

Claudia Bitrán

Broken over the top

27.10.–09.12.2023

Curated by Kathy Battista

‘Broken over the top’ is an expression coined by the celebrated American choreographer Brian Friedman, who has created iconic music videos for acts including Britney Spears, Cher, Mariah Carey and Beyonce, as well as for reality television shows such as X Factor in the UK. The phrase is used to indicate a hand position—broken meaning bent forward—and typically placed above the head. This pose indicates a second of syncopation, a brief halt in what otherwise would be fluid movement. Occurring at breaking points in the music or moments of repetition, this pose is often combined with hair flips or dancers turning their gazes towards the audience.

Claudia Bitrán, born 1986, is an artist who lives and works in New York. At Marytwo she shows twenty-four charcoal and pastel drawings focused on young dancers seen in moments of maximum, heightened emotion. Most of the artist’s subjects are Instagram celebrities or students of Friedman. Bitrán focuses on contemporary subjects, yet she references a long history of punctuated movement including Bernini’s *Ecstasy of St Teresa* (1647–52); Jean-Léon Gérôme’s *Pygmalion et Galatée* (1890); the mid-nineteenth-century photographs of Charcot’s psychiatric patients; the ballroom Vogue dance craze that brought queer black culture to the forefront; the jumpy editing of film trailers; the rhythms of dubstep and trap music; and the most vulnerable of human actions, such as coughing, vomiting, or fainting.

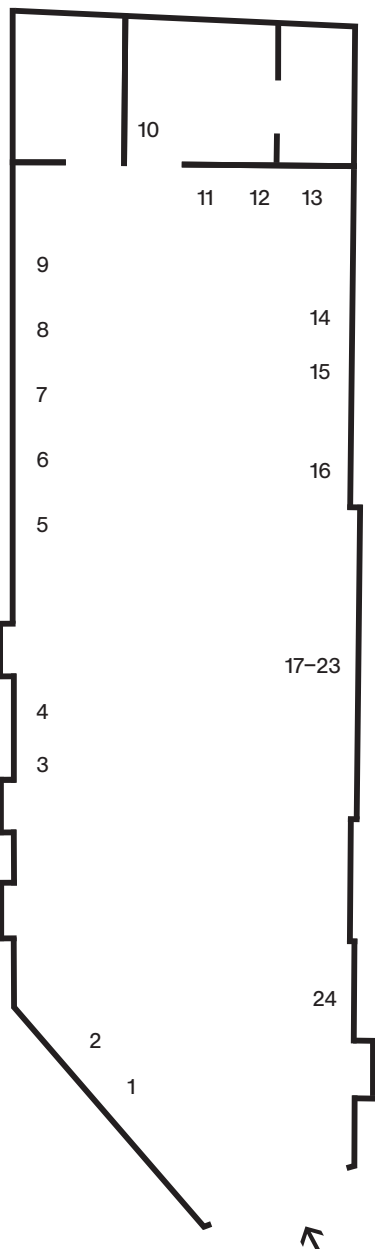
Bitrán’s dancers are each caught in a split-second stasis that marks a shift in their intense activity. They are seen in triumphant liberation, celebrating the axiomatic, joyful nature of dance. These punctuations in choreography echo Claudia Bitrán’s obsession with pop culture, which has seen the artist focus on topics ranging from Britney Spears to her low budget, shot-by-shot recreation of the blockbuster film *Titanic* from 1997. Her exhibition continues her association with Hollywood cinema, which utilizes punctuated shots to drive a narrative.

Bitrán’s choice of medium—charcoal and pastel—may be considered in the legacy of Degas, also known for his paintings of young dancers, and many of his Modernist, Post-Impressionist colleagues. Charcoal and pastel have traditionally been associated with the depiction of female bodies throughout the history of art. In addition, charcoal is essentially a sculptural material, highly malleable, that can be quickly altered, but sometimes resulting in unexpected imperfections. ‘Broken over the top’ is also a metaphor for the hard edge of a broken charcoal or pastel stick, which can provide a variety of effects. Thus, the artist uses historical technique and materials to explore time-based performance, refracting the dancer’s diagonal or contrapposto poses.

Also, in the legacy of modernist artists including Klimt and Whistler, Bitrán has placed her drawings in frames that were hand-painted by her on site. She created each frame color intentionally to echo a gesture from the corresponding drawing, resulting in a unique palette that peppers the exhibition space. As the viewer moves through the space, the pieces come alive, seemingly dancing in a staccato rhythm on the walls. Drawings are hung in groups by format—full length vertical, horizontal, or in three-quarters—or according to the choreography of moves depicted. The bodies call to mind references as diverse as the Belvedere torso, post-Impressionist compositions, performance art, as well as digital photography in the era of social media. The exhibition format intentionally echoes this range, for example a salon style hang that merges landscape and portrait orientation, upright and floor-based bodies, as well as clustered single and group scenes. *Broken over the top* captures our basic human desire to demand attention and capture the spotlight, which grows more challenging as our societies become increasingly complex.

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1, 2 *Dancers 11 / 10, 2023*
 Both 60 x 75 cm

3 *Dancers 22, 2023*
 30 x 24 cm

4 *Dancers 05, 2023*
 40 x 60 cm

5–9 *Dancers 13 / 20 / 16 / 19 / 14, 2023*
 All 75 x 60 cm

10 *Dancers 07, 2023*
 40 x 60 cm

11–13 *Dancers 15 / 17 / 18, 2023*
 All 75 x 60 cm

14 *Dancers 09, 2023*
 40 x 30 cm

15 *Dancers 06, 2023*
 40 x 60 cm

16 *Dancers 08, 2023*
 30 x 20 cm

17–23 *Dancers 01, 2023*
 40 x 30 cm
Dancers 23, 2023
 30 x 24 cm
Dancers 02, 2023
 40 x 50 cm
Dancers 03, 2023
 40 x 50 cm
Dancers 04, 2023
 40 x 50 cm
Dancers 24, 2023
 30 x 24 cm
Dancers 25, 2023
 30 x 24 cm

24 *Dancers 12, 2023*
 60 x 75 cm

Pastel and charcoal on paper, acrylic painted frames