

SIOBHAN
DAVIES
STUDIOS

MATERIAL

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Fubunation 

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Patricia Okenwa on
Stephanie Forrest

Meeting Stephanie Forrest was a revelation to me and made me feel invigorated and inspired. So when I was approached to make an introduction, I knew I wanted to share this experience. It was also an opportunity to learn more about Stephanie's practice and connect her to Sue (Siobhan Davies) and the dance community.

INTRODUCING

Stephanie is a painter whose practice is evolving through an exchange with, and incorporation of, dance and choreography. Her work stems from her specific approach to painting, the study of calligraphy and a lifelong interest in dance and love of dancing. The two of us are at the very early stages designing a possible dialogue with New Movement Collective and we are feeling our way towards discovering our shared interests, desires for making and how to engage in this collective work.

The way Stephanie speaks about dance - and her rigorous but instinctive approach - makes her love of movement infectious. This was exactly what I needed when we met at the beginning of the year. In the middle of all the doubt that the previous year had brought - self doubt, practice doubt, future doubt - and general anxiety, I felt introducing Stephanie to Sue and the community of Siobhan Davies Studios could only serve as a tonic.

This has been such a wonderful opportunity to be part of. I am so happy to share Stephanie's work and excited to experience all the contributions and their introductions.



THE DANCING LINE

by Stephanie Forrest

In 2018 I spent an extraordinary year drawing every day. I was on a postgraduate programme at the Royal Drawing School, setting out to discover what a regular practice of drawing from observation could do to open and strengthen my work. Until then, I had made conscientious, technically accomplished drawings and paintings, but the work was lacking something; it felt laboured, derivative and somehow disconnected. After months battling my compulsive perfectionism, I began to notice that whenever I let go of a predetermined outcome, something surprising and essential began to present itself. I became curious as to what that was. I often found it drawing in the dark or at speed from moving subjects - any opportunity for my hand to short-circuit the analytical, left brain. The critical question for me became, and remains: how to step into a creative space where the work can retain this freshness and spirit of incident, as if it happened by accident? My practice became about process and about touch.

I chanced upon Einstein's theory of 'combinatory play'; the act of opening up one mental channel by dabbling in another. (He

notes coming up with some of his best scientific ideas during his violin breaks). That's when I looked to dance as a catalyst and inspiration for a new kind of approach. The idea came out of a lifelong love of dancing, especially rhythm tap. The focus, in this tradition (as opposed to 'show tap'), is on the acoustic rather than the aesthetic and this seemed to ring true with my new direction. That is, being led by the body and an internal, intuitive sense as opposed to a fixed, outward objective.

I had experimented with ways of tricking myself to let go of rational thinking and allowing the work to come through unmediated and spontaneous, such as drawing with eyes closed or my opposite hand, or both hands together. Over time, such tactics began to feel disingenuous, so I began to wonder what a dancer's approach to choreography and improvisation could teach me about working more instinctively. What could I discover from their methods for setting up the conditions for improvisation? How to create work which seems to have originated from an external source, outside of myself and yet, at the same time, is more truly my own?

Watching dance often gives me a powerful, visceral feeling and it's a sensation I get from looking at a lot of gestural painting too. There is a physical empathy and connection to the experience of the dancer, or painter, in action. So I started to incorporate movement into my preparations at the start of a studio day. These warm-up exercises combine sequences learnt from choreographers, yoga instructors and also calligraphers, particularly Ewan Clayton – a key member of the school's faculty and a great influence on my practice.

I begin in the middle of my studio, facing the windows that look out onto the rooftops of South London. I stand in mountain pose and close my eyes. I take my awareness to the axis through my feet to the top of my head, visualising the vertical line rising from below the ground passing up to the sky and beyond. I focus on the air behind my head, and then in front, sensing the spaces I hold for past and future. Breathing into my width, expanding the latitude of my chest, I imagine my horizontal line extending infinitely both ways, wrapping around the earth. I relax my

eyes, allowing them to widen as if an insect with peripheral vision. Still closed, I turn them to the right, leading a rotation to the adjacent wall. The throat follows, then the shoulders, hips, knees, feet, stepping gently around to greet the wall. I repeat around the room until I'm back at the start.

I make circles with one arm, opposite foot forward, hand stretched out as if holding a torch, shining a light out to the horizon. I draw three imaginary 'O's to the corner of the room and then to the other, switching arms. I finish with *trikonasana* – or triangle pose – hand stretching to diagonal corners. Together these movements map the sacred geometry of the square, circle and triangle – shapes painted by the Japanese monk Sengai in the nineteenth century for his ink work *The Universe*.

Then I stand at my table with a stack of new paper. Taking up brush and ink, I make simple direct strokes, then continuous lines which change direction with my breath. I focus on the tip of my brush as it moves around the whole sheet, like walking onto an

empty stage or a ground of fresh snow. On the next sheet I build layers of marks with as much contrast and variety as I can find. I use Rudolf Laban's taxonomy of movements to guide the gestures of my brush; varying speed, pressure, direction and flow. Like doing the scales on a piano, I am testing and pushing the lexicon, each time discovering something new.

These simple exercises bring attention to my body in space and so to the movement of my marks on the page. If I keep a soft focus on the space of the paper as I work then the sheet becomes activated – it vibrates. Fully present to the relationship between the brush and the page, calling and responding to each mark placed, then it becomes just like a danced improvisation. Occasionally, these sheets become more than the sum of their parts – the whole resonates and they sing back. But how to keep surprising myself and develop this work when the more established the methodology the more 'knowing' and self-conscious the work becomes? As artist Avigdor Arikha puts it: 'when the hand improves too much you don't tell the truth any more.'¹ So I keep the research going...

Over lockdown I was amazed to be able to attend online classes streamed by the Trisha Brown Dance Company, Hofesh Shechter Company and Movement Research in New York. I looked again at Trisha Brown's improvised drawings and performances, with their particular freshness, bounce and flow. I'm excited by Hofesh Shechter, for his use of the chorus, the improvised passages and the raw, primal energy of the performances with their tension between abandonment and control. It is a relationship which, for me, speaks to the chaos lying just below the austere facades of Poussin's seventeenth-century bacchanals that became an obsession when drawing in the National Gallery. This dichotomy appeals. I wonder how I can make work like this, that's both free and exacting at the same time.

I'm drawn to Anouck Van Dyck and her 'counter-technique', making directions then counter-directions in the body – moving away from the idea of there being a centre. It is an approach of call and response rather than revolving around a single ego, identity or theme. She is a true proponent of letting go of an intellectual understanding to discover intuitive connections and solutions, becoming your own teacher. I find this compelling. I lay out a huge roll of paper that covers my studio floor and take a giant black bar of oil pastel. I make one kind of mark, then offer its opposite. I go on too long and the white space is destroyed, but the gestures are undeniable. I attempt to sink into my body more and try again, testing with and without music. Ah yes, music.



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A dancer recommends Anne Teresa De Keersmaecker to me. I admire her rigorous approach – translating the geometry of music to a matrix of lines marked out on the stage floor - spatial parameters for movement. I think of the secret geometry applied to the compositions of painters like Piero della Francesca using music theory. The idea of setting specific boundaries appeals; finding innovation in limitation and structure. I have only 5 sheets of my favourite Tosa Washi paper left. What happens if I spend 6 hours drawing from a particular Poussin bacchanal, commit the composition of figures to my visual memory, then relay the same sequence in quick succession on each sheet? How can each be different from the last?

De Keersmaecker's methods lead me to think about the organisation of my lines and where tension is emphasised in space. My thinking shifts from the rectangular sheet as an aerial stage plan to the potential of the scroll to convey a chorus of dancing figures. A more rhythmic touch emerges. The scroll format is more akin to music notation, Classical friezes and Chinese calligraphy. More synergies unfold.

In traditional calligraphy, once the marks are committed, there is no recourse to correction. 'Just as each movement of the dancer is absolute,' writes Tseng Yu-ho Ecke, 'so every gesture of the calligrapher is essential...Movement is the very breath of Chinese calligraphy...(where) circumscribing a figure conveys the spirit of its creation in the action of "becoming".'² The calligrapher has a limited time period in which to produce the lines which will echo through the piece and in the viewer's mind long after they have stopped looking at it, much like a performance. It's the moment of execution that's important. Note to self - set stricter time limits.

With no access to theatres or rehearsal studios I watch countless performances

streamed online. I'm captivated by a restaging of Pina Bausch's *Rite of Spring*, filmed on a beach in Touba Dialaw, on the eve of lockdown in Senegal. I take screenshots and watch clips on repeat. As with Poussin's paintings, I rehearse the sequences then 'perform' them on long scrolls from memory with brush and ink, trying to channel the essential impulse behind the movements. I am not describing the bodies so much as using my own to translate the 'becoming' lines, or 'awful lines' as John Ruskin describes them, which 'embody in their very formation the past history, present action and future potential of a thing.'³ Some of these work. The frenzied rhythm of the chorus is there, pulsing across the sheet.

I go deeper into the principles of Chinese painting and down rabbit holes of research; from the earliest-known rock paintings of humans dancing to the interrelated histories of modern dance and art throughout the twentieth century; the influence of Asia's artistic traditions on America's post-war Abstract Expressionism; Action Painting to performative drawing and so on – feverishly searching for connections and springboards. There are many. I need daily signposts and am easily lost. But after these strange and isolating months, the books and screentime no longer serve me (if they ever did) and my work starts to hunger for real-life, physical encounters. So I'm overjoyed to be introduced to the New Movement Collective. Our conversations spark a wave of new ideas and we make plans to work together in person as soon as restrictions ease. After a small taste of their open, cross-disciplinary approach, I realise the rich seam still to be mined and the vast potential in our exchange. I can't wait to get into the studio together.

All images © Stephanie Forrest, courtesy the artist.

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Page 15: Ritual Dance, III, 2020.
Page 16: RITE: Ritual Dance, V, 2020. Ink on paper, 59.0 x 168.0 cm.
Page 17: Two dancers, 2020. Ink on paper, 84.1 x 59.4 cm.
Page 18: Solitary Dancer, I, 2020. Ink on paper, 84.1 x 59.4 cm.



² Tseng Yu-ho Ecke in *Chinese Calligraphy* (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1971);
³ John Ruskin, *The Elements of Drawing* (1857), paraphrased in Tim Ingold, *Lines: A Brief History* (London and New York: Routledge, 2007) p.129