

Spiritual Intimacy: Shen Wei Dance Arts, Reviewed

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By Irene Hsiao

Undivided Divided, Beijing Olympics' choreographer Shen Wei's installation of 18 dancers, which ran March 21-24, begins in the silent contemplation of dancers in a uniform grid on the floor, each in his or her own body-sized white square, clad in nothing but nude shorts: blank.

They hardly blink as they lie face-up in savasana; even the breath seems slowed. Their first movements seem to take a measure of the small space they occupy: standing and falling, smearing themselves over the surface of their squares, walking with even steps forward and back along the perimeter, as bare as painting with water. They do not move in unison, but begin with similar movements that gradually become more idiosyncratic, clearly responding to predetermined improvisational prompts: leave and return to the floor, move parallel to the side of your square, raise the arm, stick out the tongue.



Every sinew and muscle is exposed to the people in the audience, who stand close enough to feel the air move between dancers and walk about the space at will.

On cue, the dancers move to a neighboring square, where a dollop of paint lies, and immerse themselves, picking up color on every surface of their bodies. A few remain in their new places, spooling themselves with long tufts of hair or climbing over polycarbonate cube towers, developing the dimension and texture of the space. The rest return in pairs, splattering the floor and each other in bi-colored duets before separating to dance alone, becoming more and more frenetic until, suddenly, it is over. The dancers exit, the traces of their movements documented in color. Only the odd hand- or footprint hints at the human origin of these marks.

As in a gallery, the audience does not touch the art. The experience of being present with many people, each engaged in a private experience, is oddly intimate and alienating. Though we the audience are more colorful than the dancers on view, we consent to be invisible, to occupy the dark spaces of the room and tread softly until the lights come up and the canvases are free to be examined.

Conceptually, *Undivided Divided* is simple and coherent. As experience it is visually stunning, a compact 35 minutes of sublime density. Though the theme is reminiscent of Lin Hwai Min's *Cursive* triptych for Cloud Gate Dance Theater, where Lin chooses a spiritual minimalism -- his dancers embodying the impression of ink and still rice paper -- Shen's dancers become the hand and the brush in an interpretation of the writing body that embraces color and voluptuous sensuality.

As such, rather than allude to the timeless, Shen's vision is temporary, almost painful in its evocation of the mortal journey: how we begin, differentiate, and fade, how life leaves marks on us and, to a lesser dimension, how we leave marks on it. His selection of dancers, each perfect in form and athleticism, seems yet another testament to vanitas.