



# Large drawing from dancers series

Isabel Rawsthorne

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## Not on display

**Title/Description:** Large drawing from dancers series

**Artist/Maker:** Isabel Rawsthorne

**Born:** 1967 c.

**Measurements:** Framed: h=720, w=925, d=30

**Accession Number:** 50699

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This charcoal drawing of two dancers is one of hundreds of drawings of ballerinas Isabel Rawsthorne (1912-92) completed in the 1950s and 60s. The composition is dominated by a dancer in an arabesque pose, leaning forward with one leg raised behind her. To the far left of the picture, another dancer stands upright with a raised leg. Three walls are articulated behind the figures, although the space remains somewhat ambiguous, with diagonal planes of charcoal creating shafts of light or shadow being cast across the room.

Rawsthorne often worked from life and, while designing sets and costumes at the Royal Opera House, was given unprecedented access to the company's rehearsal rooms. The dancers became Rawsthorne's main life models between 1952 and 1969 as she executed hundreds of these 'portraits in motion', as she called them. [1] She quickly sketched the forms of the dancers in charcoal and, sometimes, would work these studies up into paintings or larger drawings, such as this one.

Rawsthorne exhibited several of these works in 1986 and wrote a short essay on her artistic intentions for these works. [2] It is clear that her interest is in the flesh and bone of the dancers writing that, "it is important to be aware of the skeleton beneath the form, the underlying discipline of the action". [3] This, perhaps, explains the articulation of edges rather than planes in her depictions of dancers. We do not see the fleshy softness of skin but brittle lines which articulate an empty void within the figures.

Equally, however, Rawsthorne is interested in the humanity behind the anatomy. She wrote, "to see the touching of hand and hip and shoulder [...] is to feel an intense sympathy for the body, as though, by showing us its strength and suppleness, we are called upon to consider it as vulnerable, a fragile being with a brief existence". [4] Here, as in other movements of Rawsthorne's work, we see the artist exaggerating the living being of her subject by juxtaposing it with its own inanimate qualities.

This is significant as it shows an attempt to resolve the phenomenological problem that plagued her close associate, Alberto Giacometti: how to depict living presence. Rawsthorne's approach shares some characteristics of Giacometti's, in particular the interest in the enclosed spaces her subjects occupy. She writes "[I]t is essential to the art of classical dancing that it should be enacted in a confined space. The limits of the studio or stage put the spectator at a certain distance." [5] This ability of the enclosed space to maintain a distance from the figure echoes Jean-Paul Sartre's arguments for how Giacometti resolves the problem of recreating the experience of the encounter. [6] Rawsthorne disagreed with Giacometti's opinion, however, that "it was impossible to make a portrait in motion". [7] We may, therefore, see this series an attempt to resolve a problem Giacometti set out, through the exact methodology he claimed was impossible to employ.

Georgia Kelly, April 2023

[1] Suzanne Doyle, *Isabel Rawsthorne 1912-1992: Paintings, Drawings and Designs* (Harrogate: The Mercer Art Gallery, 1997). Exhibition Catalogue, p. 39.

[2] Isabel Lambert, "A world of movement" in *Dancers in Action: Drawings, Paintings, Stage Designs* (London: The October Gallery, 1986). Exhibition catalogue. Note that Isabel Lambert is the name under which Isabel Rawsthorne exhibited.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Jean-Paul Sartre, "The Paintings of Giacometti" (1954) and "The Quest for the Absolute" (1948) in *Essays in Aesthetics*, ed. Baskin, Wade (Freeport, NY: Books for Libraries Press, 1963), pp. 46-59 and 82-90.

[7] Rawsthorne's autobiographical notes in the Tate Archive, TGA 9612.2.4, (London: Tate Gallery Archive) p. 1.

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## Further Reading

Suzanne Doyle and Karen Southworth, *Isabel Rawsthorne 1912-1992: Paintings, Drawings and Designs* (Harrogate: The Mercer Art Gallery, 1997). Exhibition Catalogue.

Carol Jacobi, *Out of the Cage: The Art of Isabel Rawsthorne* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2021).

Isabel Lambert, "A world of movement" in *Dancers in Action: Drawings, Paintings, Stage Designs* (London: The October Gallery, 1986). Exhibition catalogue.

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