

THE FIVE POINTS STAR

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UNDIVIDED DIVIDED:

Shen Wei @ Home with ADF @ NC Museum of Art

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A slim man of unusual grace glides silently through the quiet clusters of art-viewers at the North Carolina Museum of Art, pausing here and there to contemplate the work-in-progress spread through galleries filled with artworks that have achieved their ultimate stasis, a safe repose, where they will be seen in the future, and not forgotten to history. In the pristine white galleries of the NCMA's luminous West Building, among towering modern and contemporary works, among German Expressionist paintings, among ancient Greek marbles and vases, dancers on seven-foot-square tiles mix bright wet paint with their bodies. They revel in it, moving slick color around with increasing abandon, in shocking proximity to the museum artworks.



Photo: Grant Halverson, courtesy of ADF

In less than an hour the dancers will be gone, and evidence of their performances eliminated, while the still art will remain.

The man moves in close to the elegantly twisting and folding bodies, then stands completely still, deeply alert. He's silhouetted by the theatrical lighting, and his neat dark head, close-fitted white shirt, and wide navy linen trousers cropped mid-calf form a tri-toned triangle in the large composition of the gallery. Blue suede shoes, thick-soled and strong, ground the triangle.

It's Shen Wei—aesthete, thinker, artist, dancemaker, master of visual spectacle—observing the first performance of a new version of his newest work, *Undivided Divided*, occurring July 17 thanks to a bold collaboration between the NCMA and the American Dance Festival.

Early in the 45-minute work, no music plays, but watching Shen Wei watch his dancers and the small horde of guards and paint-splatter-wipers near them, a song did play in my head: Bob Dylan's nasal voice singing "All along the watchtower, princes kept the view/While all the women came and went, barefoot servants, too." Later, an electronic score by So Percussion (an experimental quartet) begins. It is so cannily matched to Shen Wei's style, that it almost seems as if the music responds to the dancers' movement, as well as drawing movement out of the dancers.

Scaled to fit the NCMA, from the larger version that premiered last winter at New York's Park Avenue Armory, where Shen Wei had spent a year as artist-in-residence, *Undivided Divided* goes way past merely breaking the fourth wall beneath the proscenium. Here, the dancers are relatively confined, spatially, but the audience is freed to move among the dancers—or to stand still, as desired.

Spaced like sculptures along the wide passages and galleries of the museum, each dancer remains discrete on his or her tile, like a painting on a wall, or sculpture on a pedestal. The occasional short leap by a dancer from tile to tile seems like the mental leap one makes between artworks. These tile-like dance squares march down the long galleries, culminating with either a large acrylic box with a pool of paint, or a large acrylic construction involving a tray of paint and a ramp down to a tile. From the far side of these, a view extends back along the meridian of dancers.

Anyone who has watched any Shen Wei Dance Arts performance knows that these are some of the most wondrous practitioners of the arts of motion and stillness. To be able to stand close to these dancers, to hover over them, to have a slicing arm or whipping foot pass inches from your eye, is an extraordinarily thrilling experience. Even more powerful is the realization that you are within the flow of movement of a Shen Wei dance; your motion, random though it may be, has been provoked by the mind of this artist.

It may be the mind of a genius—the MacArthur Foundation has awarded Shen Wei the famous “genius” grant. At any rate, it is a mind that works at many levels simultaneously. Not only does this piece rearrange artist/audience relations, and highlight the ephemerality of dance art, it expresses of the process of creating any art.

During the quiet period at the beginning of the work, dancers enter the galleries carrying clear acrylic cubes, about 12 inches on a side. The bear them like treasures, and set them carefully on the dance squares. Several together are used by one dancer to position or prop another, who balances and rebalances on them through many changes. It looks horribly awkward and at times painful. Gradually the artistic ideas resolve themselves and the blocks clear away. Tentatively, the dancers begin to dab and roll themselves in the pools of waiting paint. Following (or leading) the music, they gradually move with more certainty, and ultimately with ecstatic freedom. (Watching the young man slither and twist in the box of orange made me giddy with pleasure, a pleasure pierced with tenderness for those dips and declivities in the body—the backs of knees, the hollows under the ankle bones, the little basins at throat and clavicle—where no color spread.)

More clearly than in any of the other dances in which Shen Wei has explored the idea of dancer as mark-maker, we can see that the dancer makes the marks, *and* the dancer receives the marks, the drenching color. While making art, the dancer becomes art. It's a delicious paradox that this occurs in an art museum, because no edifice can preserve this art, which lives only in temporal bodies.

At the reception after this hyper-intelligent art happening, Shen Wei said he was “so happy” watching his dancers, and so happy with the “direct simplicity” of the color (which of course wasn't all that simple, having been carefully keyed to nearby paintings), and so happy to be able to present *Undivided Divided* here. Shen Wei came to ADF as a young Chinese student; he founded his company at ADF in 2000, and has returned with new work many times since. Now a global phenomenon, he's based in New York, and tours all over the world, but, he says, “Summer is time for my North Carolina home.”