

# Anna Carlisle interviews artist Jack Bullen

Jack Bullen lives and works in London. He grew up in Suffolk with an Army Officer for a father and a dancer for a mother. Despite lacking the discipline to join the army or the rhythm to become a dancer both remain major influences on his work.

*You graduated in Fine Art last year from City & Guilds of London Art School. Did you discover an interest in Laban's work during your degree course?*

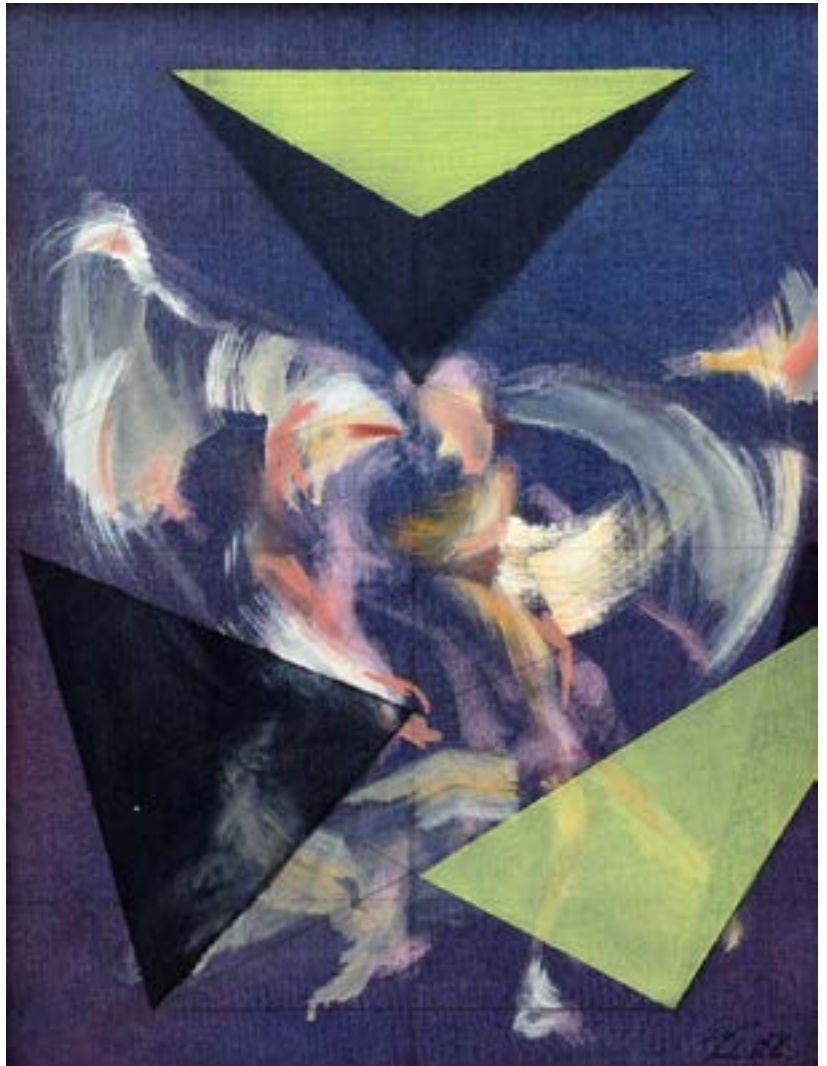
Naturally art school encourages the development and exploration of areas of interest and inspiration, but initially my interest in Laban stemmed from my mother who was a contemporary dancer. I remember looking through her notes when she was doing the Phoenix course and being fascinated by the way in which people moved gave an insight into their characters and emotions. However, it wasn't until City & Guilds that I was able to develop this interest into an area of attention pertinent to my practise. I was also lucky enough to live close to Walli Meier, who encouraged and inspired a greater interest in and understanding of Laban's work and mentored me in a sense.

*What particular movement concept/theories sparked your interest as a visual artist?*

Historically, many artists have been drawn towards the portrayal of movement, notably the Futurists, who looked to interpret the speed and dynamism of the modern age. However, what intrigued me most about Laban's work was his theory on effort quality. I not only wanted to portray movement, but describe the way in which we move. To describe the *type* of movement - not only the gestural marks, but the weight, speed and direction the movement entails - and how this transfers on to the canvas.

*I see the influence of Laban's spatial and dynamic theories transcribed within your paintings, and it is clear that you have developed more than a superficial understanding of choreutics (maps/scaffolds/trace forms) and changing dynamic qualities. How did this come about?*

In all honesty my early work contained very little understanding of the spatial elements involved and it was a matter of trial and exploration. Further work with Walli Meier gave me a much greater insight and tool. As I continued to work with graduates of Trinity Laban Conservatoire of Dance, I was able to discuss their relation to the space around them and physically move around the space with them, asking questions, taking stills etc., giving me a greater insight. This is an



ongoing exploration and I am continually visiting new approaches.

*You say in your biography that you lack a sense of rhythm; I speculate that you may consider that you aren't a good mover or dancer. Yet I see much movement and rhythm in your paintings. Perhaps you dance when you paint?*

Yes because I'm trying to describe the way in which the dancers move, so the movement has to be gestural and the only way to interpret that on to the canvas is to have an understanding of the rhythm, timings etc., so I work with a sense of rhythm – whether different from other people's I don't know! The gestural marks are so important in describing the movement and the only way to really create an authentic mark in this sense is to replicate the movement. It's down my arm, on to the paintbrush and then on to the canvas. It's a direct trace of the movement I create.

*You also work in conjunction with practicing dance artists and choreograph pieces that are used as a visual stimulus for a series of mono prints and paintings.*



is there first but the painting is constantly evolving and redeveloping with free flowing marks and the focus is the movement itself. Later on I look to re-establish the framework for the movement to take place. It is a relatively new way of working for me, I'm constantly learning and developing, and I think the exploration of Laban's work and translating a painting which is often free flowing or spontaneous, into a grid, have been echoed in the more methodological approach I've adopted towards this work.

*I understand your interest in the dynamic body in space has been a feature of your work for some time now. Does this theme have strong potential in your imagination for exploration and development in future work?*

Yes of course. My work is a continual exploration and every new piece of work unearths new possibilities. My latest project looks to further develop links between painting and dance. Using William Blake's paintings of Paradise Lost as a point of reference, I hope to work alongside a group of dancers and create a series of short dance pieces based on each painting – thus using dance as a way of transcribing an image. I will then create series of prints and large paintings based on the movements of the dancers whilst in constant dialogue with the original paintings. The finished works will then be displayed together exploring the relationship between the paintings and the performance they were inspired by.

See more on Jack's website: [www.jackbullen.com](http://www.jackbullen.com)

*Can you give some of your examples for your working methods with the dancer?*

I've been very lucky to work with such a creative and receptive group of dancers. I try and give them as much free range as possible, working within a concept. We've recently been transcribing paintings so we will analyse and dissect the structure of a painting, looking at the levels, shapes and spaces within the work. The dancers then produce short sequences in response to aspects of the visual narrative which I then work with to create my own images. I am looking for movement that will translate on to the canvas, where the composition is interesting to a viewer looking at a 2D fixed image. It has been an evolving process for all of us and we've explored a variety of inspirations. My first work choreographing for instance was an interpretation of a scene from *The Iliad* – readdressing the classical scenes from art history.

*Is it possible to describe your ways of working/thinking when you begin a painting?*

*Does the geometry come first and then the abstraction - figures and movement, or have you experimented with an unfolding of the geometry from the figures?*

I'm looking initially at sections of the movement that lend themselves to an interesting composition. This is developed through multiple sketches and constant revisiting. I work out the direction of the movement and where it situates itself within the grid. So when I begin painting, I have these reference points. I tend to have drawn the grid on my canvas, so the grid