

Dance, Abstract Art Intertwine for Sculpture



FEBRUARY 17, 2015
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As an extension of its mission to expose low-income youth to the vast array of possibilities in today's art world, Santa Ana-based dance nonprofit organization The Wooden Floor has installed a site-specific sculpture by Colombian artist Ana Belén Cantoni inspired by the students' exploratory, spontaneous approach to dance.

The piece, called "The Soft Gesture," was commissioned and underwritten by the Sayago and Pardon Collection as part of its "Abstraction in Action" initiative, which promotes contemporary abstract art from Latin America.

It will remain for a year, after which another commissioned work will be installed in its place annually.

"After researching The Wooden Floor and their activities, I decided to create a piece about movement, collective action and a sense of community," said Cantoni in Spanish.

The Wooden Floor provides free, comprehensive dance education, after school tutoring and SAT prep to low-income students from third grade and through high school.

Students take ballet and modern dance classes and are taught an improvisational dance philosophy, with an emphasis on

non-narrative choreography and organic movements that express immediate emotion.

Inspired by the weightlessness of the body during dance, Cantoni began with a series of drawings of undulating, intertwining threads and graduated to two hanging sculptures cut and sewn by hand in red cloth.

One sculpture hangs from the ceiling in the building's atrium and can be seen from outside through the glass windows.

Bunches of bright, poppy-colored fabric seemingly float overhead, with dangling threads suspended by wooden clothespins. The fragile structure dances with the breeze blowing through the doorway as parents drop off their children for class.

Upon closer inspection, the clumps of suspended fabric are actually hundreds of red gloves reaching downward, each having been individually traced around the artist's hand, then cut and sewn together.

A second sculpture is affixed to the adjacent wall, and can be touched by students racing up the stairs toward the dance studios. Those hands are dyed to gradate from red to deep purple to black, reaching together as one to create a large circle – perhaps inspired by the organization's annual "Circle of Gratitude" fundraising event that takes place in autumn.

"There are more than 1,500 hands total, and are at once a direct reference to the body and to collective action, and the way they both produce transformation and growth," said Cantoni, referring to the transformation the students undergo individually as well as the larger community change created by the organization as a whole.

This is the third time The Wooden Floor has played host to artwork from the Sayago and Pardon collection, but the first time a piece was directly inspired by the organization's change-through-dance mission.

In the past, Wooden Floor students have co-choreographed works based off the abstract paintings.

"In 2012 we did an exercise in which the dancers were asked to build a dance based on the artwork that was here by Anibal Catalan and Vicente Rojas," explained Melanie Ríos Glaser, artistic director and co-CEO of The Wooden Floor.

“Anibal Catalan was very architecturally based, a lot of straight lines and sharp explosions, and the other artist’s work was more smooth, round and blotchy,” she said. “So what I gave the kids was the initiative to find different dynamic movement qualities in their work – what can be smooth, colorful, soft, what can be edgy, straight, what can be a sharp explosion represented in movement?”

The music, too, is improvisational during class. Peeking in on a young group of dancers arching and contracting their backs during a warm-up, one could see a musician improvising with various drums, bells jingling on his ankles, and a wind instrument at his lips.

The resulting tune was not unlike the pre-Columbian indigenous melodies heard during Aztec and Mayan ceremonies.

Such an intersection between improvised dance, music and visual art is almost never seen in children’s programs – more so in the domain of accomplished artists coming together for a specifically interdisciplinary project.

“We want to expose them to the dynamic art-making process,” the artistic director said. “It’s about being witness to innovation, experimentation, question and inquiry, and that’s where they start solving problems, working in tandem to see what can happen if they try this or that, and so that vastness of options that are available to artists are the way we want them to see life as they grow up.”

Cantoni agreed, saying it is important to expose children early on to art, so that they can develop the creative sensibilities that open doors in the future.

“Children have a very spontaneous reaction to art. ... When they are older and carry more cultural baggage, they don’t see things in the same way,” the artist said.

Just then a gaggle of fourth-graders zoomed into the lobby in their black leotards and dance shoes, spinning and leaping under the sculptures, shrieking in delight.

Above the din, one voice could be heard exclaiming: “Oh look, it’s hands!”



