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Towering slow-mo shots project sheer joy of dance

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Muscles tense and twitching, three larger-than-life dancers slowly extend and contract their limbs, every movement stretching into the next in a slow crawl of exertion.

It's not a gruelling rehearsal but an installation entitled *Slow Dancing*, a creation of portraiture artist David Michalek that projects images of dancers on three 12-metre-tall screens in hyper-slow motion. For these towering figures, each five-second dance movement plays out over 10 minutes in minute detail. It's a mesmerizing mix of elegance and voyeurism, made possible by technology's rapid advances.

Starting tonight, Luminato is hosting the Canadian premiere of the outdoor installation as a free nightly event adjacent to the University of Toronto's Hart House, and has commissioned two new portraits featuring Canadian dancers Sandra Lamouche and Clarence Ford to accompany 43 others covering a wide variety of styles.

The videos, juxtaposed at random, invite viewers to lose themselves in a level of detail and minutiae previously unavailable to the human eye, blurring the line between animation and portraiture by harnessing emerging technology designed for military use.

Michalek tested his idea using an inexpensive, low-resolution black and white camera used to help golfers analyze their swings. The trial convinced him that the project would work, but that he needed a considerably more sophisticated camera.

"I realized the idea was somewhat in advance of the technology that was going to allow me to realize it, so I started this very concerted effort to locate technology companies around the world that were in the process of creating what they claimed to be the first high-definition, high-speed camera. And that took about a year," he says.

A mere two weeks before scheduled filming began, and with panic setting in, Michalek heard from Vision Research, a small engineering company in New Jersey, about a prototype camera they had developed for military ballistics analysis, capable of filming at 1,000 frames per second. Seeing a chance to work out the bugs in their technology, Vision lent Michalek the camera for minimal rental fees.

Though the prototype was not without its challenges, such as a lack of cooling that had a crew surrounding the state of the art camera with ice packs and fans, Michalek was thrilled with the result.

He suggests that the overwhelming sentiment of the piece is the immediate and inevitable joy of the dancer in performance, which he has observed for years in his marriage to New York City Ballet dancer Wendy Whelan (who is also a featured dancer). The first evidence of unease with the film's level of detail came from the dancers, shocked at their imperfect technique during early screenings.

"When I said, 'Oh my God, that's beautiful,' [Whelan] said, 'That's horrific - look at the way my legs buckle when I jump. I've got to fix that.' "

Some dancers corrected flaws while others came to appreciate a larger sense of the exhibit as something able to encompass imperfection. Still, the viewer is left with a vague sense of seeing too much, of being privy to something intended to remain invisible.

Michalek has been fascinated with slow-motion art for years, since it was being shot at 300 frames per second rather than 1,000, and variations on portraiture that toy with the line between still photographs and dynamic film have since become a contemporary art phenomenon. Mere metres away from *Slow Dancing*, Hart House's Justina M. Barnicke Gallery is currently hosting *Stutter and Twitch*, an exhibition exploring "stillness and suspense in filmic motion."

Slow Dancing has already proved to be an international success after stints at New York's Lincoln Center and the Los Angeles Music Center, and later this month it travels to Italy to be staged at the prestigious Venice Biennale's International Festival of Contemporary Dance.

Michalek's idea was born in part of "a general appreciation of what this type of technology had the potential to offer," as well as "what seemed to be a unique opportunity to marry the technology with the subject of dancers, and that much could yield as a result of the combination," he says.

That yield is a study of the dancer, both in physical form and emotional expression, writ large in a public arena, with audience interaction en masse considered crucial to the experience.

"It's an open visual experience," Michalek says. "Every person can bring to it what imaginative power they feel capable of giving it in that moment and for as long as they can. And then they can relax and turn that part of their brain off."

Slow Dancing appears nightly from June 6 to 15 at 9 o'clock on the University of Toronto's Back Campus field.