

Dance Review

## Shen Wei troupe evokes nature, sculpture through motion

By Mary Murfin Bayley  
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The dances of Chinese-born choreographer Shen Wei, performed at Meany Theater this weekend, are strange, otherworldly and at times eerily beautiful. Their originality arises as much from what is left out as what is included. These dancers are not there to express their individuality, sexuality, or to display their athleticism. Instead, they are used like components of a kinetic painting or sculpture. The images evoked on stage are not of humanity, but of nature, underwater worlds, the movement of molecules, the rough surface of tree bark.



ZHEN QIA

Shen Wei Dance Arts dance

Wei, now based in New York, is also a painter and calligrapher and was trained originally in Chinese Opera. The influence of these art forms, and his balancing of Western and Asian approaches, are all evident in his work.

"Rite of Spring," set to a four-hand piano arrangement of Igor Stravinsky's score, was performed on a raked stage painted with swirls of gray and black. It opened with the 11 dancers, also in gray and black, placing themselves onto this canvas, making small adjustments for each new dancer, like individuals on a graph. The rigidly constrained movement of this opening, a ritualized walk with still arms and tiny steps, focused the attention on the whole. The dancers formed an intricate monochromatic sculpture, like light shifting over stone or bark.

Wei, in this "Rite," was not interested in the storyline of a sacrificial victim being danced to death (the original scenario associated with Stravinsky's 1913 composition). Here it was all abstracted movement. However, the ending, with each dancer walking in a tight, circular path, conveyed a contemporary, mechanistic sense of driven frenzy.

"Folding" opened with the dancers moving with the same distinctive walk that opened "Rite," their hands cupped over each hipbone, their feet taking smooth steps. Now, though, the long trailing silks wrapped around their waists made them seem to be gliding along the floor rather than walking. Here the costumes, as in some of the classic dances of multimedia pioneers Alwin Nikolais or Loie Fuller, became an important element of the movement. Men and women wore conelike skullcaps, swelling their heads in a way that emphasized every backward bend or tilt of the head, shoulders and waist.

"Folding" is set to Tibetan Buddhist chants combined with the sweet, repetitious melodies of John Tavener. A hand-painted backdrop of an 18th-century Chinese watercolor depicts fish, and the dancers do seem to be moving in another medium than air. It is an underwater world where the carefully spaced curving trails of skirts suggest the patterns of waves in sand, or another world altogether. Wei, as a choreographer, is an innovator who is finding ways to turn dance into another medium for his art.