

Icons: seeing and being seen

Portraiture has become a powerful vehicle for me to explore not only the unique attributes of the dancer but also their uncanny ability to reveal very precise things to an audience
Sue Healey

Sue Healey embarked on a series of portraits in dance in 2014, 'driven by my obsession with the camera as a device to *view*', as she says in *Capturing the Vanishing*. Accordingly, she named it ON VIEW.

Icons is a subset of this series. It presents six grandes dames of Australian dance, icons who have left an indelible mark on the artform. It takes the form of a multi-screen installation, playing six films in two parts, each film dealing with a single icon in turn. These celebrate their lyricism and 'reveal the embodied knowledge that usually disappears when the dancer stops performing,' as Healey says. To watch each of them relay their remarkable life stories through words and movement is to reflect on time's river and the unperishable creative impulse. It's also to participate in an act of seeing as fashioned by the filmmaker's eye.

Part 1

Lucette Aldous AC
Principal artist with Ballet Rambert and The Australian Ballet

Shirley McKechnie AO
Pioneer choreographer, director, educator and author. Founder of the Contemporary Dance Theatre of Melbourne. Founder of Ausdance. Professor of Dance at the VCA

Nanette Hassall AM
Dancer, choreographer and teacher. Dancer with Merce Cunningham Company and Ballet Rambert. Founder of Dance Works. Head of Dance Dept at WAAPA

Part 2

Elizabeth Cameron Dalman OAM
Founder of Australian Dance Theatre. Founder of Mirramu Dance Company

Elma Kris
Dancer and choreographer. Member of Bangarra Dance Theatre

Eileen Kramer
Dancer and artist. Toured with the Bodenwieser Ballet for 10 years

Form

Each film runs for about 10 minutes. They are independent from each other with a unique signature and mood. The two parts likewise can be shown separately or as an ensemble. The ambient soundscapes by Darrin Verhagen also serve to link the components into a sinuous whole.

Parts 1 and 2 both open with a kind of prelude, like a curtain raising. Nine tall screens emerge with the three dancers in the cast occupying three screens forming a triptych. They are all dressed differently in each screen, three versions of themselves. They dance softly, absorbed in their individual choreography. Their dance personalities are evident from this first entrance. Nanette Hassall strides into frame. Eileen Kramer gives an undulating port de bras. The effect is a powerful sense of entrance and expectation.

In each of their ensuing films, the icons describe their introductions to dance, their careers and their thoughts on artistry and the dance world. At these moments, they are frequently shown in interior, personal spaces that disclose something of their lives. Elizabeth Cameron Dalman sits in a study with a buddha behind her right shoulder. Nanette Hassall and Elma Kris appear in dance studios.

The films of Shirley McKechnie, Nanette Hassall and Eileen Kramer incorporate sequences in which they talk in a centre screen while archival footage of their childhoods and dancing career appears on screens to their right and left, often in black and white. Thus, the icon has a dialogue with her past self, and the voice and images tell two stories at once.

McKechnie's old photographs include the cover of the Beaumaris Newsletter: 'Contemporary Dance Theatre in joint performance with Beaumaris student dancers.' Hassall's film features footage of Merce Cunningham who executes a promenade in attitude, his torso long and lifted out of the hips, his rounded arms articulating the shape in space. Kramer speaks while accompanied left and right with footage of graceful damsels—one of whom is Kramer herself—with fluid arms and melting back bends. The pretty melodies of the Blue Danube Waltz can be heard as if coming from an unseen radio.

By contrast, the viewer sees the face of Lucette Aldous behind footage of herself as Kitri with Rudolf Nureyev as Basilio in the third act pas de deux of the ballet *Don Quixote*. She appraises her performance closely, unsparingly, as dancers do. The viewer watches her watching herself. A fan crosses her face on which footage of Kitri appears, dark eyes heavy with false eyelashes. 'The eyes always had it for me,' she says. These multilayers of film on film suggest the past contained phantom-like in the present.

The moments of biography are interspersed with sequences of the icons dancing. Each film closes with their dance. The exception is Shirley McKechnie who sits in stillness and gazes out calmly. The clean vertical line of her white scarf contrasts with the low lighting surrounding her. The rich darkness suggests the interiority of the mind. She looks as if she had been painted by Sargent.

Landscape

The dance sequences take place in various settings, most often in the outdoors. The many beauties of the natural world— earth, trees, rivers, ocean, sky—allow for plays of light and mood. Sounds such as birdsong, wind and water within the score add sensory texture. In its celebration of the grandeur of the landscape, the work is Healey's paean to Australia and, by extension, to the dance artists whose home is Australia.

At the opening of her film, Elma Kris expresses her connection to country. She explains how she was born on Thursday Island. She has other homelands on both sides of her grandparents and her biological father is from Papua New Guinea. The scene is intercut with shots of her in moving like a spirit among the slim verticals of bare tree trunks, a blue dress against dappled gold, woodland green and brown. Her hands touch the twigs and grass; her bare feet walk on the rough earth.

Later she says, 'I wanted to tell stories of the land, sea and sky.' Projected on her dress is a dugong, swimming slowly in blue water. A melancholy sound like a whale call is heard above the soundscape's pulsing rhythm.

The land, sea and sky have personal significance for Elizabeth Cameron Dalman also. In one sequence she stands by a river flanked by trees. Next, she sways and reaches her arms heavenwards in open land. In voiceover she relates how she was ‘called back to Australia’ when she lived overseas. She missed the country, gumtrees and skies and was compelled by a ‘desire to open a dialogue, to speak for the natural world.’ Now she owns the Mirramu Creative Arts Centre by Lake George.

Healey derives her various colour palettes for the films and for the icons’ costumes from their natural settings. Nanette Hassall is seen moving between a formation of columns in a walkway under a sunless sky: disappearing, reappearing, catching and falling, advancing towards the camera. The palette is muted stone grey and sage green. Her hair and dress are grey.

In other moments, the colours of the icons’ garments provide a vivid contrast. Lucette Aldous’ film opens with her swirling a bright red shawl against the backdrop of sun-flecked grass. The light gleams through the fabric. The movement is intercut with snatches of her dancing flirtatiously with Nureyev in *Don Quixote*. There she brandishes a red shawl, trailing it behind her, a movement then echoed by her older self on the lawn.

But Healey doesn’t use the natural world merely as a backdrop to the action. Rather, she deploys it theatrically, as a set. She selects locations both to frame the action and to complement the dancers’ stories organically.

Elizabeth Cameron Dalman’s film opens with a drone’s eye view of open sky and pale grass. The camera tracks a small figure in white with immense wings, like a seraph. The image radiates with the spectacle of horizontal expanse. At ground level, she rotates to the lambent sound of female vocals. The landscape can be glimpsed through her wings as they project her arms away from the body.

These wings recall the props of Loie Fuller, an American innovator and performer who astonished audiences in Paris in the early years of the twentieth century. She created a dance named the Serpentine in which she danced in voluminous robes with long sleeves attached to rods that she could swish and toss around her like wings. Healey transposes this theatrical device to open space, gives it room to spread out in the boundless green.

The outdoor set can also be contained rather than open. In a sequence in Eileen Kramer’s film, she rests against the trunk of an immense Morton Bay Fig tree, a long, slender Diana in white. It fills the frame with massive branches. She caresses the bark. Birds are singing. The strong vertical thrust of the tree portrays it as a symbol of creative purpose. Like Eileen, it is more than 100 years old. Like her, it reaches ever upwards.

Healey’s flair for building a dramatic composition from the surroundings is likewise on show in her interior spaces. She harnesses the inherent theatricality of an old warehouse space in a sequence with Nanette Hassall. Here the geometry of columns, arches and iron staircases in cool tones of graphite and white suggest order and harmony.

To place the icon in the landscape is to place her within the natural order. Another aerial shot captures Elizabeth Cameron Dalman crossing the vast grey lakebed of Weereewa. There are two of her in the frame: the dancer and her long, thin shadow. In voiceover, she recites a poem she has composed in which the mountain fades ‘into a pencil line’. The slow, stately walk of the infinitesimally small figure and its shadow dramatises the body in space and time, getting older but moving forward.

Choreographer and Filmmaker

In many ways, *Icons* unfolds like a dance performance. In this, the viewer can see the work of Sue Healey the choreographer. The two parts, with their mysterious opening preludes, are akin to two acts, and the films are separate movements within them. While these are complete in themselves, they also form a trio, each one connecting to the next. Sometimes—not always—this is done by a fade to black. The last frame of Elma Kris' film is the whoosh of a wave over sand leading into the voice of Eileen Kramer. The junction between Shirley McKechnie and Nanette Hassall is an emphatic hard cut, signalling a sudden change of focus.

Throughout the work, Healey deploys a panoply of theatrical effects that include voice, image, costume, music, sounds, contrast, spectacle and intimacy. The rise and fall in pace and mood pulls the viewer along, ensnares their interest in the fascinating sights before them.

But Healey is simultaneously a filmmaker. 'The camera is a gift to the choreographer,' she says, 'because it allows for a multiplicity of viewpoints and spatial freedom.' The icons can be seen throughout to dance with themselves in sequences of solos, pas de deux and pas de trois created by the division and subdivision of screens, an effect that reaches beyond the confines of the theatre.

Healey notes that the camera can see the subject from a distance where 'bodies can become abstracted shapes and patterns.' At the close of Nanette Hassall's film, the score begins to pulse, and her dancing figure drives a series of shapes that splice and merge across the three screens in cascading patterns. She comes in and out of frame from the top and bottom as well as left and right. The screens multiply again and again, so she's there in a grid of dots, spinning like atoms. The film speeds up to the electronic beat of the synth, generating urgency. The figure darts like light bursts. The abstracted specks are still recognisably Hassall.

Yet the camera also allows for close ups of a subject, giving 'the choreographer power to articulate subtlety.' Elma Kris appears in a low light close-up across three screens. She relates in voiceover how she moved to Cairns to take a visual arts degree. She saw performances of The Australian Ballet for the first time on afternoon TV. All the while, she twists her hair with nimble fingers into coils away from her face. Her expression is intent. The camera rotates around her head within the frame. It feels almost intrusive to view this private moment of personal grooming. It's alive with the poetry of unselfconscious gestures. Then she unspools her hair again.

Portraiture

Sue Healey's suite of portraits glow with her reverence not only for each icon but also for the qualities of older artist. To her, it's 'nuance rather than grand gesture,' as she says in a feature in *Limelight* magazine. She allows them to speak and dance for themselves, creating a bond of sympathy between the subject and the viewer. By revealing their embedded knowledge, she evokes the continuity of dance through generations of dancing bodies.

'Right now, if I was making a piece, I'd make a piece about borders,' says Nanette Hassall. *Icons* presents many borders: youth and age; movement and stillness; exploring and

retreating; interior and exterior; mortality and eternity. The icons watch their past selves and look out at the unseen viewer. That viewer ultimately sees what Healey sees: her portraiture, imagination and artistry.

When Hassall spins in her vortex, what flickers before the eyes is the phenomenology of light and speed. The dancing figure spins ever-faster into a single point, the pupil in the iris, the eye that sees—the eye of the filmmaker: Sue Healey.

References

Sue Healey. *Capturing the Vanishing: A choreographer and film*. Platform Papers, No 60, August 2019
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