

Allen Bentley, Extravagance! October 2008

Although ballroom dancing has recently become incredibly popular, with two major television shows dedicated to it— there has always been an active and devoted international dance scene. Allen Bentley has tapped into the excitement and energy of the ballroom dance world in his images of male and female partners whirling across the floor, depicted from above and at extreme angles. Partner dancing can be highly emotional and extremely erotic. Much of dance is about the *pas de deux*, the relationship of two people, and that is what interests Bentley. For him, painting “is the investigation of the dynamics of a relationship as played out through the motions and interactions of a couple.”

To be precise, the *pas de deux* refers specifically to partnering in ballet, and is French for “step of two.” In Bentley’s paintings, the dancers perform classic *pas de deux* steps: they promenade, turn, and jump, and the male lifts the female. These moves form the foundation for much of contemporary ballroom dance. However, unlike ballet, ballroom dance, whether Smooth or Latin, is highly stylized. Bentley captures ballroom’s stylized sensibility with his understanding of hand gestures and body positions that are not natural, but exaggerated. These exaggerations are theatrical and emphasize the narrative of the particular dance. In competition, specific steps are performed according to rather strict guidelines. Bentley’s dancers are caught, frozen in mid-step in dramatic arrangements that emphasize their connection with each other.

Dance is not a completely new theme in art. The most well-known painter of the dance was, of course, Degas, who concentrated on the ballet. Bentley shares Degas’s love of extreme angles and broad open spaces around the figures, two ideas that when first introduced in the nineteenth century, were in large measure the result of the invention of photography and the importation of Japanese prints into France in the last quarter of the century. The acute angles often used in photography and the Eastern understanding of perspective were introduced into the art world and quickly picked up by young modern artists.

Bentley’s work is more similar in composition and lighting to Degas’s performance images like *Miss Lala at the Cirque Fernando* of 1879 than to the more delicate ballet images. Degas utilizes

intense colors and extreme angles. *Bang* and *Jet* by Bentley build on Degas's exploration of new ways of thinking about space; Bentley utilizes even more highly saturated colors than the well-known nineteenth-century artist. Degas too enjoyed popular entertainments, and produced many studies of dancers and singers. Degas and Bentley both depict performers. Here, Bentley utilizes the dancers' poses to examine their relationship with each other, while Degas's dancers were isolated individuals or anonymous members of a troupe.

There is a great respect for the dancers, which Bentley also shares with Degas. Both artists draw from popular culture for imagery, specifically from the world of performance. Bentley's performers wear the costumes of the American dance world, of rhythm dances like the Swing or the Cha Cha, and their stylized moves capture the drama of these highly energized dances. The artist utilizes their poses to symbolize the relationship between the two figures, ultimately signifying the emotional intensity and interaction between couples in a fast-paced contemporary world.

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