

5-20-2012

Grand Arabesque, Second Time

RISD Museum

Julie Strandberg

Brown University, julie_strandberg@brown.edu

Jeff Hesser

Rhode Island School of Design, jhesser01@risd.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.risd.edu/risdmuseum_channel



Part of the [Sculpture Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

RISD Museum; Strandberg, Julie; and Hesser, Jeff, "Grand Arabesque, Second Time" (2012). *Channel*. 8.
https://digitalcommons.risd.edu/risdmuseum_channel/8

This Transcript is brought to you for free and open access by the RISD Museum at DigitalCommons@RISD. It has been accepted for inclusion in Channel by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@RISD. For more information, please contact mpompeli@risd.edu.

My name is Julie Strandberg. I'm the founding director of the dance program at Brown University. I'm also the director and founder of the American Dance Legacy Institute

We're looking at the Edgar Degas *Grand Arabesque, Second Time*.

As a dancer, the first thing I really notice, having seen other works of Degas, is that I really think this looks like a dancer at work, not either a dancer in performance for even a dancer at rest.

This is not like the complete position of an Arabesque, as her back knee is slightly bent and the elbows are slightly different. It looks like she's really struggling to find the position, rather than either performing it or even rehearsing it. Rather, it's something that she's still trying to figure out.

It's not like an erotic nude. She could almost be in a tight unitard or something. So it's really more about revealing the body and the work that she's doing.

From the front, you get more of a sense of how hard it is to stand on one leg. This is not something that people do all the time. It's one of the challenges of dancing is figuring out how to align your body, because we're not designed to stand on one leg. So what do you have to do and where do you have to place all of the weight?

The thing that I talk about in classes a lot is balance, whether it's on two feet or one leg. It's this incredible connection with gravity. I actually talk about it in fairly spiritual terms. It's this infinite vertical energy that goes from the heavens through the center of the earth. When you're in balance, you're actually connecting to those energies. There are also horizontal energies. In a sense, in this sculpture, her legs and her arm are beginning to reach into one level of energy. The left arm is into another one, and then the vertical is a different one. So balance is actually this sort of convergence of all these energies. When you actually are in balance, you feel nothing. It's like there's no effort. That's why I don't think she's quite in balance yet in this moment, because there's more effort than there would be if she had found it. I don't think she's found it yet. I think she's trying to find that moment when all those energies are giving her this sense of peace.

I think one of the things I would like people to do when they see this sculpture, even if they don't think of themselves as dancers, would be just to try to actually replicate the position, and experience what it's like to try to organize your body around one leg, and to really tune into what that feels like rather than thinking of it as a final destination. What is the work process of trying to find your balance on one leg, and not just the final position?

My name is Jeff Hesser. I've taught at RISD since 2002 in the Division of Foundation Studies, the Illustration department, and also in the Sculpture department. Today we're going to be looking at Edgar Degas's *Grande Arabesque Second Time*.

Degas's sculptures for the most part, except for one of them, were sculptures that he never exhibited or perhaps even intended to exhibit. They were some really private acts of creation that were just found in his studio after he died. So because of that, a lot is not unknown about their creation.

Although we know from a lot of other aspects how Degas worked that the sculptures weren't done from direct observation, but rather from a combination of referencing drawings that he had done from observation and photographs, and from memory.

Sometimes he worked in clay, but most of these individual sculptures he did were wax or a kind of wax composite. Many of them were in real states of disrepair when they were found in his studio after his death, and then they were cast in bronze. So if you look closely at the sculpture, you can really see those individual bits of wax, especially in the hair as they were kind of put on as he was working.

There's a really clear three-dimensional volume of space that's being defined by this sculpture. It's a volume of space that exists below the sculpture. We could find another volume of space that her extended left leg is defining.

This is a really good example of the ways in which Degas wasn't just sculpting three-dimensional forms out of wax. He was also sculpting three-dimensional forms out of air.