

Dancing brushstrokes – An investigation of the dance art of Edgar Jansen

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Movement captured on paper. Dance expressed through the dancing brush strokes of a visual artist. Containing the energy and expression of the dance on a canvas, while also allowing that fleeting moment to live on through time so that in 100 years from now, the viewer can still experience the energy and expression as the artist did in that moment that he made the picture.



Nowadays, thanks to technology, dance is most often captured through photography and film. But every so often

you're lucky enough to meet an artist who likes to combine dance with visual art. I have had the pleasure of meeting [Edgar Jansen](#), an Amsterdam based visual artist who uses a variety of different types of art materials to create human portraits as well as music, life and dance drawings.

I know Edgar through taking part in the [Henny Jurriens Summer Intensive](#) in Amsterdam where he collaborated with a dancer through making fast water-colour drawings as she

danced in the space. I was immediately intrigued as to how quickly he could paint an image that captured her energy so well; sure there was no fine detail of her face or what she wore but through the images you could still experience her movement and sense the energy she danced with.

Being a dance artist, and a photographer myself, I am always searching for ways that I can collaborate dance with other art forms – especially when the aim is to capture dance through still image. I am also always open to learning how other artists, such as Edgar, achieve the



combining of dance and art so effortlessly and with such an inspiring effect. So I got around to questioning Edgar about his art and how he works with dance.

‘Drawing is like my dance, my dance floor is the sketchbook.’

For Edgar it’s the beauty of the human body in motion and the ‘shapes, positions and gestures are a pleasure to observe and draw/paint.’ He believes that the ‘beauty of the body is eternal’ and is what has been the essence of inspiration for many artists through the ages – he quotes Rodin “The sight of human forms nourishes and comforts me.” But apart from human aesthetics of dance, Edgar particularly tries to see ‘the inner life as expressed through the body’ – the emotion, expression and energy that comes from within the dancer as he/she moves. Which is essentially the language that dance speaks and communicates with Edgar and moves him in a way that goes beyond words.

However, this is true with other art forms as well, such as music, poetry and painting and so Edgar tries to translate what he reads from dance through his own visual language – ‘an

image is a poem without words, music without sounds.’ Edgar’s images of dance are his translation of the movement and how it speaks to him as an artist. Of course the experience of dance in its physicality is also a factor that inspires Edgar, ‘the energy, speed or power of dance gives me thrill, an impulse and a feeling of excitement.’ However, in contrast to this the moments where dance is quieter, slow and still or with a strong sense of concentration can also inspire the artist. During dance drawing, Edgar chooses not to focus on the face as it can be somewhat distracting for him as a portrait painter, he prefers to ‘observe the entire shape of the dancing body.’



‘Dance can move and touch me. Don’t ask me why and how dance can touch me so much, as I simply don’t know.’

Edgar’s journey with dance began with curiosity, coincidence and inspiration. He used to focus mainly on portraiture, figure drawing and landscapes but soon learned that his drawing style was in fact vivid and dynamic. Edgar remembers his first aha-moment with dance,

‘There was once a dancer modelling for a pastel portrait and when she saw my portrait afterwards she said “Look at this: your lines are moving, your drawing is dancing!” “Why don’t you draw dance as well?”’

Despite keeping the advice in mind, he wasn’t sure where to begin. ‘The very first start was when I saw an open air performance of a flamenco dancer in a park. I liked it so much that I



started to make sketches and unexpectedly the results were special and new.’ With that experience, Edgar had somewhat ‘accidentally opened a door to an entirely new field of opportunities’ which allowed him to expand his art and audience. Edgar was happy to enter the world of dance but understood that he still had more to learn and so began ‘a long search of how to transform dance and movement in to a drawing.’ He visited studios where he could observe different professional ballet and contemporary dancers some of whom agreed to model for his

portraits – and so he began making friends in the Amsterdam dance community.

Through these new friendships with the dancers, Edgar began collaborating. The inspiration-conversation became two-ways as the dancers were just as inspired by the drawings as Edgar was with the dancers. His work has been used frequently for flyers, posters, and websites and even printed on to T-shirts (for a dance school in Israel). Edgar is also often invited to teach how to draw dance at dance festivals and academies, locally and internationally.

Edgar would label his style of art as 'impressionist' although the dance drawings can be called 'expressionist' and his portraiture as more 'classical' or 'romantic'. Those are the techniques he uses like a language 'in which I tell my own story.' Edgar has never felt attracted to draw/paint exact and photographic details – he feels that this is photography's purpose although his works do show sharp observation of details as well as general shapes.

'I like something rough unfinished in art. It gives room for the viewer to finish the work.'

The roughness, he feels reflects the rough edges of life itself. Edgar believes that a work which is 'too finished and smooth' can lose some of its expressions; he quotes Paul Cezanne: "A portrait is never finished, it only can be abandoned." Artists shouldn't be afraid to make errors and allow imperfection into their work; here he quotes Eugene Delacroix to explain: "The artist who aims at perfection in everything achieves it in nothing."

Like most beautiful things in life, Edgar's style developed in to a unique one of his own; one 'which people often recognize as specifically mine.' However, Edgar didn't force it, he allowed his style to grow and develop organically. As for Edgar's dance drawing process, it is better explained in the artist's own words:

In class, at rehearsal or performance I am observing the dance and start to draw as soon as there is a movement which appeals to me most. It may be the climax or essence of the dance or it may be what I personally prefer in the dance. I make a kind of mental image and don't lift my head from my sketchbook until the drawing is finished. I am drawing what I see as well as what I feel. And I emphasize in the drawing which strikes me most in the movement. I am trying to imagine what the dancer is experiencing, including

the sense of weight, power, speed, and excitement. I am drawing it super-fast not only because the dance is continuing and I am afraid to forget it, but also because then I allow myself no time to think. I hardly know what I am doing, I guess in this way I am following my intuition and there is a sort of direct connection from my heart (inner feelings) to my hand.

The result is a picture that reflects his observations and feelings – with the guidance and influence of the technique and art materials. During the process, Edgar believes that it is the drawing that is telling him what to do such as adding lines, changing colours, adjusting this and that, etc. – as Picasso states, “You have to start drawing in order to know what to draw.” Edgar also takes risks in his process so as to allow coincidence in as a factor, which at the end allows the result to turn out different



to what was originally intended or expected – in a surprising way.

If something has gone wrong, then it may be due to the materials – using the wrong quality paper or not taking the correct materials for example. Of course there are other factors involved too, such as the music, the space and other people in the studio. Edgar often finds that the dancers recognize the movements he captures and feels as though he has also captured what they felt while they were dancing. He also finds, interestingly, that the dancers

often have different preferences of the drawings compared to him – which allows him gain a different/deeper insight to his work; ‘to see through their eyes and learn from it.’



‘I think I like all kinds of dance: varying from ballet, modern, contemporary, jazz, African, Asian, oriental, capoeira, flamenco, butoh, tango, salsa, euritmie, to contact improvisation and hoola hoop.’

But naturally not all choreography, performances and dancers/performers will appeal to the artist. Edgar has a slight preference for contemporary and modern dance, simply because of the variation of the vocabulary. Edgar also enjoys duos and trios and contact between dancers, ‘sharing weights, touching, holding and lifting each other are very interesting for me.’ Highly conceptual work that questions the boundaries of dance don’t hold a lot of appeal for Edgar as he believes that ‘there should be physicality in it.’ Every different style of dance has its own ‘nature’ as Edgar describes it; his inspiration ranges from the temperament, power and deep melancholy of Flamenco to the sensuality of the Tango – and he is always looking for new sources of dance inspiration (lately, the Brazilian duo dance ‘Zouk’).



Edgar's advice to artists in regards to collaborating is that 'on one hand interdisciplinary collaboration is not a "must" as your own field of art is broad enough but on the other hand it is worth trying to explore and cross the borders of your own discipline and be open to what other disciplines can tell you' which can lead to new avenues and perspectives of your art.

In conclusion Edgar states that he can 'find it a fruitful, refreshing, enriching experience to work with artists (mostly musicians and dancers) from another discipline.' If you're open to it, other artists can help you to find a new and fresh view of your work, which can allow you to grow as an artist and as a person.

If you would like to contact Edgar, or read/see more about his work then head here: <http://www.edgarportraits.com/>

Please note: all quotes, unless otherwise stated in the text, come from Edgar.

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