

The Photographer, The Dancer and The Landscape

By Janice Ross

“Photography should present the significance of facts so that they are transformed
from things seen to things known.”

Edward Weston

There is no art form with a more oppositional relationship with the photographic image than dance. Photography is about making the evanescent indelible. Dance is about making the tangible, our bodies, evanescent. The photographer catches what exists temporarily and gives it permanence. The dancer uses bodily motion to communicate in the most impermanent medium possible—physical gesture. Dance is about shaping the physical presence of the body into the transitory material of an experience. Photography turns experience into fixed images.

Hal Eastman’s photographs of women dancers in nature are remarkable in their capacity to hover in this middle zone between experience and imagery. These photographs capture a moment of dance as it is in the process of melting into an image, and they freeze it. Part technique, part skill, but like the most memorable dancing, part the confluence of understanding and feeling made palpable and visible, these photographs evoke the mysterious communion between the artifice of beauty and the naturalness of art.

Eastman’s work also reminds us that dance and photography share a curious obsession with formalizing the human body, yet at the same time photography allows us to observe at leisure how emotions play across that body. In dance the body is a medium of choreographic expression, a flesh and muscle canvas for articulate display. Photography also inevitably transforms people, rendering them visual objects. Photographs of dancers in performance thus frame them twice. First the dancers are the medium of the dance maker, a document of his or her choreographic invention, and then they are objects in the photographer’s visual design. The dancers in these photographs, however, are captured responding improvisationally to their setting. So rather than seeing a choreographer’s statement, their dancing reveals itself to the viewer as a physical palimpsest, the product of their spontaneous reaction to a specific setting and then the photographer’s considered response to those actions. In one sense it is the inside, unseen dance nested within all dance photographs that Eastman’s work shows us with remarkable explicitness. This is the dance that is felt and sensed more than seen, what Susan Sontag called “the invisible dance.”

Eastman is new to photography and newer still to dance. In 1995, seeking change from a long corporate career and open to new experiences, he significantly reduced his business activity and began studying photography, looking at important works, reading extensively, and taking workshop classes from photographers whose work he respected. As he started photographing, he was first drawn to remote areas of natural beauty in California, Idaho and Hawaii. His early photographs revealed a fascination with the sculpted rhythmic forms created over time by the unseen natural forces of wind, water and seasonal changes. “The gnarled trunk of a wind-swept cypress can be a visual manifestation of ubiquitous, long unseen movement in nature. Captured in a photograph, it’s almost a time-lapse,” Eastman says. Later, when he began to photograph dancers, he discovered a similar poetry of sensing in a quiet instant a history of the events leading up to and away from it.

One afternoon in 1998, while on a photography excursion on the Big Island of Hawaii, he was at a sidewalk café in a small village waiting for the harsh midday light to soften when he noticed a young woman joyously skipping down the street. He looked at her and thought, “That’s incredibly beautiful.” His next thought was how she might look moving like that in a flowing garment in a forest glade he was planning to photograph the next morning.

The young woman turned out to be a local organic farm worker with little formal dance training but a love of nature and a special attachment to the particular place he was planning to photograph. Recruited as a model and accompanied by her boyfriend and dog, she arrived the next morning at the appointed time. Eastman was fascinated by how easily she responded to the setting, moving unselfconsciously to the surrounding forms of flora and landscape.

To capture a longer slice of this movement he experimented with slowing the shutter speed. “For some reason,” he notes, “I also moved the camera with her, likely because of the emotion I was feeling. When I returned home and printed the images, I was very excited, and felt that this was something I had to pursue. That was the beginning of the ‘Natural Dance’ project.”

That day Eastman discovered a curious technique to slightly distort, and at the same time enhance, the image of the dancer in nature into greater verisimilitude to the temporal quality of a real performance. The result was a shimmering image of transformation. The photograph became a portrait of the dancer

seeming to both emerge from and recede into her surroundings. A dancer skipping along the shoreline of the beach, for example, is transformed into a diaphanous presence that seems to end in a tapering toe hovering above the wet, dark sand like a cloud about to descend to earth. The point of contact is a dancer's beautifully pointed foot and arched instep and calf.

As Eastman's enthusiasm grew, he began to work with more experienced dancers, attend live dance performances and read dance history. He was drawn to the writings of Isadora Duncan, especially her philosophy that "all true dance movements possible to the human body exist primarily in nature," and her advocacy of social and physical freedom for women. He enrolled in a contact improvisation dance class to better grasp what the dancers on the other side of his camera were feeling. He traveled extensively searching for special locations which might prompt dancers to move as if partnered by the forms and rhythms of the landscape.

Eastman also continued to refine his shutter speed and camera movement techniques at early winter morning sessions photographing birds in flight at the mouth of the Carmel River in northern California. Gradually he learned the combinations of subject movement, camera movement, shutter speed and light that produced the images he sought to create.

The result of this carefully timed and synchronized camera technique, blended with the dancer's movement and the location, is a photograph that reveals an elongation of the dancer's limbs, and the shimmering, almost vibratory beauty of the terrain. This accentuation of the dancer's gesture gives the viewer the vivid illusion of having glimpsed an actual segment of real dance activity. The figure of a lone dancer pivoting under a massive oak tree on the slope of a hillside becomes a duet for woman and tree. The white, misty blurs of her rotating arms, legs and head echo the dark green arabesques of the old oak's branches.

What is intriguing about these photographs is that you see in them a larger piece of time in dance than you can see with the human eye. When you are looking at live dance, you're seeing a continuum of movement, but there's a lot of unseen detail that one misses and which suddenly becomes visible in these images. So what we see is an abstraction of the dancer, an abstraction that photography usually arrests into a still image, but that Eastman has instead translated back into a fresh abstraction. As Sontag observes, one of the truisms of photographs is that they are a slice-of-time, not a flow. Yet in slowing down time in his images, Eastman seems to momentarily challenge that – giving us a slice so unprecedentedly large that for a moment we think we have the flow.

The most compelling of Eastman's photographs make visceral the dancer's emotional connection with her art, her instrument and her setting. He found it important to gauge each dancer's response to a place and whether she felt comfortable and inspired. He then encouraged her to freely experiment and awaited moments of her spontaneous expression. This often resulted in fresh movement synchronous with the natural setting.

While Eastman's techniques and resources are modern, the resulting photographs evoke late 19th- and early 20th-century images. During the previous fin de siècle women were often depicted in art as naturalistic beings, as the gender bound closest to nature. It is interesting that at the dawn of the new millennium this trope reappears in Eastman's work, but he sees it as an homage to the valor of women rather than just a means of circumscribing their imagined limitations.

Another turn-of-the-20th-century quality these photographs share is that objects are deliberately blurred. The Victorian photographers did this with a brush or by etching – a practice known as "the cult of the spoilt print." The original objective was to have the photographs look like 19th-century paintings. Ironically, today the blurred and painterly romantic qualities of Eastman's photographs make one suspect the high-tech digital manipulation of the images, which is not the case.

Like other contemporary artists, Eastman embraces the curious complexity of having to become an empirical scientist to express through art as closely as possible how the eye sees the transitory moments of life. His photographs, like those of his 19th-century counterparts, serve to exorcise our anxiety and remorse about a disappearing facet of our world. As Sontag has noted, in the 19th century this was the landscape, and for us at the beginning of the 21st century, it is again the landscape, as well as the manual rather than the computerized creation of images.

Artists have long been attracted to women dancers because they dually embody dance as a vigorous athletic practice and yet one that uses hard physical work to create images of ultimate grace and ease. In many ways, depicting women moving with intuitive comfort in nature has long been emblematic of how women are fictionalized and essentialized as being more animalistic than men. Eastman's work reveals photography as a struggle between the imperative of beauty and the imperative of truth telling. The images are recognizably about dance, but unlike the majority of dance photography, they valorize neither a specific celebrated dancer nor a famous work of choreography. The dancers in these images are

inherently expressive but not necessarily well known. The motion of the camera and the slowness of the shutter—the actions that give the images their tight connection to danced reality—also erase the usual signifiers of individuality in the dancers. We see neither physical nor facial features, nor the sense of the physical weightiness and effort of the dancers' actions. In its place we have another dancing truth, a dance that echoes how our imagination, rather than our memory, recalls dancing. The figures in these photographs suggest mirages in the landscape, spectral evidence of fleeting truths that were visible only in the instant when the shutter was released.

Eastman's photographs also suggest that perhaps these images are inside each of us, and that the kind of regard for the world outside oneself that photography prompts in fact reveals a new inner world as well. "Photography brought me heightened visual awareness; exposure to dance increased my sensitivity to movement. The combined effect has been both life enhancing and self revealing," he notes.

Perhaps then, what is finally most compelling in these photographs is more than their subject; it is the cumulative impression of the photographer's consciousness and the model they offer for how we might similarly transform our own. In this regard, paintings have always been emphatic in reminding us how they mediate reality. It is bracing to have dance photography that so explicitly reminds us of this. It is true, as Janet Malcom observed, "If you scratch a great photograph you find two things: a photograph and a painting."