When Dancing the Senses, Sometimes No Explanation Is Required

"Perceptual Motion," the new work presented by Battery Dance Company, is about the five senses. During its course, we're clearly told this — in writing. Typed definitions and scientific descriptions of sight, hearing, touch, taste and smell appear on a screen at the beginning of each section; there's a particular pleasure in finding that there's no dumbing down in the way information is stated. Words like "somatosensory" and "mechanoreceptor" are part of the script, and at the matinee I attended on Friday at 3LD Art & Technology Center the audience responded with complete attention throughout because of the work's serious intelligence.

A number of basic questions arise from such a work. We can all name aspects of the senses, but can we dance them? If a dance abstracts or lyricizes aspects of a sense, how does the audience know what the dance is about? Must a certain amount of literal gesture be employed? And regardless of whether the dance illustrates its subject matter, is it good as a dance?

The answers to these questions kept changing during the course of this 88-minute work, which was choreographed by the company's five main dancers — Rebekah Carroll, Missy Boe, Bahia Solomon Matea, Carmen Nicole Smith and Sean Scallen — each making one section. I confess that I was dreading Snell, which came last. Were the dancers going to keep stuffing one another? Yet this proved to be one of the most entertaining parts of the performance, where each of its three sections began with a dancer walking through the audience with a spray can, while the words "Please Inhale" appeared on the screen. It didn't matter that most of us couldn't detect a scent; re-stage the section started with a flying lift in which the dancer's legs — parted wide and kicking responsively in opposite directions — suggested intense sensual responsiveness. No dancer ever smiled stuffing or inhaling; no such explanation was required.

The expressive methods kept changing. The Sight section (the first) began with one woman who was blindfolded. As she felt her way to a male partner, the dancer was physically close to being blindfolded the entire time. But, when blindness are removed, the contrast of feeling was unmistakable.

The solo with which Mr. Scallen's Twice was irresistible. Fast, ebullient, pulsating, rhythmic, it covered space and used every part of the body. What on earth it had to do with taste was a problem I kept shaking in the back of my mind. A delight in its own right, this was the dance that I would most want to see again. Each sense though had passages that were bland and which seemed equally unconnected to their subject matter. Fortunately this never mattered for long; every so often something would bring us back to the theme.

Battery Dance Company, which does much work connected to education, travels extensively; last week's performances provided a tour of Brazil and Sardinia. The changes of scale, pace and tone in "Perceptual Motion" all expressed a keen instinct for holding an audience's attention. Of the cast, the two men, temperamentally very dissimilar, are the most natural stage animals. Mr. Matea's manner is contemplative; Mr. Scallen's is extroverted, but both have easy-stage authority and full-sounding dancing. The Joan Ms. Carroll seems always central: In ensembles she's the one with the surest sense of a phrase's shape and rhythm, but as a soloist her manner tends to be conscientious rather than personal.

In a few parts they were joined by five guest dancers; the scale varied between solos and duets and larger ensembles. The collage of taped music ranged from classical to techno-rock. One problem was that little of the music was particularly interesting in its own right; a more serious one was that few dancers even tried to show what interest might be in the music. Several quartets showed four different solos happening at the same time (always a technical accomplishment worth noting), but it invariably happened in the same tempo, even when the music involves instruments playing at different speeds.

As choreography "Perceptual Motion" was only occasionally of note (Mr. Scallen's Twice solo, the opening of Snell, a few other moments). As a teacherly exercise in how dance can communicate with, and engage, an audience, it was largely successful. I was always grateful for its skill as entertainment while often wishing it were more ambitious as a work of art.