

Nicole Wermers: "Strictly come endurance dancing! Marathon hoofers bring back the age of week-long epics"

By Alice Blackhurst

April 1, 2025



Stay in the game and don't collapse ... part of Marathon Dance Relief in Waterford. Photograph: Nicole Wermers

It was a time of high-octane thrills as cavorting couples put themselves through brutal competitions in the hope of winning the equivalent of a year's salary. Now sculptor Nicole Wermers has brought the dancefloor craze back to life

Marathon Dance Relief, the latest intriguing work by Nicole Wermers, focuses on the Depression-era craze for endurance dancing competitions, mainly in the US in the 1920s and 30s, where cavorting couples put themselves through brutal, sometimes week-long contests in the hope of winning prizes equivalent to a year's salary, if they could be the last ones standing. On show at St Carthage Hall in Lismore, Waterford, Ireland, the work is a departure from Wermers' usual interest in the art of "lounging around". In contrast to her normal languid figures, the subject here is the body when exhausted or taking strenuous exertion.

Cruder class dynamics – the contestants were almost by definition down-at-heel and watched by more affluent audiences – hovered in the background of such spectacles. Although they gathered swift momentum as a low-cost form of high-octane, mass entertainment, their exploitations took a toll on their participants and could, in rare cases, lead to injury and death. Dovetailing with the era's boom in photography and the rise of the American picture magazine, many black and white snapshots attesting to these merciless dancefloors remain in circulation as a sombre archive, showing woozy couples slumped and clutching at each other, holding one another up in the effort to stay in the game and not collapse.

**JESSICA  
SILVERMAN**

621 Grant Avenue, San Francisco, CA 94108  
jessicasilvermangallery.com +1 415 255 9508

*The exhausted partners could, on closer inspection, just as well be figures in a boxing match or worn-out ravers*  
In Marathon Dance Relief, Wermers draws from this repository of material (which also spawned a 1969 film featuring Jane Fonda) to create both a contemporary update on this phenomenon – a precursor to mainstream reality TV formats such as Survivor, I’m a Celebrity ... Get Me Out of Here!, and even Strictly Come Dancing – and a more timeless monument to vulnerable bodies forced to jostle and perform for others.



Crude class dynamics ... Marathon Dance Relief. Photograph: Nicole Wermers

In the form of 10, rectangular grey slabs each featuring a mid-dance couple moulded from air-dried clay and elevated on repurposed bistro tables to create a solid line in the manner of a sculptural frieze, the work combines Wermers’ proficiency in tactile and hand-crafted methods with her fetish for functional objects estranged from their usual utilitarian contexts. Here, the high-shine silver dazzle of a surface more habitually strewn with coffee cups, cigarettes and morning pastries, and folded up to serve as a flat background for a sculptural relief, recalls the artist’s early totem pieces topped with ashtrays; her double-ended teaspoons once commissioned for the Tate Britain cafe; or her shrewd photographic series Croissants and Architecture, which raised the flaky breakfast staple to a worthy artful object.

Wermers is best known for her witty sculptural assemblages of bodies out-of-frame or in repose. Balancing voluptuous, plaster-cast female nudes on hotel cleaning carts or stitching feminine fur coats on to industrial steel chairs, her work since the early noughties has provided a sly commentary on the gendered power dynamics that prop up contemporary urban spaces, and the unseen labour shoved into the storage cupboards of art history. Destabilising traditional sculptural models such as the base, pedestal and plinth, a Wermers piece skews perspectives. Often, it will set out to look down on you.

**JESSICA  
SILVERMAN**

621 Grant Avenue, San Francisco, CA 94108  
jessicasilvermangallery.com +1 415 255 9508



Wermers' 2015 installation Infrastruktur. Photograph: Anita Russo/Rex Shutterstock

She insists on the streamlined focus of her practice and refuses baggy definitions of her work as being “across media”, emphasising that she is a sculptor first and foremost. Yet she also has a way with words, an ear for a catchy title. Marathon Dance Relief refers both to her new work’s physical format – reminiscent, in some ways, of the classical hangings that ornamented walls in ancient Greece and Rome – and the brief pause or relief granted to the taxed contestants she is tracing, typically 15 minutes every hour, spent on beds summoned to the dancefloor.

“Relief” may also evoke the spectator’s moment of expected solace upon entering an exhibition space, but Wermers (as with all her work to date) short-circuits expectations. The piece’s intervention in a former Victorian church hall, complete with a small cluster of stained-glass windows beaming discs of red and blue and yellow coloured light into the building, jars somewhat with the finer details of the delicate clay figures and the urban loucheness of the cafe tables. The work’s positioning on a diagonal axis disrupts the church hall’s traditional harmonious proportions even further, making its curious viewer reassess the arbitrary distinctions between sacred and profane.

Marathon Dance Relief’s enlaced, exhausted partners could, on closer inspection, just as well be figures in a boxing match or worn-out, debauched ravers. Not just men and women, some appear as same gender dancers. Their versatility suggests that Wermers’ true subject here is less endurance entertainment competitions than the doomed waltz of the unit of the couple in society more generally, the absolute necessity and disorienting terror of dependency on another person.

Classical reliefs traditionally feature robust and triumphal figures in a state of sporting prowess or achievement. This piece, Wermers notes, represents a “dance of failure”. Despite this gamble, we keep watching. We remain hopelessly attached.

Marathon Dance Relief is at St Carthage Hall, Lismore Castle Arts, Lismore, Ireland, until 25 May

**JESSICA  
SILVERMAN**

621 Grant Avenue, San Francisco, CA 94108  
jessicasilvermangallery.com +1 415 255 9508