Titian in 4D

By

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Bachelor of Arts- Department of Theatre and Dance

Undergraduate Honors Thesis

Final Copy

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Thesis advised by Erika Randall

When a body is in motion it becomes slippery. A static image is easier for us the viewer to consume; thus, the minute it begins to move, the body assumes a level of autonomy from the influences around it. Titian, the 16th century Venetian painter, was the first to give his figures this power. His dynamic renderings effectively capture the fourth dimension thereby granting his subjects with an unprecedented amount of influence. I intend to use his paintings as a study for a dance piece unpacking the male gaze through the lens of post structural feminism. This piece will take into consideration both sixteenth century and twenty first century attitudes towards male and female bodies. Through these studies, five female and four male dancers will personify the post-structural feminist discourse on the powers of the body and explore the effects of the male gaze on both genders.
Titian in 4D
BFA Honors Thesis

For my BFA thesis, I chose to examine the sixteenth century Venetian painter Titian and the 21st century female body through a post structural feminist lens in order to encourage my audience to question how they are looking at the subjects presented to them. I collaborated with nine dancers to create a twelve-minute dance set in an alley stage. One dancer, Ian Fraser, performed an aerial dance solo for a section of the performance.

When I began this process, I expected to make a dance about how the sixteenth century Venetian painter Titian incorporated the fourth dimension into his work. My finished product is more complex. To make a dance about Titian would be to make a dance about dominant masculinist power structures. To make a dance in conversation with Titian and post structural feminism would reveal patriarchal genealogies and delegitimize their centrality to society¹. I had to eliminate traditional narrative so as to avoid creating a dance which has one interpretation. I kept my choreographer’s presence visible to prevent the audience from completely consuming my dancers. I examined the ways Titian painted anatomical strictures underneath fabrics and translated the questions sparked by my observations into costumes for my dancers. I had to constantly tear down what I had created. I began with a dance which brought paintings onto the stage. I ended up with a dance which personified the questions I had about the paintings as well as our American society as a whole. I wanted to investigate how the female body is both aesthetically pleasing and a challenge when put on the stage or a canvas. The creation of this work was

extremely challenging for me, but I by the end I managed to make a dance which incorporated both Titian and post structural feminism.

I was originally drawn to using the 16th century Venetian painter Titian as one of my lenses for analysis because I was interested in the aesthetics he created. I stumbled across him in a Venetian art history class here at the University of Colorado Boulder my sophomore year. After half a semester of static Byzantine style saints and odd Giorgione women, for the first time I saw realistic human bodies portrayed. Particularly in his mythologies, Titian captured bodies in motion, something which had been lost since antiquity. I had just watched a documentary entitled The Science of Sex Appeal, and it had piqued my interest in body motions and dimensionality. I learned that humans are not designed to be seen standing still. Even during sleep, we are constantly moving. As a result, our brains are hardwired to recognize motion- especially when it comes to recognizing the difference between male and female bodies. Carrie Johnson of the University of California Los Angeles has done studies on how humans recognize each other. She designed “a series of grey manikins” with different shoulder-waist-hip ratios, and then animated them to walk. Some gaits included more shoulder swagger, and others more hip sway. When shown to a test group, it became very clear which ones were easily recognizable as masculine or feminine based on the combination of shape and motion. Test subjects as young as six years old identified shoulder emphasis as more manly, while a hip sway was associated with women. Movement highlights favorable attributes in our bodies- this pattern recognition is built into our neurological system. 2 I was interested in how we express our gender in

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movement. In Titian’s work, I saw motion. I saw swiveling figures, expressive drapery and evocative shadows. From my perspective, this was the first time I saw accurate human figures. Later, I learned how the development of naturalism in the fourteenth to sixteenth century is actually a very complicated subject. My research primarily focuses on how the artist Titian created the elements of dance in a painting.

The moment I realized I wanted to make this the topic of my BFA show was when I was studying abroad in France. I was standing in the Louvre, watching the tourists walking down the long hallways. Most stopped only briefly to take pictures of the paintings they were looking at before moving on. Few bothered to even glance at the descriptive plaque. These oil paintings are meant to be seen in person; a photograph taken with a camera phone cannot capture what they have to offer. Only a handful of people stopped to actually take in what was in front of them amidst the throngs who barely glanced at each before moving on.

I noticed a parallel between women’s bodies and these paintings. Too often in our American society are women’s bodies viewed as objects worth a glance and a photograph and nothing more. The female body has been contentious for millennia. If a woman completely covers her body, she is a prude. If she shows some skin, she’s a whore. If she takes her body out into the business world leaving her children at home with a child minder she is heartless. If she choses to stay at home with her children, she has no ambition. The hyper-sexualized female body can be seen plastered on billboards and magazine covers across the world; yet if a woman is sexually assaulted it must be her fault because she “must have been asking for it.” To be female is to be a problem.
For my process, I was interested to see if I could create a dance which challenges the way people look at their world. With this goal came several issues: how could I create this dance without exploiting the bodies of my dancers? Could Titian be a part of my dance without my just borrowing his work? I had to examine the women Titian painted. Why did he paint them? What did he intend to give to women, and what is my personal conjecture? Can women be both sexy and a challenge to their viewers at the same time, thus subverting traditional gender binaries? Instead of answering questions, I just kept finding more.

Although I began with a fairly simple idea, the project quickly mushroomed into something much larger than I originally intended. In the process, I lost some of my investigations into Titian. I only retained a very basic overview of his work. I focused instead on how to deconstruct the phenomenon of a woman in a skirt on a stage.

The first iteration of my dance closely followed the philosophy of the liberal humanists. There was a plot, a climax, antagonists and protagonists. There was one way to interpret my dance. It was fairly one-dimensional. The plan was as follows: Lights would come up on a room full of dancers positioned as statues. Each would be a recreation of one of Titian’s paintings. While tango music played in the background, the dancers would, “come to life.” Once male dancer would be hanging from the ceiling swathed in red aerial silk. He would be the personification of the Male Gaze. With his gestures he would control the dance happening below him. The end of the song would leave two dancers, a male and a female, left on the stage. They would dance an increasingly intense duet which would eventually, literally tear the Male Gaze out of the sky. Once he was destroyed all the dancers would come back on and dance together in joyful freedom.
While the narrative itself defied traditional binaries by uniting men and women to fights the patriarchy, the process I described above reinscribed everything I was rebelling against. There was one person in charge, myself the Choreographer. The subjects, my dancers, had no power to find their own autonomy. One male entity, Titian, was the overarching center of power. I needed a new way to organize the driving force behind my dance in order to truly deconstruct the existing power structures.

I found it in the language of the post structural feminists. Post structural feminists bring together Foucauldian and earlier feminist concerns with the political language of the body\textsuperscript{4}. One project of post structural feminism is to deconstruct the liberal-humanist subject (the human entity) as a rational, unified, free, and self-determining individual. In contrast, poststructuralists view subjects as socially constructed.\textsuperscript{3} In order to dimensionalize my dance I had to decentralize the power structures. I eliminated traditional narrative and reorganized the vocabulary of the work. I did keep both the male and female dancers. If I wanted to deconstruct gender binaries, I felt I needed to have both genders on the stage. By having the physical binary present I could directly challenge it. I was not interested in abstract representations of male and female bodies. In this theory, I was able to find a vocabulary to restructure my language. With this, I could ask and manipulate my central question: How are we looking?

In my attempt not to superimpose traditional narrative in my work, I had to manipulate time itself. This was inherently problematic, as human beings experience time in a linear fashion. How could I create a deconstructed, non-linear though line within time,

a linear entity? My solution came from the fourth dimension. If time is one half of the fourth dimension, motion is the other. I looked at Titian’s figures and how he created time and motion within them to manipulate time on my stage. Most of his figures are seen in a swiveling contrapposto. Traditional contrapposto, as defined by the Kritios boy in Greece in the fifth century BCE, is when the bones are stacked on top of one another requiring minimal muscular energy. One knee locks, allowing the weight to shift to one side of the pelvis. The shoulders tilt in opposition while the other knee pops out. Humans can hold this position with little to no effort and thus they step out of time. In a painting, if the participants are static, there is no sense of how long the figure could stay there. If there is dynamism within the positions of the figures, gravity becomes a central player. In this situation, the painting captures a moment suspended within time.

The difference between being suspended in a moment and completely removing a figure from the influences of time means the former has autonomy while the later is restricted to the position he or she was put into. According to post structural feminists, a woman in motion can slip out of the frame inscribing the boundaries of her life. Titian’s women exist beyond our grasp. In addition to body positioning, Titian uses the gaze of his figures and renderings of anatomy in relation to fabric to bring the fourth dimension into his work. I use my voice and my costumes to subvert traditional readings of the female body.

_Bacchus and Ariadne_ (1520-1523), Figure 1, displays one of the best examples of how the gaze of figures can manipulate time. The two main characters have bodies traveling in one direction while their eyes are pointed in another. Their physicality signifies

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4 Titian, _Bacchus and Ariadne_, 1520-1523, oil on canvas, 5’9” by 6’3”, London, The National Gallery.
the impulse of the previous moment, while their gaze
takes them in the direction of their future. As a viewer,
our eyes are drawn to where they are looking because
it is the only empty space in the entire canvas. In
Assumption of the Virgin (1516-1518), Titian also
uses negative space in conjunction with eye contact to
establish motion. Mary gazes upwards towards the
celestial beings across an empty golden backdrop. All
around her angels and clouds fill the scene, but the
spectators’ eye is drawn to the calm in the middle of the storm. Thus in both these
paintings, the gaze is used in two ways: between figures it manipulates time, and the
spectators are drawn to the negative in between spaces.

The relationship I have to manipulation of the gaze includes my audience and
myself. Titian manipulated the gaze of his figures to incorporate dimensionality; I
manipulate the gaze of my audience in order to challenge the way they look at dance. In
traditional Western concert dance, the presence of the choreographer disappears once the
production goes up. Choreographers of ballet and modern dance direct their spectators’
gaze through formation changes, framing negative space, and narrative. Postmodern
concert dance pioneered by the Judson Church group in the second half of the twentieth
century deconstructed these formal elements of composition. With this, the relationship of

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5 Titian, Assumption of the Virgin, 1516-1518, Oil on Panel, 22'8” by 11’10”, Venice, Santa Maria Gloriosa dei Frari.
the choreographer and the audience changes. With my piece, I was interested in how I could use my text to play with that relationship.

I used my voice projected over a god microphone to create this effect in my work. Originally, I intended for the dancers to get their cues ‘invisibly.’ That is, they would listen for audio cues and just know when to go. However, after discussions with my readers, I realized keeping my voice would add another layer to the work. These cues are the scaffolding that holds up the dance. By exposing the studs and foundations, the audience gets a glimpse into the construction project. Often, I personally find the process of making a dance to be more interesting than the final product. In this, the audience has almost complete scaffolding, thus their relationship to the performance changes.

In keeping my voice, I subverted the romantic elements of the dance thereby neutralizing the gender binary on the stage. In one moment at the end of the first section, a man and a woman come together. Dancers Dillon Colagrosso and Taylor King walk towards each other and eventually lock eyes. This has a decidedly romantic flavor to it. It would have been even more romantic if I had carried out my original plan and set it to tango music. Instead, “Dillon and Taylor come together,” is the only sound. My instruction exposes the scaffolding of the moment thus deconstructing the idea of romance on my stage.

It is extremely romantic to watch two people finding each other in an unexpected place; it is extremely unromantic to watch two people be told to fall in love. This idea, of “verfremdungseffekt . . . the attempt to ‘make strange’ the entire experience of watching
theatre” or dance occurs when elements of the work are set against one another. Bertolt Brecht was one pioneer who explored these concepts in the first half of the twentieth century. The Judson Church group also created innovative work which said “No” to traditional theatre dance methodologies. My piece is a continuation of their investigation.

The way the performance space was set up also interfered with the gaze of the audience. Instead of a traditional proscenium style setting, the audience was seated in an alley stage. This meant the spectators were much closer to the dancers themselves; they were almost in the dance. In fact, the audience on the opposite side of the stage was within view. They were framed by the negative space created by the dancers. The audience could not sit back and frame the dancers with the proscenium arch, so the notion of what is framing the dance becomes slippery. The in between spaces become interesting, just like they do in Titian’s paintings; and here, the in between spaces are filled with more spectators. This makes it is more difficult to define what is the separation between the viewer and the spectator and the whole experience has been ‘made strange.’

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In *Sacred and Profane Love* (1514), Figure 2, Titian also uses fabrics to stretch traditional interpretations of female sexuality. The current theory surrounding this painting is the figure on the left is a bride on the eve of her wedding, and the one

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7 Titian, *Sacred and Profane Love*, 1514, Oil on Canvas, 46” by 110”, Rome, Galleria Borghese.
on the right is the goddess Venus. If we accept this theory, then the woman with the most power is, in fact, the woman with the least amount of coverage. The woman on the left is covered modestly, and is a mortal. The one on the right is exposed to us all and is a deathless goddess. The bride glances out of the corner of her eye at the viewer, which gives us, the spectators, power. She is inviting us into her world. The gaze of the goddess is completely fixed on her counterpart. She could not care less that she is being looked at. She is vulnerable in her nudity but powerful in her challenge to the viewer. According to post structural feminism, to be feminized means to be made extremely vulnerable; able to be disassembled, reassembled, exploited as a reserve labor force ... leading an existence that always borders on the obscene, out of place, and reducible to sex. The woman of the right’s body is vulnerable to our gaze, but nothing else about her is. She does not invite us into her world; she is not to be used. A bride, on the other hand, is especially reducible to sex. In the early sixteenth century, a woman’s primary role was to provide heirs to continue the family line. In fact, to the Church, sex was licit only within marriage, with the conscious aim of procreation. Women’s bodies were used as tools in the dynastic power play. If the woman on the right is not available for sex, she is a challenge. She is not available for consumption, thus she challenges dominant masculinist views of knowledge by using strategies of

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opposition, resistance, and deconstruction. At the same time, she is naked and presents a pleasing and sexual image. She was painted this way by a man. Her existence is problematic. She is both a sexual object and a challenge to the spectator.

I used costumes to investigate these questions of feminine sexuality by playing with the amount of clothing each dancer wears. In my piece, three female dancers walk into a museum in nothing but their slips. This state, in this world, is normal and accepted. Then, they have their clothes put on them. The more layers they have put on them, the more sexualized they become. The men, on the other hand, take off their clothes and gain power. Between the 14th century and the present day, the clothed female and the nude male have lost power in art. The most powerful woman in the Renaissance, the Virgin Mary, was always depicted clothed. Manet’s women directly stare down their viewers, reclaiming power in their nudity. The deities of the Renaissance: Jesus Christ, figures from the bible and Greek gods were always partially naked. By the time Manet painted his women, respectable men were never painted or carved without their clothes on. My dancers have an inverse relationship to history. The men claim power after their clothes come off; the women claim theirs when they put clothes on.

Neither Titian’s goddess nor my dancers are available for consumption. The gaze of the woman on the right in Sacred and Profane Love prevents the spectator from entering her world, and my voice in combination with the dancers movement means the audience cannot completely possess the bodies in front of them. As previously stated, the romantic lens is shattered when I tell my dancers to come together. The audience cannot use that

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moment to reinforce idyllic heteronormative ideals about how men and women should interact. I also tell the dancers when to get dressed. Ian Fraser, the male dancer who helps the others with their on stage costumes change, does not help the women into more clothing out of chivalry, nor does he do it because he is ashamed of their bodies and wants them to go away. He does it because I tell him to. My dominance in this situation has restricted the freedom of the audience to interpret what is in front of them. These parameters manipulate the gaze of the spectator preventing the total consumption of the bodies presented.

In the third section of my dance, my women were completely clothed and they looked directly at the audience. My voice is silent. These women were almost in the exact same position as the bride in Sacred and Profane Love, except my dancers were in motion. Thus they did not relinquish their power. At any time they could look away. This is a luxury the woman in Sacred and Profane Love does not have. Additionally, during this section, the dancers were at liberty to move in the way they wished. I made suggestions as the choreographer, but I did not superimpose my artistic vision over the views of the individuals. I gave them a choice. My dancers could move provocatively or in a completely ambiguous manner. They could heighten their sexuality or neutralize it. They have not been put into a position by an outside entity. Several of Titian’s figures find a level of freedom in the fourth dimension; however they cannot escape the medium they exist in. One individual has trapped them in oils on a two-dimensional surface, so they can only be as free as he painted them. By making this section improvisation, my dancers and I eliminated the binary between artist and figures. We each brought something to the work and neither had total authority over the situation. By including this element, we subverted
traditional structures. This subversion then encouraged the audience to reexamine my central question: “Are you looking?”

Upon reflection, I believe I took on a lot more than I expected. I thought my concepts went well together, but I feel like I lost some of my original intent. I could not deconstruct gendered power structures and fully analyze the developments of 16th century Venetian painting. Separately, the two are massive subjects that require years of research, and I only had a few months. In the end, I was very proud of my finished product. It encouraged audience members to question what is in front of them. The whole project was far more challenging than anything I had ever attempted before; and it was a good representation of my experience here while here at the University of Colorado Boulder. I am grateful to have had this opportunity for exploration.
Bibliography and Image Gallery


Titian. *Assumption of the Virgin*. 1516-1518. Oil on Panel. 22'8" by 11'10". Venice, Santa Maria Gloriosa dei Frari.

![Assumption of the Virgin](image)


![Bacchus and Ariadne](image)


![Danaë](image)


End of Section I - “Museum”
Dancers- Nathan Christensen, Lily Minkowitz

End of Section I - “The Museum”
Dancers- Brea Graber, Jon Ansell, Sasha Alcott, Ian Fraser, Kaitlyn Lawrence

Beginning of Section II- “Look at Me”
Dancers- Brea Graber, Jon Ansell, Ian Fraser, Sasha Alcott, Kaitlyn Lawrence
End of Section III- “Are You Looking?”
Dancers- Taylor King, Sasha Alcott, Lily Minkowitz, Brea Graber, Kaitlyn Lawrence, Jon Ansell, Dillon Colagrosso