

Slow Dancing, Trafalgar Square, London

(Rated 4/ 5)

Some steps in the right direction

Reviewed by Zoë Anderson

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It's hard to loom in Trafalgar Square – Nelson's Column has that covered – but the screens for David Michalek's installation *Slow Dancing* are still vast.

In silence, in extreme slow motion, each shows a dancer at work. At these slow, slow speeds, the dancing looks both dreamlike and precise. You can see every detail of a curving finger, while leaping dancers drift like clouds.

Michalek is a portrait artist. Early in his career, he worked as a photographer for *Vogue* and *The New Yorker*. He now focuses on art installations, using video as well as still images. *Slow Dancing*, presented by Sadler's Wells, is a portrait of 50 leading dance artists, dancers and choreographers from all styles. Each performs a short movement phrase, filmed against a black backdrop. Five seconds of movement can be stretched to 10 minutes of slow motion.



Hot moves: William Forsythe and Shantala Shivalingappa in 'Slow Dancing'

The photography is beautiful. Even at these speeds, the image is sharp, the colours luscious. You can see the gleaming golden threads in the costume of Balinese dancer Wayan Dibia, the textures of hair, skin and cloth. The pictures glow, bold enough to catch your eye, drawing you into the detail of these dances.

The slower solos could almost be still photographs: it's a while before you notice any movement. Other dancers are obviously in motion, stretched but still astonishingly quick. How fast must, say, Dwana Smallwood have been moving, to cross the screen with such energy, so much relative speed? Her legs stomp and thrust, her yellow skirts flying.

Some solos trick you. Glancing away from a slower number, you catch the dancer in a completely different pose when you look back. There are other surprises, as Michalek's slow camera lingers on moments that are almost invisible at natural speeds. Holley Farmer, a dancer with the Merce Cunningham company, shows an amazing gift for off-balance movement. Minutes pass as she tilts and reaches, poised in the moment before gravity catches her.

Michalek's sequence is random, his three screens setting dancers from different styles and cultures side by side. Sometimes that throws up unexpected parallels. As ballet choreographer Alexei Ratmansky goes into a deep plié, he looks like an Indian classical dancer – even the position of his hands suggests the storytelling gestures of other styles. Then his leg sweeps up into a high extension: ballet through and through.

Then there are the contrasts between these dancers as individuals: taller, smaller, male and female, different body types or ways of presenting themselves. Some of these dancers stay within the frame, keeping even big gestures contained.

Michalek has a cast of dance heavyweights. Yet choreographers such as Ratmansky or William Forsythe are big names rather than star faces: even dance fans won't necessarily recognise many of Michalek's performers. They're just people dancing. In Trafalgar Square, people around them danced back. One passer-by stopped and copied poses, heroically balancing on one leg. Across the square, a busker on rollerblades turned on the spot, a fast whirligig beside the huge, floating images.

At Village Underground, London EC2 (Sadlerswells.com) 13 to 24 July

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