

Illustrating *Dance*

Barefoot Dance collaborated with BA and MA Illustration students at Anglia Ruskin University, inviting them to illustrate the world of dance.

Dance is often fleeting and evanescent – now you see it, now its gone – lingering in the memory, with responses imprinted in the body, but without a visual record. You can't pick out a dance, and take time to mull it over, revisit the original moment, hang it on the wall for contemplation. Not without film. It is difficult to catch hold of the the dancing body as it moves dynamically through space and time.

How to explain dance to non-dancers? I wanted to find a way of capturing the understanding dancers in my classes have of dance when they are immersed in doing it. I work with all ages – from 2 year olds to 80 year olds. The art of dancing is understood differently at different stages of ones life. A two year old will experience dance very differently from a grandmother. As we move through life we are literally dancing through different bodies over time. The intention was to create a series of postcard images that could convey a wide sense of dance to the world.

I spent a year collecting words from my dancers – and built up a landscape of thoughts, attitudes, experiences, and expressions around dance.

The challenge was now to find ways of illustrating these words. The wonderful and ever generous Pam Smy, who teaches Illustration at Anglia Ruskin University agreed to collaborate with me on this project, and to find students who would be willing to take on this task.

Some of the students I had met already – we had established a practice of them coming along to the children's dance classes to practice drawing the moving body.

We booked some time for me to come and give the participating students a 2 hour practical session. We took time to get into movement ourselves. This was more of a challenge for some than for others – for some, the idea of coming out from behind the sketch book was pretty terrifying, but in actuality, once we got started, it was fairly fun. We tried different experiences – dancing and being drawn by a partner, dancing and drawing at the same time, even creating little dance sequences. To the relief of the more reluctant dancers, I then took the floor, free-dancing so the students could practice drawing movement. Despite my being a practiced dancer, it was a different and slightly odd experience to draw to the soundscape of pencils scratching and gliding over paper, and to be so scrutinised in such an objective yet focused way.

We ended the session by reading out a portion of the words I had collected; each student chose two phrases that most resonated with them. The task was now to go away and create an image that best portrayed or expressed the words. There was no brief as to how the images needed to look – each student was invited to enjoy creating their own interpretation.

A mere four weeks later, Pam and I reviewed the first stages of 16 pieces together – the range of interpretation and imagery was delightful and impressive. For me it was incredibly exciting to see the words come to life in such a beautiful way. The images manifested both a different version of the original sentiment, whilst remaining completely true. It was also a delight to be surprised by some of the images – to marvel at the interpretations.

The final stage was for students to return to their work, and finalise details, carefully suggested by Pam's expert eye.

Students work will be available in the new year for viewing and for purchasing.

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