

Art in the Campus Landscape

Elizabeth H. Simmons

October 22, 2017

This weekend, my first spent entirely on the U.C. San Diego campus, I experienced the transformative power of art through a stunning performance by the Patricia Brown Dance Company, presented by ArtPower.

On one level, the sequence of pieces transformed the social dynamics of the audience.

Initially we sat silently in formal rows of folding chairs on a clipped Revelle College lawn, stratified by proximity to the “stage” and passively watching the dance. Then the performers beckoned us to move with them toward the Stuart Collection’s *La Jolla Project*, affectionately referred to as “Stonehenge”. Strata loosened, as we clustered to follow different performers, setting up our chairs where and near whom we pleased. By the time we moved to the Breezeway between Bonner and Mayer Halls, we had abandoned the structure imposed by chairs and formed a flexible chattering cohort pivoting to watch the performers arranged high above us on the buildings’ walkways.

At a deeper level, I found the pieces transformed my relationship to the campus landscape through the questions they raised.

Figure 8 led me to ponder the nature of synchronization: How precisely must events align in time and appearance for us to experience them as synchronized? How does this impact our perception of movements as robotic rather than organic? The backdrop for this piece was a huge twin-trunked eucalyptus — which, now seems to be asking me: am I one tree or two? Where does the boundary lie?

Group Primary Accumulation utterly changed my view of Stonehenge. I’d first encountered its stone forms on a summer walk with Provost Paul Yu: silent, still, frozen in the serene green space. But juxtaposed with the dancers, I can now see the sculpture as a snapshot of motion, just as its Neolithic namesake marks the stately progressions of the celestial bodies.

The *Leaning Duets* and *Falling Duet* meditations on trust called to mind our educational mission. How can we support our students – and get them to support one another – as fully as the dancers did their partners? How can we make our campus a landscape in which students feel safe enough to experiment, stretch, and grow?

Finally, *Roof Piece* nudged aside my previous impression of the Breezeway as sterile and a bit forlorn. Henceforth, when I pass through *en route* to a physics seminar, I will recall the dancers’ scarlet garb and dramatic movements, their signaling to one another high above our heads like reflected beams of ruby laser light. And I will remember the day I first felt like part of the U.C. San Diego campus landscape myself, thanks to the power of art.