

WITNESSES @ AXIOM  
review by JACQUELINE HOUTON

I sit in relative comfort in the climate-controlled gallery, on the bench so thoughtfully provided for me, and yet I am profoundly uncomfortable. I am watching a body slowly tumble down a flight of stairs, shaking the wooden framework with its terrible rhythm. The body is entirely shrouded, white burial cloth tied at the neck, waist, knees, and ankles, obscuring all details of identity so that the viewer is left only with a sense of its surprisingly insistent weight, with an opportunity to study the way it falls—torso thudding against each step a half-second before the hips, the legs. And of course, with a vague sense of shame at doing so, at watching the spectacle of a violence that is simultaneously symbolic and literal, unnecessarily self-imposed yet purposeful.

“Downrush exposes our complicity and questions our passivity as witnesses to current events, conflicts, war, genocide, and the resultant loss of lives,” declares Marika in the artist’s statement, suggesting that her body is being used in this bruising ritual as a surrogate for victims of real violence....

...And indeed, it is easy to feel complicit in something unspeakable when you watch what looks like a corpse smacking each step again and again, all the while seated on makeshift benches—the back one taller than the front, both made from weathered planks lain atop concrete blocks—that are eerily reminiscent of the wooden stairs in the video. Venture off those benches, and the paneled walls of the exhibition room reveal themselves as more than impromptu projection screens. From ceiling to floor, they are covered in Braille renderings of text from the Torah, the New Testament, and the Koran—the holy texts of three faiths whose followers worship the same God but whose disputes are the source of so much strife. The gallery staff will gladly give you a key to the Braille alphabet, but the sighted will still find themselves handicapped by a painfully slow translation process: these words of God are nearly as inaccessible to us as the images of Marika’s video would be to a blind visitor. The juxtaposition of unreadable text and indelible image begs the question: when we are passive witnesses to atrocity—a role we increasingly play, it seems, in an age where news is nearly instantaneously available on air and online—what are we seeing, and what are we not seeing? ... But politically engaged art is an end worth striving for, perhaps now more than ever, and there are elements in both works that give credence to the possibility that the answer is yes—that a seed may be planted amid indifference that might one day make a difference, even if only a handful of gallery-goers are affected at a time.



Denise Marika, still from *Downrush*, video and Braille installation.



Viewers come up close to Marika's *Downrush*.