

Dance as a Visual Language

*In water's hush, I cast my weight,
An anchor to the fleeting state.
I grip the earth, deny the drift,
Hold fast against the silent shift.*



Figure 1 Kayla Nortier, *Dance as a Visual Language*, 2025

Kayla Nortier

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INTRODUCTION



Since childhood, I had a fascination with non-verbal communication. When I started taking dance classes I saw it as just another fun activity. I later realised that movement can become a form of communication by expressing emotion, intention, and meaning. In contrast to verbal language, which is structured and fixed, dance felt like it is deeply connected to how the body has the ability to express what cannot be said out loud. My artwork derived from that fascination, exploring how dance can be reimagined as a visual language; one that can be read, written, and preserved through signs and symbols.

The body is not just a performer of movement; it is a lexicon of gestures carrying cultural, emotional, and psychological weight (Singleton 2016:1). My artwork focusses on three different dance styles namely Ballet, Contemporary Dance, and Hip Hop, each of them has different expressive features. Ballet represents the Western tradition of discipline and structure (Carter 1998:22). Contemporary Dance represents self-expression and rebellion. Hip Hop expresses rhythm, authenticity, and resistance that is born in Black urban culture (Dyson 2004:61). My artwork explores the possibility of how movement itself can be a means of expression by extracting poses from each dance style and turn them into visual forms.

In the current digital age where most communication takes place over screens, the body is absent from expression. My artwork places the body back at the centre, as dance is being translated into visual forms, through inkblots, animation, embroidery, photography, and a self-made alphabet, asking viewers to interpret gestures as meaningful signs. It is both personal and theoretical because it reflects my experience as a dancer while incorporating semiotics, phenomenology, and embodied cognition to frame movement as a communicative system.

Figure 2 Kayla Norbier, *Dance as a Visual Language*, 2025

INSPIRATIONS

Ryan Woodward's animation *Thought of You*, consist of figure drawing inspired by contemporary dance that tells a visual story. The essence of movement and rhythm is captured without relying on literal words in order to tell a story (Rignas n.d). This approach reinforces the idea that using gestures can carry emotional and narrative weight. This aligns with my own animation where each dance pose is interpreted via an inkblot that fluidly morphs into a new form equal to a dance move. Similar to Woodward, my work conveys the ability to convey meaning through movement rather than with verbal communication.

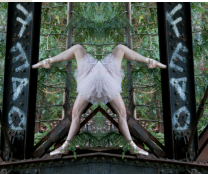


Figure 4 Alina Sotskova, *Ghost of Rorschach*, n.d



Figure 3 Ryan Woodward, *Thought of You*, 2010

Alina Sotskova's *Ghost of Rorschach* series, translates the format of the Rorschach inkblot test to emotionally loaded fields of images. The inkblots made from each dance style is influenced by the way in which Sotskova engages with psychological perception and mirrored abstraction. Sotskova's choice in inkblots as a medium inspired my own artwork as I am using inkblots for its fluidity that reference fluid dance movements.

CONTEXT AND CONCEPT

Dance as a Visual Language is a transformation of gesture into symbols through a single visual narrative. Dance as a Visual Language is developed as a unified body of work.

I derived poses from each dance style; Ballet, Contemporary Dance, and Hip Hop. These poses are based on expressive clarity, emotional tone and iconic associations. The poses were turned into Rorschach-style inkblots, using black paint on folded white paper to create a mirrored image. This process introduced the medium of inkblot.

My second approach consists of a frame-by-frame 2D animation. The animation interprets the dance poses by morphing them via inkblots into new forms emerging from the dance poses. This process is repeated six times. The animation is thus created as a loop of continuous movements, emphasising the repetitive nature of dance, illuminating its transformative and interpretative qualities.





In my third approach I revisit the idea of inkblots by re-creating them on black fabric with white paint. I used yarn to embroider geometric shapes onto the fabric; each shape and colour are coded to a specific dance style.

My fourth approach consists of revisiting each still frame from my animation in order to find shapes and morphs to re-create them using my own body through photography.

My final approach consists of focusing on language. I went through each still frame of my animation, again, in order to find out if I could identify shapes or morphs that can be visually represented. I created my own original alphabet, assigning each shape to a word that can be associated with movement, emotion, and psychology. I created 26 poems that are an extension of the movement alphabet in poetic forms. The poems are constructed around each letter of my alphabet and their corresponding words, thus translating dance gestures into words.

All together, these forms explore how movement can pass from the body into abstraction and back again, preserving it as a system of communication.

The theoretical framework is a combination of semiotics, phenomenology, and embodied cognition. Signs and symbols convey meaning as evidenced in my work when gestures are turned into inkblots and geometric shapes that are turned into signs (Johansen et al. 2014:3). Phenomenology partly suggest that the body is also an embodiment of perception and meaning (Merleau-Ponty 2012:236). This embodied experience is evident in my re-creation of movement of the body through photography. Embodied cognition suggest that our thoughts, language, and understanding is shaped by the way we physically experience the world (Shapiro 2019:1-2). By treating the body as the main site of knowledge and communication, turning gestures into visual symbols such as creating an alphabet, my artwork shows how the body writes and remembers meaning.

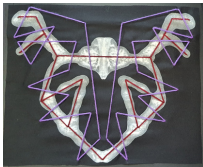


Figure 7 Kayla Nortier, *Dance as a Visual Language*, 2025

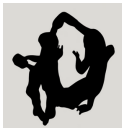


Figure 8 Kayla Nortier, *Dance as a Visual Language*, 2025



Figure 9 Kayla Nortier, *Dance as a Visual Language*, 2025

METHODS AND MATERIAL PRACTICE

The choices of medium was not merely chosen for its visual characteristics but for what it reveals regarding the relationship between dance, memory, and communication. The choice was also made with the question in mind: how can movement be preserved and translated as language?

Inkblots provided a way to capture movement as still image, frozen in time. This is an expressive medium that connects the body and the psychological, suggesting that dance can be both physical and interpretive.

Animation emphasises transformation and continuity. It allowed me to depict the transition between one pose to another, while reflecting the flowing rhythm of dance. This medium reveals the 'in-betweens' of how dance is experienced that are sometimes lost when captured as still images.



The textile geometric shapes serve a metaphor that references the tension between freedom and structure. By incorporating repeated geometric shapes over the inkblots, the idea that choreography can be patterned and improvisational is introduced. In a way, geometry becomes a visual tool for interpreting rhythm, style, and identity, and communicating in a particular or specific manner.

The re-embodied photography brought the body back from abstracted forms, thus serving as a reminder that dancing is not only symbolic but personal and physical. It brings back the element of presence.

The alphabet and poems turned my artwork into a visual lexicon, where words are not just spelled out, but also seen, felt, and interpreted through form.

*Navigate the unknown dunes,
Where impulse fades and reach defines.
From pulse to quiver, wordless times.
A language from the body bled.*



Navigate

Figure 11 Kayla Nortier, *Dance as a Visual Language*, 2025

*Drift through shadows, open wide,
Navigate the fault inside.
Met the sky with tower's hush,
Impulse trailing in the rush.*



Drift

Figure 12 Kayla Nortier, *Dance as a Visual Language*, 2025

CONCLUSION

Dance as a Visual Language is an attempt to show how our bodies are potential tools for alternative means of communicating beyond verbal language. It suggests that the body itself is an alternative language tool – a visual, symbolic, and emotional one that is often overlooked. My artwork creates new opportunities to think about communication as fluid, intuitive, and deeply rooted in the physical experience. This is made possible by turning dance moves into communication signs and symbols. These translations keeps movement alive. The challenge viewers to see the communication where it is so easily missed and to think about the fact that the size of language is always bigger than the alphabet we are passing on.

*Unravel soft the anchor's thread,
Drift from thoughts once left unsaid.
Knot by knot the silence grows,
A language lost that no one knows.*



Figure 13 Kayla Nortier, *Dance as a Visual Language*, 2025

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Kayla Nortier



I am a South African artist based in Pretoria, Gauteng. I love using my artistic skills through a range of media, including drawing, animation, mixed media, and bookmaking. I am passionate about creating art that connects with people on both a visual and emotional level, and I am always open to experimenting with new methods and approaches.



kaylanortier@gmail.com



kaylanortier.art

