



Motion pictures

David Michalek's films, shot at 1,000 frames a second, show a dancer's every move when they are blown 12 metres high and slowed to a crawl

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The art of going slow has sped up in recent years.

Douglas Gordon's *24-Hour Psycho* video – Alfred Hitchcock's 1960 film slowed to stretch through an entire day – travels the art festival circuit the way an old master would once tour the great museums. Equally ubiquitous is Michael Snow's *Sheep Loop*, where sheep graze eternally on a tape loop. Andy Warhol's film *Empire*, eight-hours-plus of the single flickering night shot of the Empire State Building, is the recognized old master of the new genre.

Pop culture's response was inevitable and the Luminato festival has it with David Michalek's *Slow Dancing*, showing Friday to June 15 at the University of Toronto's back campus near Hoskin Ave. and St. George St.

Utilizing three 12-metre-high screens, more than 40 internationally recognized dancers are shown twisting, leaping and stomping in extreme slow motion – portraits made up of light, colour and the passage of time.

"It has an innate meditative aspect to it," says the artist, a sometimes yoga instructor from New York where he lives with his wife, Wendy Whelan, a New York City Ballet principal dancer. "It's extremely revelatory at many levels. With regard to the dancers themselves you find there are so many different types of technique shown when slowed down."

Not that every dancer was initially thrilled at having miscues, barely noticed at normal speed, revealed on such a massive scale. A "gruesome thing," is how iconic dancer Bill T. Jones described watching himself.

"I didn't realize how deeply they'd feel this way," Michalek admits. "But now a dancer can use a playback monitor as a sort of dancer's mirror."

Seeing five seconds of body movement stretched to a 10-minute length recalls the "science of animal locomotion" studies by Victorian photographer/scientist, Eadweard Muybridge, some of the most memorable images from early photography.

But there's an element of pageantry and spectacle in the interplay of Michalek's three

video projections, where each screen is programmed with some 15 individual films that appear randomly. We're reminded of early triptychs placed over a church altarpiece. *Slow Dancing's* drawn-out urgency and ecstasy equally channels 17th-century Mannerist or early Baroque paintings and sculpture – Bernini's 17th-century masterwork, *The Ecstasy of St. Theresa*, is an example Michalek uses.

"Many of the early painters and sculptors had a fine idea of what the folds of the fabric could convey," he continues. "I worked with a costume designer to make the fabric very potent-looking. We did motion tests to see how fabric moved, which fabrics took light better than others. Fabric somehow adds mystery to a dancer."

After a two-year stint working as photographer Herb Ritts's assistant, Michalek launched his career in 1991 shooting celebrity portraiture for the likes of *Vogue* and *Vanity Fair*.

But as with many photographers of his generation, he found himself drawn to performance, eventually working with the post-modern director Peter Sellars on two stage works, the *Kafka Fragments*, for Carnegie Hall and *Saint François d' Assise*, for the Salzburg Opera and Opéra national de Paris.

While considering doing life-size portraits for gallery shows, Michalek met a few years back with Nigel Redden, Lincoln Center Festival director. *Slow Dancing* premiered last summer at Lincoln Center.

Michalek tried various cameras, including one designed for the high-speed capture of a golfer's swing, before coming upon the Phantom HD high-speed camera, used mostly by the military, capable of capturing 1,000 frames a second. (Video captures 30 frames a second.)

Alberta hoop dancer Sandra Lamouche was photographed specifically for the Toronto showing.

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