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DANCE REVIEW

'Women and War' at Highways Performance Space

Moments of intrigue and wit to savor.

By Sara Wolf, Special to The Times
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The relationship of gender to geopolitics was the premise for the timely, eclectic showcase "Women and War" at Highways Performance Space on Friday night. Curated by Samantha Giron, the program highlighted emerging female choreographers from Northern and Southern California.

Duets by lean to productions (Rachael Lincoln and Leslie Seiters), Rebecca Pappas and Sri Susilowati consisted of excerpts from evening-length works, with the results tantalizing like a trio of *amuses-bouche*.

Nevertheless, these small gems (all from works scheduled to premiere in Los Angeles later this year) were among the evening's most intriguing dances.

They also shared a more jaundiced eye toward the thin line separating women from men.

In the enigmatic program opener, "The Exact Moment of Departure," Lincoln and Seiters tried on masculinity by slipping into empty tuxedo jackets suspended from the rafters. Alternately dangling limply or attempting to soar, the pair capitalized on simple props and aerial work to demonstrate that being a member of either sex can be as awkward as moving in an ill-fitting suit.

For "Chosen," Susilowati abstracted a narrative about a warrior transformed into a woman from the epic Mahabharata. Expressing this duality through contrasting qualities, Susilowati and Annie Tucker used Indonesian *wayang wong* hand moves to slice and carve across a giant spiral of rose petals. Adding to the effect was a score featuring a poetic evocation of the horrors of war by Robert Earle.

Hana van der Kolk and Krenly Guzman mesmerized in Pappas' compelling "Monster: Portrait 5," the only dance on the program to feature a male performer. Combining halting, floundering movements with erratic, compulsive gestures, Pappas invoked the memory of former wars while detailing how the body remembers. Poignantly, Van der Kolk trailed after Guzman while reading a story that omitted any specifics of who, when or where; then she echoed Guzman's exhausted poses and compulsive repetitions, as if to take on his memories.

Giron approached the evening's topic by turning to the diary of a young Viet Cong field medic, Dang Thuy Tram. Although "Fire Diary" was marred by an imbalance in the sound score that made the text impossible to decipher, Giron shined in a solo that accumulated force through an expanding web of delicately folding and unfolding limbs.

San Francisco-based Mary Armentrout similarly delivered a character-driven solo in the witty "traffic (or thoughts while eating Ritz crackers)." Sitting in front of a video by Ian Winters of relentless highway traffic, Armentrout wound herself around her chair and into a knot of worry as she ate the titular snack and mused aloud about her day, the Iraq war, global warming and so on -- all of which, like the onslaught of imagery and crackers, quickly overwhelmed her.

Less successful were "Pavane for an Iraqi Girl," Sarah Swenson's response to the 2006 gang rape of an Iraqi teenager by U.S. soldiers, and Giron's solo for Robin Wilson, "Interrogations." Though substantially different, both were too heavy-handed in their approach, despite the dancers' expressive sincerity.