



Memories of Moments

We admire photographs of dancers for many reasons. Michelle Potter reveals some of them

Photographs of dancers, such as those from collections by Ross Gould and Greg Barrett on display in *Future Memory*, are admired for many reasons. That dancers are athletes with extraordinary physical skills is one. They leap higher than you think is possible. They assume the most surprising poses. And often they look out at you from the frame, poised and confident in seemingly impossible moves. Take the Barrett portrait of an

assertively beautiful Sarah Peace, for example. Then these dancers interact seamlessly with their partners. Each supports and complements the other in a manner that pleases the eye and excites the imagination and that, again, is often unusual. Surprise is certainly the case with another Barrett portrait in which Rachel Dougherty effortlessly holds a curled-up, tight-as-a-ball Joshua Consandine.

Theatricality is there in abundance too. Sometimes it appears in the faces of the dancers. Other times it's seen in costuming or other effects. Compare the hooped petticoat and bodice worn by Michelle Heaven in *Knee Deep in Thin Air* with the frilly tutu—and it's only half a tutu too—worn by Lisa

Greg Barrett (b.1943)
Sarah Peace 1999
 b&w photograph; 34.1 x 27.7 cm
 Pictures Collection nla.pic-an23697819

Bolte. These images present two very different faces of theatrical dance.

Such photos are also admired as examples of the art of the photographer. The ability to capture a dancer in mid-air requires technical skill, an ability to collaborate with the dancer and an extraordinary eye for the grace and poetry of the perfect moment. Dancers, whose instrument is the human body, are particularly sensitive to the image they project to the world beyond the rehearsal studio. To be able to create an image that



(left) Greg Barrett (b.1943)
*Rachel Dougherty and
 Joshua Consandine* 1999
 b&w photograph;
 34.1 x 27.7 cm
 Pictures Collection
 nla.pic-an23697692

(below) Ross Gould (b.1946)
 Michelle Heaven in *Knee Deep in
 Thin Air*, choreographed by Sue
 Healey and inspired by Bruno
 Bettelheim's *Uses of Enchantment*
 and Clarissa Pinkola Estes' *Women
 Who Run with the Wolves* 1993
 b&w photograph; 30.4 x 24 cm
 Pictures Collection nla.pic-an24809134



(above) Ross Gould (b.1946)
 Sue Healey in *Knee Deep in Thin Air*,
 performed to Mike Nock's music at the
 Australian National University Arts
 Centre, October 1993
 b&w photograph; 30.3 x 24 cm
 Pictures Collection nla.pic-an24809141



(left) Greg Barrett
 (b.1943)
Lisa Bolte 1999
 b&w photograph;
 34.1 x 27.7 cm
 Pictures Collection
 nla.pic-an23697854

pleases a dancer as well as an outside viewer is a rare skill.

But the dance photographs on display in *Future Memory* are also significant as documentary source material. While they were all acquired in the years between 2001 and 2003, they were created between 1993 and 1999 and are already well and truly historical items. The Ross Gould collection, for example, documents a particular period in the history of professional dance in Canberra. All images are of productions by Vis-à-vis Dance Canberra, a small contemporary company led by choreographer Sue Healey. Vis-à-vis lasted for not quite three years from 1993 to mid-1995. During that time Healey's choreographic career blossomed in the peaceful surroundings of Canberra's Gorman House Arts Centre. Looking at the Vis-à-vis photos, one is reminded of the power of collections to summon up memories of moments that have passed, critical in the arts when the performance itself is so ephemeral.

But these dance photographs are also potent reminders of the fluid nature of

artistic endeavour and the peripatetic bent that artists have. Dancers move constantly. Sometimes they follow a mentor or travel to work with a choreographer they especially admire. Sometimes they change direction slightly and, while still working in dance, look for different challenges from those of onstage performing. In fact almost every dancer represented in the selection of photographs on display in *Future Memory* has made some kind of career change since the shots were taken. Sarah Peace, for example, no longer dances with The Australian Ballet and nor does Joshua Consandine. Peace now works in Adelaide with Leigh Warren and Dancers, Consandine in Sydney with Sydney Dance Company. As for Sue Healey, after leaving Canberra in 1995 Healey began to investigate in earnest the medium of film as a way of expanding her dance horizons. Now she is acclaimed as a maker of short dance films and was the winner of a 2003 Australian Dance Award for best dance film for her most recent production, *Fine Line*. So, while the

dance images in *Future Memory* are intrinsically arresting, they also afford the viewer an opportunity to look back at a past body of work or career as a basis from which to examine the present and anticipate the future.

The dance images on display in *Future Memory* are a small part of an extensive collection of dance resources crossing all of the National Library's collecting areas. Oral histories, items of ephemera, pictures and material from manuscript collections provide a rich and diverse source of information about Australia's dance heritage. These collections put the National Library in a unique position as the single most important repository of the nation's dance culture.

MICHELLE POTTER is the National Library's Curator of Dance. She was the recipient of the award for Services to Dance at the 2003 Australian Dance Awards



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