

## Film Review *Ad Parnassum – Purapurawhetū* by Daniel Belton (New Zealand)

Claudia Rosiny

Daniel Belton's latest 30-minute dance film, *Ad Parnassum – Purapurawhetū*, had its World Premiere at The Arts Centre Christchurch Te Matatiki Toi Ora for Matariki Festival as an expanded cinema outdoor projection installation in 2022 and was re-created for the summer 2023 exhibition at Gallery OUT of PLACE in Nara, Japan. Originally the film was planned to be a live work. Due to the pandemic, production schemes were changed. The filmic format that *Ad Parnassum - Purapurawhetū* set now shows a unique signature in its artistic construction that combines movement, music, and graphic artistry. With a background in both dance and filmmaking, Belton and Good Company Arts, based in Dunedin, New Zealand, have crafted their own cinematic experience. Their way of creating choreography for the screen is different from that of many dance films in that they use the two-dimensional screen instead of shooting, for example, in outdoor locations. However, Daniel Belton works with few camera movements to create depth—the screen is his canvas. As a flat 2D-work, *Ad Parnassum - Purapurawhetū* alludes to spatial depth in scenography design and offers multiple scenes through which the digitally recorded dancers move.

*Ad Parnassum - Purapurawhetū* unfolds as a visual poem, in which the use of animation adds a layer of surrealism to the narrative, blurring the lines between reality and fantasy. The film is a collaboration between Belton's direction and the music composed by Gillian Whitehead. The title, *Ad Parnassum*, refers to the famous painting of the same name by Swiss artist Paul Klee, known for its rich symbolism and intricate details. Daniel Belton saw it ten years ago at Bern's Kunstmuseum. The picture from 1932, painted in the pointillist style, shows an abstract mountain. Klee painted it after a trip to Egypt and its pyramid shape is also reminiscent of Mount Niesen in the Bernese Oberland. Belton draws inspiration from Klee's work, like the motif of the orange sun next to the triangular mountain, using it as a springboard for his own artistic journey. In responding to Paul Klee's painting, where patches of color (his pointillist-like brush marks) emit subtle grid cells forms, Belton created his own cells as handheld props which were used by the dancers as a choreographic device to suggest flight, and the movement of wings. The objects were designed to relate to key linear aspects of Paul Klee's *Ad Parnassum*. And this supports that the dancers become part of a shared visual and digital language. The use of animation, created by Jac Grenfell, adds this extra layer: the cross-like motion graphics also draw inspiration from tukutuku Māori weaving techniques.

Daniel Belton, together with his partner Donnine Harrison, chose nine dancers that refer to the Muses of Antiquity, as well as Māori Goddesses. Both of their backgrounds in contemporary dance shine through in the intricate and fluid movements. Knowledge of Māori folklore amongst the team linked their research to the mythology of the 9 Muses of ancient Greece. The latter occupy a distinguished position in Greek culture, as beauties and as embodiments of music, song, dance, poetry, history, astronomy, tragedy, harmony, and love. In Māori mythology, there are also the nine stars of Matariki. Pōhutukawa, mentioned in the title of the work, connecting Matariki to those who have passed from the physical world and who is the star that carries the dead across the year. So, the *Ad Parnassum - Purapurawhetū* project refers to the Mediterranean and to the Muses of Antiquity. Bauhaus artist Paul Klee alluded to the mythical home of the Muses, to Mount Parnassus, which was regarded for many years as a metaphor for perfection in art.

In some passages it remains unclear whether the dance formations are graphically duplicated in post-production or represent the whole group. This impression is reinforced by the two-dimensionality of the images and Belton's artistic play with proportions between dancers and animations. The long white robes

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and the movement style can be seen reminiscent of the early modern dance of Isadora Duncan. And yet the screen is not a stage, but allows for layers, different levels of perspectives that can mirror each other.

The film's music, composed by Gillian Karawe Whitehead and performed by the New Zealand String Quartet, is an integral element of the experience. Whitehead's contribution to the work combines a classical string quartet with taonga pūoro, the traditional musical instruments of the Māori people, and embraces significant indigenous elements. The strong relation between the dancers' movements and the music that underlines the atmosphere of the whole work is a testament to the meticulous attention paid to all details of the film's production.

After *Line Dances* (2013), in which Daniel Belton explored the concept of digital line drawings, transforming the dancers into moving, living lines on a canvas and *Time Dance* (2012), in which he continued the exploration of the interplay between movement and time, *Ad Parnassum - Purapurawhetū* is a visual treat: Daniel Belton's personal style is again characterized in this work by simplicity, slowness and traces of movement already used in his other works. In *Ad Parnassum - Purapurawhetū* the reduced use of color and graphic [MOU2] [CR3] animations and lines further deepens its connection to Klee's painting. Belton's keen eye for composition is on full display, turning every frame into a work of his unique screen dance art. Even if individual artistic approaches such as the strobe effects are reminiscent of *Pas de Deux* (1968) by Norman McLaren, rotoscoping animation such as *Anchors Aweigh* (1945) by George Sidney, or the works of Kathy Rose since the 1980s, Belton has created his own, almost abstract-painterly style in his dance films, which fits well with the works of Paul Klee, whom he appreciates. The film won among others an award as best Art/Dance Film at Athens International Art Film Festival in 2023 and was winner for Best Female Composer at Paris' Elles - Women Composers Festival in 2023 [MOU4].

The film can be seen on the company's Vimeo account: <https://vimeo.com/770632708> [MOU5]

### Biography

Dr. Claudia Rosiny has been responsible for the performing arts at the Federal Office of Culture, Bern, since 2021, and was previously responsible for dance and theatre from 2012. In addition, she teaches and publishes, among others: *Tanz Film, Intermediale Beziehungen zwischen Mediengeschichte und moderner Tanzästhetik*, Bielefeld: transcript 2013, *Zeitgenössischer Tanz. Körper, Konzepte, Kulturen*, Bielefeld: transcript 2007. Recently she was a jury member at the Cinedans Festival 2024 in Amsterdam. She finished theatre, film and television studies in Cologne and Amsterdam and completed her doctorate at the University of Bern with a thesis on video dance, published as: *Videotanz. Panorama einer intermediären Kunstform*, Zurich: Chronos, 1999. She directed the dance festival Berner Tanztage from 1991 to 2007 and established a forum for media and design at the Kornhaus Bern from 1998 to 2007. After a fellowship stay in New York City in 2008-2009, she was a consultant and project manager at the Swiss Dance Archive, now SAPA (Swiss Archive of the Performing Arts), from 2009 to 2012.