she says. "It has to be simple and light-colored, so that the drawings can be seen on the body. It also must evoke a woman's everyday, gotta-get-stuff done outfit, as well."

Meanwhile, Mandi Wood's lighting design will "suggest the light that progresses through the arc of a day," but must also illuminate more than the ordinary. "Within the choreography," Lee says, "there are fissures in time within the mundane that can seem quite magical, and the light embodies those moments."

Lee expects to explore similar topics of time, daily life, and creativity in an upcoming solo exhibition at the Frye Art Museum in February, 2012, titled "Of Breath and Rain".

"I'm most curious about the fundamentals of our behavior and thoughts," Lee says. "It probably runs through much of my work."

"Swimming the List" will be presented from Sept. 23 – 25 at the Theatre Off Jackson, 409 Seventh Avenue South, Seattle.