

## When groove is in the art

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Eight artists putting dance in the frame

**Victoria Woodcock** FEBRUARY 21 2024

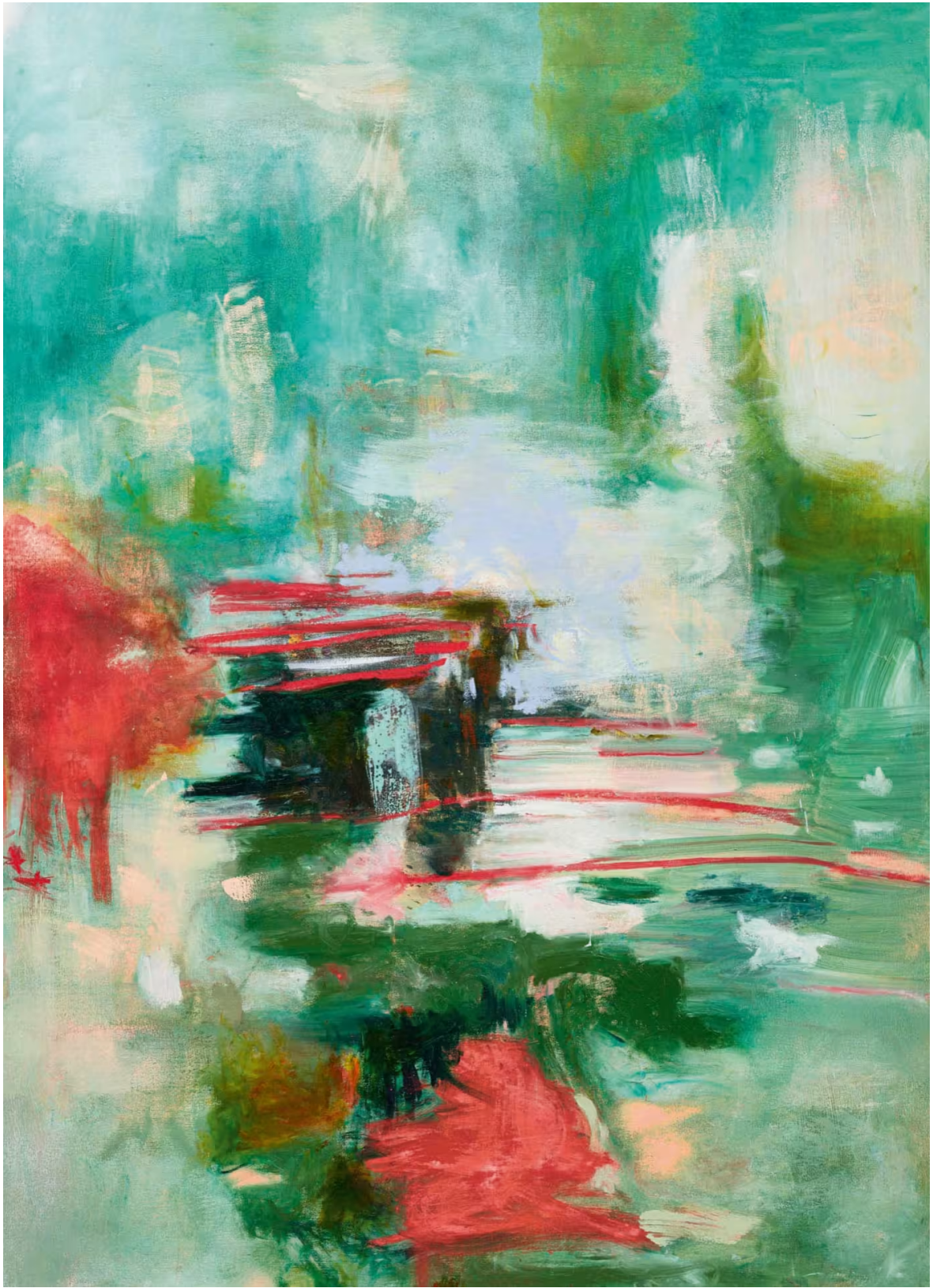
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Deep in the basement of London's Somerset House, in the studio of artist, dancer and choreographer [Florence Peake](#), giant canvases unfurl to reveal a cascade of figures. "The paintings are made with a group of dancers – drawing around bodies, working with line- and mark-making," says Peake. Inspired by her performance at the National Gallery in 2021, the series *Factual Actual* also involves the canvases being "hung up and flung about" and dancers breaking out of frames. It's a vibrant and somewhat tongue-in-cheek take on the crossover between dance and painting, which can be, Peake exclaims, "so cringe! Dance is a really strong theme in the visual arts, but it's often so romanticised – dancing nymphs in the forest, all that kind of thing."



Dance with Mask, 2016, by Ulla von Brandenburg © Courtesy Ulla von Brandenburg and Pilar Corrias, London





Your Wind for my Mirror, 2022-23, by Megan Rooney © Megan Rooney. Courtesy Thaddaeus Ropac gallery. Photograph by Eva Herzog

## RESUME

Everywhere Been There, 2009, by Megan Rooney © Megan Rooney

The artist perhaps best known for committing dance to canvas is [Edgar Degas](#), who obsessively turned out some 1,500 depictions of ballet [dancers](#) between the 1860s and the early 1900s, including bronze sculptures, paintings and pastel drawings. But the enduring symbiosis between the two disciplines takes many forms: from the early-20th-century collaborations between Sergei Diaghilev's Ballets Russes and avant-garde artists such as Henri Matisse, Pablo Picasso and Joan Miró, to the expressive 1970s movement studies by American choreographer and dancer Trisha Brown.

**It can be so cringe –  
dancing nymphs in the  
forest**

Today, the relationship between the two mediums finds fresh expression in figurative portraits: the majestic “imagined” dancers of British painter [Lynette Yiadom-Boakye](#); [Ulla von Brandenburg](#)’s watercolour studies, which she creates alongside theatre-like fabric installations; or the swirling, colourful compositions of [Sophie von Hellermann](#). It also encompasses artist Tosh Basco’s performance collective at the Zürich opera house and her body-capturing images, and the sweeping scenography of American painter Kylie Manning for the New York City Ballet.

## RESUME



“I’ve never been a big ballet fan,” admits Peake, who refers to her interest in dance as less “tutus and lyrical movement”, more “people dancing in DMs”. She started going to street-dance classes and learning Janet Jackson routines in the 1980s: “I was just completely obsessed with the sensation of my body moving through space.” In May, *Factual Actual* opens at Towner Eastbourne gallery. The exhibition and live performances bring together Peake’s formal dance training, her love of “shambolic experimental dance” and the “somatic techniques” pioneered in the US by modern-dance pioneer Joan Skinner.



'Big blue(s)' by Tosh Basco as seen in the Rockbund Art Museum, Shanghai © Yan Tao. Rockbund Art Museum, Shanghai





Dandelion, 2023, by Sophie von Hellermann © Courtesy Sophie von Hellermann and Pilar Corrias, London

Von Hellermann's experience of dance is less structured. "I used to DJ and would make big paintings of people dancing as a backdrop for our parties," says the Margate-based German artist. "It's about the power of the group". Her solo booth with Pilar Corrias gallery at [Frieze London](#) in October, for instance, featured a series of canvases on top of painted walls, while the floor was carpeted in a design based on her brushstrokes. "My dream is to paint a backdrop for an opera," she says.

[Kylie Manning](#)'s scenographic collaboration with choreographer Christopher Wheeldon, meanwhile, "came out of the blue". She recalls how her energetic part-abstract, part-figurative paintings inspired the ballet *From You Within Me*, shown at the New York City Ballet's Spring Gala last year. "We both listened to *Verklärte Nacht*, Arnold Schoenberg's string sextet," says Manning, whose paintings became the backdrops and costumes for the production. "The choreography completed the paintings and the painting completed the choreography."



Little Wild Bouquet, 2023, by Kylie Manning © Kylie Manning/Courtesy of Pace Gallery



Factual Actual II, 2020, by Florence Peake © Florence Peake. Courtesy Richard Saltoun Gallery, London and Rome. Photograph by Ben Westoby

The project has also dovetailed into a new body of work. Gestural studies, drawn live from the ballet rehearsals in graphite, will be shown at Pace’s Hong Kong gallery in March, alongside new paintings “that are not necessarily about the ballet, but incorporate all of the movement, all of the flow and all of the activity from that experience”, she says. “The dance-like activity is the pacing and the speed with which the marks are put down.”



## Five exhibitions to move you

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**Florence Peake,**

***Factual Actual: Ensemble***

[Towner Eastbourne](#), 9 May to 16 June

**Kylie Manning, *Sea Change***

[Pace Hong Kong](#), 25 March to 9 May

**Megan Rooney [Kettle's Yard](#),**

Cambridge, 22 June to 6 October

**Ulla von Brandenburg**

[Pilar Corrias](#) Savile Row, London, 8 March to 13 April

**Xiyao Wang [Massimo de Carlo](#),**

Milan, 27 June to 2 August

In the London studio of [Megan Rooney](#), pace and tempo are constituents of two giant canvases – each more than 4m high – that loom over the space in bold, turbulent swaths. “Every second of the production of the painting is about movement,” says the Canadian artist. Each canvas is built up in multiple layers – “a process of doing and undoing, so it’s almost like the accumulation of hundreds of performances”.

The work of New York-based Cuban-American artist [José Parlá](#), whose show at the Bronx Museum in 2020 was titled *It's Yours* after the hip-hop track by T La Rock with DJ Jazzy Jay, has a very different rhythm. His longtime interest in dance – from salsa to breakdancing – is especially relevant when he works on a large scale, when “the movement is of your entire body”, he says.





Amorphous Waves, 2023, by José Parlá © Courtesy Ben Brown Fine Arts





En l'air No 2, 2023, by Xiyao Wang © Courtesy of the artist and Massimodecarlo

And in Berlin, Chinese artist [Xiyao Wang](#)'s paintings visualise dance as flurries of line and colour; her solo booth with MassimodeCarlo gallery at Frieze London last year was titled *En l'Air*, referencing the ballet positions carried out in mid-air. "All of us are dancing all the time," says von Brandenburg, who will open a solo show in London with Pilar Corrias next month. Rooney, too, draws her inspiration from "watching people", she says. "For me, the whole world is moving to a dance."