

Wednesday, September 19, 2007

Striking clarity of 'Slow Dancing'

Review: L.A. Music Center
free video installation
profound a viewing
experience.

By **LAURA BLEIBERG**

The Orange County Register

"Art for all!" is the rallying cry *du jour*, as performing arts administrators look to stem an inexorable dwindling of audiences.

There have been some creative solutions. The Los Angeles Music Center began free social dancing on its plaza several years ago. Manhattan's City Center theater launched a fall dance festival with \$10 tickets; the Orange County Performing Arts Center begins its own Fall for Dance festival in October.

These initiatives are a sign of a healthy culture, to my mind, even if they make few converts to dance (or theater or classical music).

And now we have "Slow Dancing," a free art installation co-commissioned by Dance at the Music Center and visible on the plaza in Los Angeles now through Sept. 26, from 6 p. m. to midnight.

Its creator, New York photographer David Michalek, had other things in mind, although he, too, wants dance to find the larger audience it deserves.

Armed with a new high-definition camera that records 1,000 frames per second (standard is 30 frames per second), Michalek photographed his wife, New York City Ballet principal dancer Wendy Whelan, in duet with former City Ballet principal Edwaard Liang in their living room. He was floored by the one-of-a-kind effects – the video's profound slowness made the body's muscular articulation seem to pop off the screen. It allowed the viewer to see whole new aspects of human movement.

This was the start of "Slow Dancing," 43 video portraits of outstanding dancers of all ages, representing all styles (ballet, hip-hop, African, Indian, modern, and more) from around the world. Michalek recorded each participant dancing for five seconds, which

became 10 minutes of hyper-slow video.

Four screens are positioned around the David Janssen fountain and Jacques Lipchitz's sculpture on the plaza, allowing viewers to see the front of one screen, and the backs of two others at the same time. At a Monday night preview, there were a few technical glitches and some portraits were repeated several times. The videos are randomly selected each night and so, theoretically, if you go back more than once, even at the same time of night, you could see different portraits.

Granted, repeat viewings are a little inconvenient if you don't work in downtown Los Angeles. Still, several viewings would be the best way to see "Slow Dancing," rather than standing there for hours.

Some videos are mesmerizing. French ballerina Isabelle Guérin only had to lift her leg and it became a miraculous event, with the fabric of the see-through sheath she's wearing swirling upward.

American Ballet Theatre principal dancer Herman Cornejo leaps and we can see the muscles flex and contract, and his pointed foot leaving the floor at a precise instant.

Equally amazing was watching Spanish flamenco dancer Omayra Amaya swing her arm in one direction, while her head turned

simultaneously in another. At regular speeds such normal gestures would hardly raise an eyebrow; in this format it looked like poetry.

We can see as never before the one quality each outstanding dancers shares: the pared down clarity of their movement.

Dancers who chose dance phrases of small or slow gestures, however, made for less rewarding viewing. Modern dance choreographer Trisha Brown, for example, raised her arms, and shuffled her feet; the most fascinating aspect of her solo was the ripple of her elegant green dress.

The work, though, is not about virtuosity or explosive dance thrills; "Slow Dancing" is actually the antithesis of all that. It's a quieter, more contemplative reflection on the art form, which, again, makes it better suited to several viewings.

A few other thoughts: Kudos to Michalek's lighting supervisor Bob Bushfield. Several of the dancer portraits looked nearly 3-D, with limbs seeming to pull off the screen, thanks to the glorious lighting. The flooring and backdrop are such a dense black that this "popping" effect was further enhanced.

The simple, elegant costumes are similarly striking. Dancers whose anatomies are works of art in and of themselves, such as Cornejo

and Desmond Richardson, are clothed only in dance briefs.

Finally, make sure you get a "Slow Dancing" program. It unfolds to a full page that contains little photos of each participant so you can put a name to the dancers, which is a courtesy for the viewers and a show of respect to the artists.

Contact the writer: 714-796-4976 or
lbleiberg@ocregister.com