

The Sun

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ART AROUND TOWN

A Different Picture of Dance

By **PIA CATTON**

Dance photography may seem like a logical endeavor, but it represents an incompatible dichotomy: Dance is motion, photography is stillness. No matter how talented the photographer or how beautiful the dancers, the art

forms are inherently at odds.

Performance shots can capture an event as it happened, but as with great sports photography, the response to seeing a photograph of a successful Hail Mary pass is nostalgia, not necessarily pleasure at the image itself. For dance, the trouble is most acute with off-stage photography:

Studio setups can be unflatteringly lighted, too cutesy, or way too up-close-and-sweaty. Even if all the elements in a portrait are right, the viewer is ultimately left with a frozen moment that is connected to dance only in the imagination: What would the next step look like?

Satisfying that curiosity, however, is no

longer impossible. Earlier this month, Lincoln Center Festival organizers announced that the festival's 2007 offerings will include photographer David Michalek's outdoor installation "Slow Dancing," to be displayed on the façade of New York State Theater. The work is composed of 45 films of dancers moving at speeds so slow the images look like photographs. But only at first.

The films — of just five seconds worth of movement — were shot at super-high speed and replayed at a speed that makes each film 10 minutes long. The result is movement so slow that if you glance at the video, your eye initially perceives a photograph. But look at the image longer and it moves at a rate that allows you to watch the minutia of each step breath by breath. It solves the dance photography problem

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SLOW DANCING from page 11 and goes one further: The slowness of the moving image allows us to see the steps with detail that is impossible to see in real time.

The Upper West Side-based Mr. Michalek has been working in photography and film for nearly 20 years, but his marriage to a New York City Ballet principal dancer, Wendy Whelan, helped turn his attention to dance — and to the problem of dance photography. “A dancer is a being in time. But it’s the time element that’s always missing,” he said.

In an effort to change that, Mr. Michalek began experimenting with high-speed cameras. “I found a company in California that was manufacturing a low-grade, high-speed camera. They were trying to market the camera to golfers to analyze their swing,” he said.

After having Ms. Whelan and fellow company member Edwaard Liang dance around the living room with the camera rolling, Mr. Michalek played back the results. The slow-motion images gave the dancers a chance to view details they were never able to see before — and they quickly wanted the chance to correct specific details. “Wendy said, ‘Do my knees really buckle like that?’” Mr. Michalek recalled.

That wariness was the signal to push further: If the dancers were surprised, the casual viewer would surely be engaged at the new way of seeing movement. Armed with that insight, Mr. Michalek set out on the filming of “Slow Dancing,” which represents a breakthrough for dance portraiture.

In the past, photographers like Lois Greenfield have pushed gravity and bodies to the edge by capturing complicated poses in the air or in motion. Ms. Greenfield’s “Breaking Bounds” (1992) includes series of nine black-and-white shots showing dancer Denise Roberts in a seated pose with David Parsons behind her jumping and landing in a different shape in each frame. Even so, the progression conveys the same energy and intensity that one isolated shot does.

More common are studio shots of dancers in costumes and poses from their most popular roles. These give the viewer a greater visual connection to the otherwise



CHRIS MARTIN

MOTION CAPTURE A photography shoot with Trisha Brown for ‘Slow Dancing.’

elusive stars — like an artistic version of baseball cards. Fabrizio Ferri, the husband of an American Ballet Theatre principal dancer, Alessandra Ferri, created a series of conceptual images for ABT (2006) in which he took costumed dancers out of the studio: a shot to illustrate “Swan Lake” has Gillian Murphy, arms outstretched like wings, and Ethan Stiefel kissing in a body of water. In “Acts of Light” (2006), a collection of John Deane’s photographs of the Martha Graham Dance Company, the shots catalog iconic images from Graham’s major works. A book like Roy Round’s “Round About the Ballet” (2004) gives fans a warm, close look at the stars at their best.

But still, these glossy tributes leave you aching to see the movement. They send you into a mental eddy that ends in sighs and a reminder to book your tickets for next season. What Mr. Michalek’s work represents is a step toward alleviating that frustration.

During the course of last winter, in a spacious studio in Chelsea, Mr. Michalek invited 45 dancers — from ballet dancers to capoeira masters — to each perform five seconds of dance against a black background. This time, he had the perfect equipment. After more research, he had located a high-speed, high-definition camera typically used by the military to analyze ballistics and by automotive companies to film crash tests. Using this camera, he recorded each five-second dance at 1,000 frames

per second. (Standard film captures about 30 frames per second.)

The technology allows you to see all the muscles required for dancers like American Ballet Theatre’s Herman Cornejo to bend, take flight, and whip around for a double turn in the air. Included in the films are choreographers William Forsythe and Trisha Brown and dancers from NYCB, ABT, and Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. The roster of dancers invited was intended to cover an international range. “I spent a long time creating the wish list before I made any phone calls,” Mr. Michalek said. “The question was always, Does it seem to represent the globe?”

By the time the installation goes up in June, there will be some distance from another slow-motion project — Robert Wilson’s “Voom Portraits” — but there will undoubtedly be comparisons. The key difference is that Mr. Wilson directed his subjects to move slowly, making for a living portrait. The subjects blink, nod, or turn their heads. By contrast, Mr. Michalek’s subjects are dancing at a normal pace and appear slow by way of technology.

“We’re both working with the concept of slowness, but entirely differently. He’s directing slowness in real time, whereas I have managed to get a piece of equipment that allows me to tap into the secret world of movement,” Mr. Michalek said.

Luckily, it’s not so secret anymore.