

surface



The
ENDORSEMENTS

Our second annual
SURVEY OF RISING TALENTS
nominated by 14 leaders of design

Artek design director Ville Kokkonen enjoys the elaborate scenographies created by this Parisian pair.

VIRGINIE MIRA + JULIE NIOCHE

A woman lies on a stage. She rolls over, fidgeting as if sleeping, but pauses halfway through the movement, facing the audience. As she does this, half of her body remains suspended in mid-air. Each time she reaches, kicks, or stretches, she climbs higher, bound to a constellation of falling weights that lever her upwards. She struggles in flashes—here elegant, there frustrated—with the cords around her, seemingly unconscious all the while, until the weights are on the ground, and she hangs 13 feet above the stage. Then, suddenly, she sinks back down to the ground within a circle of rising weights.

The dancer and choreographer is Julie Nioche, the weights are the creation of scenographer and architect Virginie Mira, and the piece is the best known of the French duo's four collaborations since 2004. Shortly after its premiere in 2010, this work, entitled "Nos Solitudes," was performed at the Pompidou Center under the rubric of the Paris Autumn Festival, and garnered that year's Special Jury Award from the French Critics Association. Like Nioche and Mira's other pieces, "Nos Solitudes" integrates choreography and scenography to tread the line between architectural installation and movement-based art, immersing viewers in the surreal building of suspension within a dream.

Nioche, 36, first approached Mira, 38, after meeting in a workshop Nioche led. Mira, an amateur dancer since she was young, had recently returned to Paris after two years with MMW Architects in Oslo, Norway, where she had experimented with mobile architecture and scenography.

Back in France, Nioche and Mira discovered a mutual fascination with how constraints to a body change the dynamics of its movement. As Ville Kokkonen of Finnish

furniture brand Artek puts it, "In Virginie's collaborations with Julie, the architectural design is approached as a threat, a restraint, or limitation to the body. The approach of each piece contains a synergetic and interweaving articulation between the body and the space; the scenography becomes an active, performative tool."

Their goal, Mira says, is to bring the audience into an experience, rather than relegate viewers to watching a body interact with an object. To that end, she says, "There's always some material that's being transformed that's impossible to control."

Case in point: their most recent creation, "Voleuse," presented as part of the Hermès Foundation's New Settings 2012 program. In it, lights flash as four women in orange jumpsuits race around, chasing the four prongs of a massive propeller that rotates slowly overhead to the sound of thrumming music. It descends little by little to the ground. The women try to stop it, are trapped between its blades, then pushed beneath the prongs as they near the floor. Bodies drape, defeated, lifeless—and then a change. The dancers now sit on the propeller as if on a porch swing. Throughout the performance, the object shifts from dangerous to playful to ominous to contemplative via the movements of the women around it.

Mira hasn't left non-performative built architecture behind. For a client, she's in the process of renovating a late-19th-century house, full of closed spaces and small rooms. Where the objects she makes for the stage often aim to constrain the body in varied ways, the challenge here, as she describes it, is "to bring movement back into the home."—JULIA COOKE

The "Voleuse" propeller. (OPPOSITE) Virginie Mira (left) and Julie Nioche with their "Voleuse" creation. Photos: Claudia Imbert.

