

Alan Storey

Machine for Drawing the Movements of a Ballerina

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Alan STOREY *Machine for Drawing the Movements of a Ballerina*

Alison APPELBE

When Ballet British Columbia's full-length ballet *The Four Seasons* premiered at Vancouver's Queen Elizabeth Theatre in February, it featured the latest art installation by artist-sculptor and mechanical-technological innovator Alan Storey.

As the curtain rose, the most recent "drawing machine" by the Vancouver-based artist hung, illuminated, above the stage. Lead ballerina Makaila Wallace entered with an infrared transmitter embedded in her pinioned hair. As she danced, her movements were transferred to an infrared camera in the fly, then down to a receptor on the suspended drawing machine, and finally "mapped" on a large plastic sheet by what amounts to an oversized, dynamically moving "pen."

At the end of the performance, the *Machine for Drawing the Movements of a Ballerina* was lowered, and the plastic sheet tilted towards the audience so it could see the real-time recording of a dancer in Ballet BC Artistic Director John Alleyne's ballet.

Given that the Vivaldi concertos — spring, summer, autumn and winter — address the passage of time, the act of mapping the ballet's progress was a natural extension of the theme, and the reasoning behind the inclusion of the drawing machine, Storey says.

All six performances in Vancouver were recorded on the same plastic sheet, producing a cumulative record of the Ballet BC series.

At his warehouse studio on Vancouver's Railway Avenue, Storey suggested that the physical and interactive nature of dance made it a "natural fit" for the most recent in his lengthy and evolutionary series of drawing machines.

The series began in 1984 with *Machine for Drawing on Walls*, in which a central motorized post and

beam applied horizontal lines on the surrounding walls and windows of galleries in Vancouver and Toronto. In 1990, the *Climatic Drawing Machine*, mounted outside Toronto's Power Plant Gallery, recorded weather conditions in a manner similar to the hygrothermograph technology used in most gallery interiors.

In 1999, the Canadian Cultural Centre in Paris showed Storey's *Bird in a Cage, Writing its Own History*. In this installation, the openings and closing of doors and drafts produced by gallery patrons were recorded on a paper-covered drum or "cage."

Then in 2003, Storey took drawing devices called *Transaction* to both the Galerie Circa in Montreal and Expression in Saint-Hyacinthe, Quebec. "At each site, pulleys and cables on overhead cross-beams worked as a mechanism to map shifting x/y coordinates as lines drawn on the flat, white surface of a large table," wrote curator Petra Watson.

While there were problems with, particularly, the computer link between the two installations ("I had some struggles," Storey admits), *Transaction* served as the prototype for the Ballet BC drawing machine.

That said, all of these site-specific installations are, Watson noted, about "space and time, movement and performance."

Storey, born in 1960, grew up in Summerland in B.C.'s Okanagan Valley. His father, Ken Storey, was simultaneously a math and physics teacher and musician and builder of Baroque-era instruments — harpsichords, virginals and clavichords.

Alan was introduced to the skills of designer, mechanic and artisan-craftsman in the large workshop (half the house) he shared with his father. In this recent association with the 18th



Alan STOREY in his studio.

century Vivaldi concerti, Storey drew on his musical background. And all this experience comes together in this latest "Rube Goldberg-ish" installation.

The *Machine for Drawing the Movements of a Ballerina* frame is constructed of aluminum (to keep it light) and wood salvaged from building sites; fixtures and materials include clothesline pulleys and 1/16th-inch aircraft cable. The "real time record" of the dancer's performance is written with a "pen" attached to a long metal bar driven by two motors on the x/y axis.

"It's all interconnected so it moves in a dynamic way," Storey explains. "There's a computer interface, but the mechanism is rudimentary." Following the performances, Storey said of the installation: "It exceeded my expectations. I was absolutely delighted."

In the catalogue *Alan Storey Sculptures 1982-1992* from the Surrey Art Gallery, Robin Laurence writes: "Alan Storey's sculpture is dedicatedly 'low-tech,' employing a high-school level physics which is both visible and comprehensible, and which stands in pertinent opposition to the invisible and arcane technologies that seem to dominate our lives. While Storey's practice is primarily demystifying, it also has a nostalgic component; his means and materials seem to meet our longing for a simpler age, a more primitive technology."

Storey's best known work is the 98-foot-long aluminum *Pendulum* that swings back and forth—a distance of

21 feet—in the light-filled atrium of the HSBC building on Georgia Street in downtown Vancouver. Installed in 1987, it has become a city landmark.

Other pieces by Storey on Vancouver's Public Art Registry include the 2002 *Coopers Mews* on the north shore of False Creek—a complex piece of sculpture and mechanics referring to the region's industrial history and particularly the long-time industrial barrel builder, Sweeney Cooperage.

Downtown on Burrard Street, *Public Service/Private Steps*, installed in 2003, is a collection of five under-sized elevators that, thanks to a computer interface, mimic five functional elevators within the building on the former Customs House site.

Sensors in the actual elevators pick up footprints and transmit them to a screen on the underside of the corresponding outdoor elevators. "So—from a standing position on the plaza—an observer can look up and see the movement and use of the inner workings of the building represented in a formal yet abstracted public realm," Storey writes.

The University of Victoria graduate is now working on a sculptural installation in association with the historic and now relocated boiler plant at Vancouver General Hospital, and another with the North Vancouver Public Library. The latter will feature a moving mechanism, suspended LED screen, and cryptic messaging as described in the classic children's novel *Charlotte's Web*—all as a kind of "virtual library," Storey says.



"I've always been interested in how things work and function, and how people perceive things, and how they come together," he adds. "I think I'm

helping people see things in new ways by setting up an installation that makes you question what's going on—and has you looking back and learning something about the way things work, or have worked, around you." ←

Alan Storey, Machine for Drawing the Movements of a Ballerina
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Alison APPELBE is a Vancouver-based writer and photographer with a particular interest in art and architecture, culture (in the broadest sense), and European travel.

Alan STOREY,
Machine for Drawing the Movements of a Ballerina, 2007. Detail.
Photo: Courtesy of the artist.

