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Shen Wei's colorful 'Undivided Divided' defies our expectation

It was standing-room only for Shen Wei Dance Arts at the Kennedy Center on Thursday night. Except for the dancers, who were lying on the floor.

Sometimes they'd sit up on one hip or lean on one of the plastic cubes nearby. Because the dancers were naked, except for flesh-colored underpants, it was thoughtful of Shen to devise the cubes out of clear plastic. (He created the visual design as well as the choreography.) Even when the dancers hugged the cubes or curled up behind a stack of them, their bodies were never hidden.



Photo © Christopher Duggan

Not that there was any place to hide in the center's atrium, a long, high-ceilinged cavern given white pillars and pale gray floor coverings for this show, so it resembled a loft in SoHo. The dancers were arrayed in rows, each inhabiting a small white square. Before entering, audience members had to remove their shoes and wear cloth galoshes. Then they filed through the atrium to wander around from dancer to dancer, standing mere inches away from all that uncovered flesh, for the 45-minute performance, called "Undivided Divided."

At first, you feel more divided. As in: Okay, got it, it's a living art gallery. And on display are not only human sculptures, but bravery. Consider the topless women (as most of the audience did, with some interest). They're lying there, stonily, under Jennifer Tipton's unforgiving lighting. Eventually, they stand, and lunge and arch backward and careen on their little square of floor, limbs jiggling like wet mops, with all these strangers within arms' reach, staring at

them. These weren't women; they were Amazonian heroines. Not like the rest of us. Not even like the rest of the dancers, shirtlessness hardly amounting to the same kind of exposure for the men.

As you move around the atrium, though, the display of flesh also seems a bit precious. Although we're standing so close, the dancers look past us, expressionless. They're maintaining a zone of privacy, and it seems contrived.

Still, you can't blame them for not rewarding eye contact, vulnerable as they are. With their cold reserve, they force us to consider them as objects. And so, as close as we are, we never get *too* close, physically or even emotionally.

Then the paint comes into play, and everything changes.

Shen Wei, the Chinese-born, New York-based choreographer, was trained in visual arts as well as dance, and he has an affinity for paint. In another work of his, "Connect Transfer," performed here in 2008, the dancers drenched feet and hands in paint and rolled around on floor cloths. Early in "Undivided Divided," you might overlook the small pools of paint that dot many of the squares the dancers inhabit. But suddenly, as the music builds to a roar (an original electronic score by So Percussion), the dancers start smearing themselves with color. One steps onto a square that contains a puddle of red paint and piles of fuzzy black hair; he rolls around, coating himself, until he looks like the Swamp Thing emerging from tomato soup. A man covered in blue and a woman in pink spiral against each other and turn themselves purple.

Sticky and wet, the dancers are twisting and spinning wildly, still in their little spaces but barely. An audience member in an expensive-looking black jacket steps past one of the more crazily bounding dancers just as he's tumbling upside down — uh-oh! But somehow, the dancer halts the trajectory of his wet blue foot; the jacket moves on, unscathed.

The lighting warms and grows more dramatic. No more cold appraisal or distance now. There's a wonderful shift in perspective, and this is the achievement of this piece. You move from objective observation to subjective involvement, brought about by the unleashed energy and the slippery, smeary danger of the paint. You're a little afraid and a little in awe, and maybe even a little envious. It looks like such fun. With the music cresting and colors blooming around you as the dancers whirl and roll, you're in an emotional spin, too.

A fascinating experiment in theater and perception, "Undivided Divided" ends up bringing the big room together. And then the dancers — miraculous creatures who just moments before had been the ringleaders of a kind of ecstatic circus — turn and casually file out. They head to the exit at the back by stepping from one white square to another, avoiding the floor, like little kids walking on stones across a stream.

By Sarah Kaufman of the Washington Post