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## Guerrilla Gowns: Orange County's Ghostly Performance Art

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From the 1960s to the 1980s, feminist performance art was the epitome of edginess and boundary-pushing female art. But where are all the feminists today? That bygone era gave us artists like Marina Abramovic, Janine Antoni, Ana Mendieta, Annie Sprinkle, Oriana Fox and Suzanne Lacy. With such a vibrant history of feminist performance art, contemporary feminist artists have been seemingly quieted over the years. But there is a new feminist movement happening in Orange County. A group of young women calling themselves "the Nine," have found a new expression for feminist performance art that speaks to contemporary womanhood.

Their newest project: Guerrilla Gowns.

It's a performance series created and enacted by The Nine, an all-women young artist collective based in Santa Ana. Based on a dream by the group's founder, Ingrid Reeve, and inspired by the feminist art activism of organizations like Guerrilla Girls, these performances are visually stunning feminist happenings, usually without warning. The choreographed performance of the gowns is beautifully entrancing. The women dressed in white, floor-length wedding dresses. The Nine perform a dreamy, disturbing and uniquely personal performance focused on the exploration of beauty and power within womanhood in our contemporary society. As a visual, it

is mesmerizing, and as a symbol, it is strikingly feminine. They start together in a circle, and then embark separately on their own ventures, away from each other. Each brides' experience is different, some are calm and serene, some are angry and violent, some are inquisitive and some are curious.



*The Nine performing Guerrilla Gowns in downtown Santa Ana.*

A bridal gown is an object imbued with multilayered meanings. The Nine founder, Ingrid Reeve explains: "In these performances, the artists are clothed in bridal gowns. We create a metaphoric event. This symbolizes a woman's ability to dream and to manifest dreams transforming our pasts, presents and futures by tapping into a liminal state between thought and action." A gown imparts a serious tone on any space or time, casting a quiet shadow, emitted by those graceful and ghostly movements. The gown could be a symbol for many things, but it undoubtedly ushers in huge life changes. The action of becoming a bride is a strange and personal moment in many women's lives, but that same feeling of importance and significance can be found in other places. The Nine use the gown as a means to express that moment, and make viewers reflect on other moments that are as freeing and beautiful and exquisitely feminine as wearing a wedding gown. Moments of transformation and creation can be found in many different aspects of a woman's life. The gown is a visual reminder of change.

Each participant of the performance comes from different backgrounds; American, Mexican, Iranian, Caucasian and Guatemalan, lesbian, straight, single, married and divorced. The Nine consists of Barbara Milliom, Kaitlin Evans, Sara Dehghan, Devora Orantes, Ivy Yang, Tiffany Ma, Kazka Reitz, Christina Lee, Fatima Faiz, and Ingrid Reeve. The performances are less about a wedding or being a bride, but more about the moments that are specifically unique to women.



*Ingrid Reeve and Barbara Milliorn, members of The Nine. Image Courtesy of Evan Senn.*

As the women perform in these gowns, it seems that their personal struggle with change and the process of acceptance become apparent. After leaving the initial group, they each appear to find a nesting area, where they crouch down on the ground and begin to unravel things that have been woven or sewn to the insides of their dresses. They take out objects and mementos from under their dresses, holding and studying them as if recalling where they had been and what they had done before the moment of the white dress.



*Devora Orantes, Ingrid Reeve, Barbara Milliorn and Kaitlin Evans, members of The Nine. Image Courtesy of Evan Senn.*

The Guerrilla Gowns are not about telling, but more about feeling. This is not our mothers' performance art; this is uniquely ours, young women of our time. The Contemporary 9 is not as seemingly loud and proud as the 60s, 70s, and 80s feminist performance artists, but they are

dealing with a contemporary feminism, uniquely placed in Orange County. It is a different world than when the original feminists lived. Yet, we are fighting similar internal and external issues, but we are doing it differently. Sara Dehghan, a member of The Nine, and one of the creators of the Phantom Galleries in OC will be speaking on a panel at Grand Central Art Center's First Saturday Art Walk on October 6, called Conversations with Masters, with Tony De Los Reyes and Deb Klowden Mann. In the performance, Dehghan (as a bride) helps another bride, Tiffany Ma, showing her what to do, leading and guiding as a mother guiding a child, forming a sisterhood, "This piece is a conversation between sisters," Dehghan says. "One is guiding the other one to help her (through womanhood)".



*Interview with members of The Nine. Courtesy of Evan Senn.*

Another bride in Guerrilla Gowns shows anger, tossing and ripping items out of the dress, spitting and crying about the objects and pain associated with them. Many others had reflective, personal moments with their objects, and each reacting differently but also similarly. The performance is silent, the Nine want the viewers to take away something more of their own mindful interpretation of the Guerrilla Gowns, and not be told. The thoughtful private moments each bride expresses separately translate to a larger picture as well. The group starts together, separate, experience, and then come back together. As each bride grows through the performance cycle of the experiences on her own, some discard the gown and some keep it on. Nine member, Fatima Faiz disrobes her gown and subsequently her bridal status, and puts on large men's slacks in the performance, where as another member drops the gown to reveal a red mini skirt. The Guerrilla Gowns undress symbols, and strip down truths, revealing feminism behind the Orange Curtain.