

Meditations on Presence

Essay by Dr. Nalina Wait 2024

Portraiture aims to reveal the essence of the subject, capturing a distillation of their core identity at a moment in time. Often in training since childhood, a dancer's identity is forged through such an immersion in the refinement of movement practices that their way of being and knowing the world is entwined with the act of dancing. Therefore, WB Yeats's question, asking if it is possible to separate the dancer from the dance, feels even more poignant when witnessing portraits of dance artists whose 'body of work' is the result of a lifetime shaped by this artform.

Sue Healey's *ON VIEW: ICONS* (2024) offers a reverence in honour of artists who, through their lifelong dedication to the form, have generously endowed the gift of dance to others and have carved a pathway for the generations who follow. As an art form with few artifacts, Healey has captured a slice of the legacy of pioneering Australian theatre dance artists and scholars, Lucette Aldous AC, Shirley McKechnie AO, Nanette Hassall AM, Elizabeth Cameron Dalman OAM, Elma Kris, and Eileen Kramer. These portraits are personal for Healey, as they pay homage to important mentors and artists who have influenced her via their sensibilities. As these iconic subjects have formed their identity through a life engaged with dance, in capturing their portraits Healey reveals not only the identity of these artists but also their experience of the essence of dance and what it is to dedicate one's life to becoming present to movement.

Seeing

Multi-award-winning collaborators, Healey and DOP Judd Overton take us into the beauty of observance experienced through the cinematic frame, revealing not only what is seen but also a way of seeing. Darrin Verhagen's atmospheric score suspends time, and an empathetic sense of presence emerges within the viewer in response to the moving poetry that bears witness to the presence of subjects who have made an art form of being seen. By directing the lens and composing through editing and pace, rather than overly manipulating the contents of the frame, Healey reveals how the subject arrives into view already loaded with subtext and layers of memory and meaning.

ON VIEW: ICONS captures not only the ephemerality of dance, as a medium, but also speaks to its resilience and continued existence in the layers of history embedded in the flesh of these artists. The portraits reveal the way that dance is held as affective resonance in the psycho-somatic archives of these dancers, existing within the feelings and the flesh in ways that have been passed on from body to body. Through each moving portrait, Healey captures dancing as a way to travel through time, conjuring movements and moments that resonate with echoes of the past. Telescoping in time does not occur backwards and forwards but in layers of depth. Somatically observing down into the past body (blood/bone) memories, and back up to the surface of the present movement. Through this process, the work transmits a sense of presence and embodiment that are the currency and vitality of live dance performances. Making it possible to come close to the experience of an encounter with aliveness through the medium of film.

In the opening trios of triptychs, the thoughts, feelings, and ways of being are quietly recounted through these sensing kinetic sculptures of flesh. It is the repetition of practice accumulating over the years to inform the pace, tempo, timing, and tone of a movement. The fullness of stillness that never actually stops. These movement artists experience the spatial relationship of their bones, the torque of viscera and grip of muscle, and the stretch and compression of fascia and skin. Proprioceptive understanding is revealed as it vibrates within and on the surface of the resonating vessel of the dancer, who finds familiar anchors in space and time of movement pathways that have

been refined through practice. The poised grace in the arc and fall of flow, and the fullness of stillness with the gathering of forces (in what Hubert Godard describes as a dancer's *pre-movement*), reveal the cyclic current of the dance as it moves the dancer. Pathways that are written into the choreography of the body as repeatable and recognisable, are pleasingly released in and out of unison and unfold within their own affective time.

Being Seen

Lucette Aldous AC

Through her articulation of a shawl, the late great ballerina Lucette Aldous (1938-2021) transports us to the vitality and composed exhilaration of her renowned duet with Rudolf Nureyev in *Don Quixote*. She passes on her philosophy of the empathetic and transcendent nature of her art form, as she invites us to share in the sensation of the clarity and purity of her *port de bras*, revealing her aliveness to the pathways she has embodied for decades. Healey guides us to experience the knowledge of her articulated foot as her leg rotates guiding her heel forward and 'home' into fifth position. As a coda, Aldous takes us to what moves her, the spiritual majesty of nature, and in her encounter with an expansive body of water and sky, she waves us a fond farewell.

Shirley McKechnie AO

Surrounded by archival ephemera, the pioneering Dance theorist Shirley McKechnie (1926-2022) draws into focus the vibrant and essential relationship between dance and writing. Her history of embodiment guides her rigorous practice of finding and forming language or conceptual frameworks that strive to articulate the knowledges of dance. We see her framed among falling pages that echo her immense contributions to Dance scholarship. Her palms open in an offering gesture, as she passes on layers of knowledge accumulated draft after draft, paper after paper, and book after book, as a legacy of translating the wordless secrets of dance to be held in posterity.

Nanette Hassall AM

An integral mentor for generations of Australian dancers, choreographer and educator Nanette Hassall shares her joy in the efficiency found through the rigour of a deep understanding of the architecture of the body, and in inhabiting the clean and expansive kinetic power of embodied physics. She senses the weight and momentum of bones swinging as pendulums, adroitly shifts her central plumb line through space, and falls upwards to ride the potential energy of balancing on the tip of her turning points. Her effortless sense of line and knowledge of movement vortices are echoed in the architecture of her dancing space which is demarcated through a pleasing repetition of pillars and the simple, functional, elegance of archways. Archival footage of Merge Cunningham's company, during her formative artistic apprenticeship, supports Hassall in reflecting on the value of sustained practice, the current state of the art form, and her reserved optimism for the future. Healey's gratitude for Hassall's deeply influential choreographic mentorship of her, as Director of DanceWorks, becomes evident in her treatment of Hassall's image in space and time through geometric layering. The spirals and lines of Hassall's limbs reverberate in the bird's eye view of spiral staircases, celebrating the fundamental pleasure of symmetry, repetition, patterning, multiplicity, and beauty that can be crafted in the journey from simplicity to complexity.

Elizabeth Cameron Dalman OAM

The founder of Australia's first contemporary dance company (ADT), choreographer Cameron Dalman, casts an inspiring figure on the vast dry lakebed of Weereewa, as she extends her limbs back in time to touch pioneering contemporary dance artist Loie Fuller (1862-1928). On the land, she recounts her relationship with nature and of dance which both embody her as a willing and open

vessel. Through poetic words and images, Cameron Dalman shares her legacy of modern dance and what it is to make spiritual contact with the earth and allow those forces to move through her flesh.

Elma Kris

Embodying familial lineages from Thursday Island in the Torres Strait, and Papua New Guinea, influential choreographer Kris shares her enrichment of dance made for the theatre through her grounding in cultural knowledges and practices of traditional dance. The stories she tells through her carving, yet delicate and intentional gestures reframe the purpose of the dance to speak of the land and the deep, danced, histories of her First Nations ancestors. With her feet in the sand and the sea, Kris dances rhythms playful and grounded as she holds within her body a sense of time and place shaped by the land on which she was raised and her ongoing connection to culture.

Eileen Kramer

Centenarian choreographer, Kramer (1914-), passes on the wisdom of a life well-lived and how she continues the creative inspiration of her childhood through the gentle grace or dramatic force of Expressionism. In a rare treat of historical footage of Gertrud Bodenwieser's choreographies from the 1940s, Kramer's familiar face shines through as she demonstrates the agelessness of her spirit. Dancing with a majestic fig tree, accompanied by a choir of Australian bird songs, Kramer traces the echoes of her dance history in Sydney and across the world.

Healey reveals that is it through the embodiment of movement in space and time, that these iconic dance artists can simultaneously move between the past and present, as they step into the future.

Evident in the quality of these portraits is Healey's highly crafted choreographic knowledge accumulated over decades of observing dancers' experiential experiments. Over time, Healey has refined her creative development process into a rhythm, much like the cyclic process of nature. Beginning with a central premise, Healey accumulates threads of smaller projects that weave together into her major works which become rich with the tapestry of works that came before them. The shape of this cycle allows time for her ideas to gestate, swell, expand, gain momentum and maturity, and develop a force that propels them into being like the barrel of a wave. Once the wave has broken, the force of the accumulated idea begins to reform through a new dimension. As such Healey's body of work has explored the essence of choreography and cinematography through multiple series exploring space (*Niche*), time (*IN TIME*), curiosity (*The Curiosities*), and portraiture (*On View*). The ideas explored in each of these series have informed those that follow, and as a result *ON VIEW: ICONS* resonates with her mastery of the form.

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