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At Jacob's Pillow, Shen Wei is moving all over the 'Map'

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BECKET -- If Shen Wei is driven by any sort of artistic dictum, it must be something like "Keep moving forward." The Chinese-born choreographer is resolutely experimental, amassing a body of works so strikingly original they defy categorization. And each one seems radically different from the others -- distinctive, yet pushing boundaries in different ways, as exemplified by the two works he and his New York-based Shen Wei Dance Arts are presenting at Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival this week.

With his background in traditional Chinese opera and visual art, Shen's creative vision embraces movement, set/costume design, painting, sculpture, calligraphy, even filmmaking. This multidisciplinary approach tweaks an underlying Asian aesthetic with contemporary energy and edge.

For "Map," Shen designed a blackboard-like backdrop filled with mysterious scrawlings that are slightly faded and smudged. The score is Steve Reich's stirring "The Desert Music" for chorus and orchestra, which propels the dancers through a series of what Shen calls "movement maps" that unspool as a brilliant, mesmerizing flow of invention.

In "Rotation Map," the dancers' short repeated phrases have the precision of a well-oiled machine, yet these are so clearly bodies, not pistons. As arms open up and out, rotating all the while, hips sidle, shoulders roll, and feet swivel with a rubbery looseness no mechanical device could match. Slowly shifting patterns reflect subtle changes in the score until the idea of rotation is embodied not just in individual limbs, but entire bodies, then groups of bodies. They turn and dart as one, skimming the stage in great loops like a school of fish.

In "Bouncing Map," the dancers seem to have springs for knees as they spiral to the ground and bound back up. Kathleen Jewett begins "Internal Isolation Map" with a squiggly, off-balance solo that looks like some bizarre organism is whimsically scooting around inside her body, taking over all motor control. Transported to the floor, the solo is an astonishing, elastic blur begging the question, "How can a body do that?"

In fact, all Shen's dancers possess remarkable flexibility and fluidity. If "Map" provides direction for anything, it is to guide the dancers to move with complete abandon toward the discovery of the body's extraordinary potential.

While “Map” unfurls as a stream of perpetual motion, the brand new “Re-” is a study in meditation. Given its Northeast debut Wednesday night, the work evolves with the subtlety and slow deliberation of contemplative ritual. Inspired by Shen’s recent travels in Tibet, it opens with four dancers amidst an abstract design created by tiny pieces of blue and white paper arranged on the floor like a giant mandala. In Tibetan culture, white symbolizes purity and the color blue represents nirvana. The mandala design symbolizes regeneration, which is not considered complete until its destruction by the monk who created it.

In “Re-,” set to a haunting score of traditional Buddhist chants, the dancers gently, methodically destroy the design. With softly weighted walks, slides, lunges, stretches and falls, they move about the space, each swinging arc of the arms and legs sending flakes drifting about the space like snow. By work’s end, they have scattered the paper bits so thoroughly that the colors are mixed -- purity and nirvana have become one.