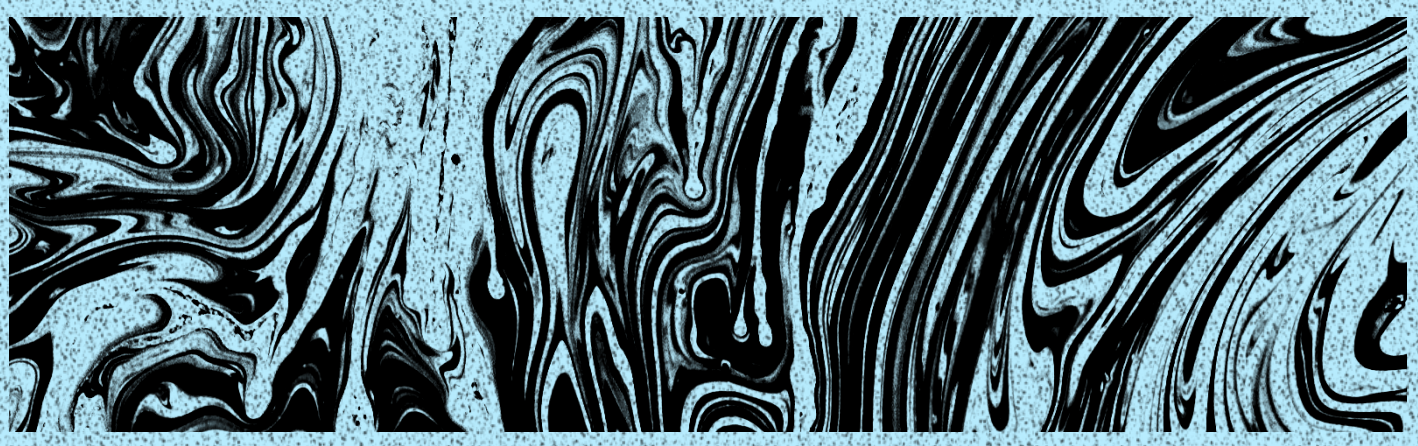
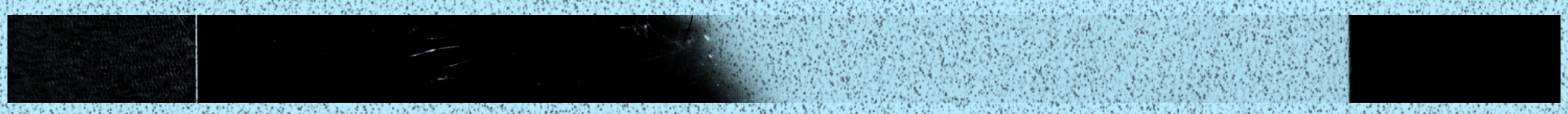


ORBIT



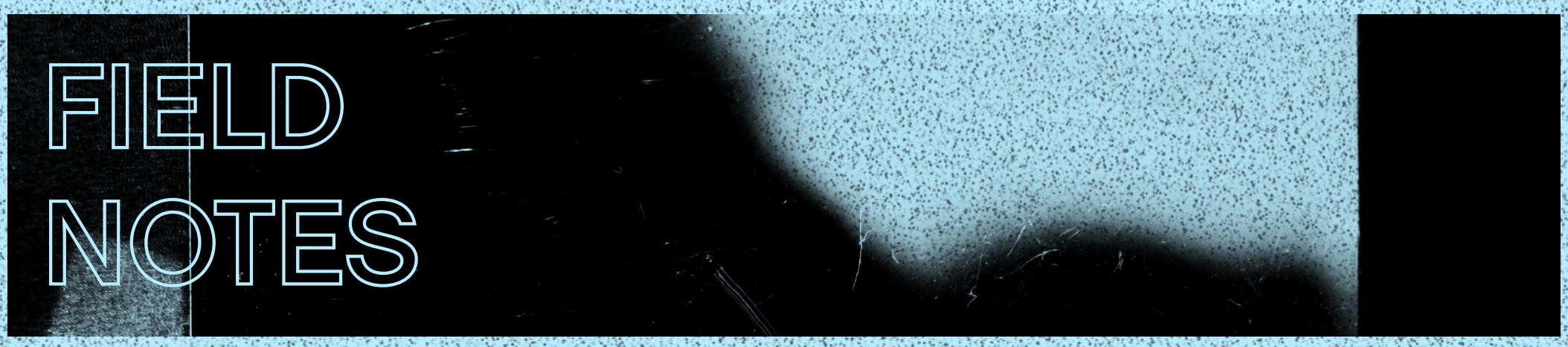
we who watch dance

by Erin Brannigan

reflecting on

Future History
by Gabrielle Nankivell

Performed at Sydney Dance Company,
5-8 Nov, 2026



DANCEHOUSE
SYDNEY DANCE COMPANY
Australian Government
Creative Australia

Future History scuttles between the past and future. Time opens up between the making of a dancer and some kind of end, filled up with a finely honed technician, a fury of dancing, and a deep despair.

A work in 3 or 4 parts. A solo. And a collaboration. A revival of a past, pre-Covid work, a rare remount in a local economy with an incessant drive for premieres. What is important to say about an encounter with something re-appearing from the past and projecting itself into a future it is attempting to write? What will be recorded and persist beyond the foyer chat and studio dialogues?



'Future History' (2026) by Gabrielle Nankivell. Photo by Dan Boud.



The work begins as many do – a slow build. A sculptural, textural figure looks back at us through slits in a cardboard mask, a green feather held in their left hand blown gently by a fan to the sound of an open field, birds and breeze. We are asked to look and look again at this pile of coloured fabrics, braided blonde fibres, pink organza that flashes, corrugated cardboard. It’s a secret we know the answer to – Nankivell is provoking through withholding.

The time-space opens up for thinking in a way that is so familiar to we who watch dance. Is Nankivell carrying the weight of the world? The many stagings of her work across time? The wardrobe of costumes that have moved with her as she danced? What are we waiting for? What is she setting up? Why this decision to hold us away at a distance where the dancer becomes object? A figure appears on stage and a world of possibilities is present, but the specificity here of costume and obfuscation is familiar in its aim to estrange.

Slow and tentative sideway slides, the rise of a soundscape reverberating, physical collapse to the tarkett, blackout.

'Future History' (2026) by Gabrielle Nankivell. Photo by Dan Boud.

Part 2. Nankivell populates the stage space with objects set on the white plinths that served as an abstract landscape in the opening section. A taxidermy Tasmanian Tiger, an obsolete machine, dried flowers... a dancer in the mix who begins to move in ways familiar to me. Clear lines and careful shapes cut through a contained space held tight by the museum of the ephemeral that surrounds her. High legs and controlled swooping turns are juxtaposed with body tremors and contortions. She is oriented towards the audience and always returns to stillness with her face to us, a challenge in her eyes that holds us with her.



'Future History' (2026) by Gabrielle Nankivell. Photo by Dan Boud.



A cumulus cloud is trapped in a glass box downstage left. Together with the exhibition of objects and dancer, the notion of 'all that passes' as a theme is set out for us and driven home, loud and clear.

This longest middle section of the work moves quickly through mood – control and shape give way to a virtuosic insistence. The shift from withheld potential to its full expression is dramatic. The solo is a generous form for engaging us, the audience, in the singularity of this dancer, on this night, at this point in time-space. Effort is unmasked here as we spiral together through an inventory of moves that seem to recall other dances at other times and places. This could be an encyclopaedic gathering, an attempt to show it all, an audition for the last spot in some canon of Australian dance that will always be referring to somewhere else, as all dance always does.

'Future History' (2026) by Gabrielle Nankivell. Photo by Dan Boud.

Except that the singularity of Nankivell holds us to account here. She is dancing for us in an explicit way, and the energy of transmission is palpable. I'm swimming through affects – rage, sorrow, mirth, wonder, bewilderment - that are coming at me, rapid fire, and constantly shifting the ground beneath our feet, hers and mine. Expression and dance were untethered in an historical rift that changed the way we thought about dancing subjectivities. So I do not take the decision here to move me for granted. Nankivell has something to say and she is saying it.

She stops. Feels her breast and up into her armpit. Every woman in the room knows how this feels, and anyone anywhere knows what it means. This gesture cuts through the work like a scalpel and pulls the entire work into a point, like a puckered scar on soft skin.



'Future History' (2026) by Gabrielle Nankivell. Photo by Dan Boud.

Part 3. Objects are gone, costumes are back, layers and layers of coloured and textured fabric that Nankivell holds like a baby, holds out to us as if we have an answer for the mounting sense of grief that this work is building. A circle is made of the fabrics on the floor and a tentative step inside. Nankivell spins, holding forms in the same way she has throughout but in miniature, all of that affect pulled into a tight ball of spiralling energy. She works on the floor, convulsing as if she would vomit up whatever it is she has brought into being. It feels like an ending and it is.

What does one dance artist carry? Gabrielle Nankivell shouldn’t be a rare gem in our orbit, working across countries, companies, and training programs, yet she is. How many brilliant dance artists have we lost through an attrition driven by a lack of care for their longevity? Brett Daffy, Kirstie McCracken, Bryon Perry, a list pointless to start as it has no end. A grief for dancers past was evoked in a performance built by a community – a roll call of more of our excellent artists who we see in full flight too rarely - Kristina Chan, Martin Del Amo, Luke Smiles, Joshua Thomson, and Nankivell’s international colleagues Rasmus Ölme & Vânia Vaneau.



'Future History' (2026) by Gabrielle Nankivell. Photo by Dan Boud.

What more would we see if our dance artists had more time to practice, develop, work and present? This is the grief I took away from Future History, as if Nankivell could hold all of this in one work.



Erin Brannigan is Professor in Theatre and Performance at the University of New South Wales, working on the unceded lands of Bidjigal clan of the Dharawal Nation, alongside the Biripai, Dharug, Gadigal, Gumbaynggirr, Ngunnawal and Wiradjuri peoples. She is of Irish and Danish political exile, convict, and settler descent.

'Future History' (2026) by Gabrielle Nankivell. Photo by Dan Boud.