

Three artists on Dance



1

Nicolas Poussin

Sprightly satyrs, skipping maids and raucous Bacchanals – the paintings Poussin produced in Rome in the 1620s and 30s project an air of abandon (*The Triumph of Bacchus*, 1635-36; **1**). But if all the stamping feet and smiling tambourine players suggest the painter's ears must have been ringing, you would be mistaken. As a new National Gallery exhibition dedicated to the French master's renditions of dance shows (9 Oct–2 Jan 2022), Poussin worked not from live performers but miniature wax models of his own making, in carefully calibrated configurations. As painter Antoine Leblond de Latour described: 'He dressed them in clothes suited to the figures he wished to paint, forming the draperies with the tip of a little stick... making their heads, feet, hands... with soft wax, which he handled with a singular swiftness and ease.' This painstaking approach to capturing the illusion of movement became a foundation for Poussin's poised formal language, with the father of French Classicism, in his most complex scenes, seeming to still the swirling world beneath his brush.

Isamu Noguchi

For the American artist Isamu Noguchi, dance had the power to activate sculpture, the presence of bodies in motion imbuing inert forms with a palpable charge. In 1935, he started working with Martha Graham, a choreographer who shared his commitment to the universal possibilities of organic shape and gesture in art. The pair collaborated many times during the ensuing decades, with the sculptor devising minimalist props for the dancer to integrate with her body on stage – her anatomy, he remarked, becoming 'an extension' of the sculptures he produced.

Among the most arresting was his 'spider dress', on display at the Barbican in its retrospective of the sculptor (30 Sep–9 Jan 2022). Made for Graham's 1946 reimagining of the Medea myth, *Cave of the Heart*, the bronze wire carapace gleams inanimate on stage until the ballet's chilling end (**2**). Medea's bloody acts complete, she slides into the dress for her final 'dance of transformation', its glistening fronds bristling with her movement, quickened to life as if by divine intent.



2



3

Elaine Mitchener

'I approach dance with a musician's sensibility,' says vocalist, composer and movement artist Elaine Mitchener, whose work appears in 'British Art Show 9', a major group exhibition that takes the temperature of contemporary art every five years (touring nationally until 23 Dec 2022). Mitchener often works with the choreographer Dam Van Huynh on visceral performances in which bodily movement and vocal projection become indivisible. 'I'm searching for a totality of expression', she says.

In one of her best-known pieces, *Sweet Tooth* (2017; **3**), a harrowing rumination on the enslavement of Africans in the sugar trade, this bond between sound and movement sits at the work's core, with Mitchener's guttural cries convulsing through her body as if controlling it. It makes for difficult viewing, one's own body clenched to mirror hers, but this discomfort is the point. The work is an exploration, in Mitchener's words, of 'the sound and smell of fear... [and] the essential activity of song and dance as a reminder of one's own humanity, history, tradition'.