



DANCE | A MODERN MASTERPIECE

By PIA CATTON

Choreographer Shen Wei is brilliant, and his new work, "Connect Transfer," is a modern masterpiece. To miss it is to miss an exhilarating work by one of the most expansive, creative minds in the arts.

Presented as part of the Lincoln Center Festival on Wednesday night, "Connect Transfer" blends contemporary dance with painting and — in a sense — sculpture. The Shen Wei Dance Arts company delivers this potent mix with such soaring artistry that it would be an insult to reduce this company's work to "multimedia." This is art in the fullest sense.

"Connect Transfer" begins with several dancers striking brief, bizarre poses individually or in small groups on a white floor — in silence. But the silence is soon replaced by the shimmering chords of Kevin Volans' String Quartet No. 6. And the floor doesn't stay white for long. A dancer discretely emerges from the wings, whipping her arms in wide, looping circles against the floor. As she does, she leaves black streaks of paint on the surface, which after this point can really only be considered a canvas.

Later dancers fill the canvas with black streaks, lines, and loops that other dancers produce with their hands or feet. Red is added by a man who arrives with paint on his back and a woman with paint on her feet. The dazzling factor here is that the painting and the movement are inseparable — and both are quite beautiful. The large, precise circles that the first dancer makes on the canvas are not made simply for the sake of the painting; the movement is the choreography, and other dancers make the same swoops, lying on their backs and rolling over, but they do it without paint.

Similarly, later in the work several dancers stand on the edge of the stage and lunge across the canvas. Only two have paint on their feet, and the lines the dancers create could be counted as small paintings themselves. But it's the motion that one notices first — lunge, but also a slide and a fall, melded into something all its own. The movement Mr. Shen has designed has an intense, though supremely controlled, energy.

The poses at the beginning look like they start from the idea of yoga, but they go far beyond — and they're held just long enough to make you think of sculpture. Here's an attempt at describing one pose: With his weight on one hand and one foot, a dancer brings his free foot to the knee of the planted leg (forming a half lotus). He then places one arm through the bent leg — reaching that arm to the ground — and balances like a loopy tripod. (Did I lose you? Just go see it.) While the posing



itself is absorbing, watching the dancers get in and out of the positions is also fascinating. And the dancers make it happen with the same, cool, distant looks on their faces throughout.

The poses are a sort of preparation for the movement, which is full of contradictions. It flows, but has a sharply angular quality. It is sometimes spastic, but

you will notice ballet vocabulary at the same time. The work can be fast, but it is also tightly controlled — never just speed for the sake of speed, as devotees of William Forsythe's Euro-whiplash style. When a Shen Wei dancer raises himself on one foot, the look does not recall demi-pointe or a relevé or anything familiar. The weight is shifted onto the ball of the foot gently, sometimes unevenly, but always with precise energy that keeps the next direction a secret — until the dancer decides to divulge it.

Several dancers have gripping solos that take place while the rest of the group stands in a line. The supreme solo of the evening, however, was danced by the choreographer himself. Standing at the front corner of stage left, the compact, calm Mr. Shen moved as though he were telling a story about a series of animals. There is no narrative or tale, per se, but if a light were cast on Mr. Wei and his shadow were to fill the backdrop, we would see fish, birds, and long, snouted creatures. Every movement is abstracted, but given the many dimensions in which he works, there is depth to these smoothly linked, slow, and delicate movements.

Perhaps one of the elements that made this work so much more enjoyable than others in the abstract, contemporary genre was the well-selected live music played by the Flux Quartet and pianist Stephen Gosling. In addition to the Volans were works by Iannis Xenakis and György Ligeti. These were minimal, yes, but none of them were jarring, overly repetitive, or otherwise abusive to the ear.

The simple black costumes and white-powdered skin lent an air of anonymity to the dancers, though there was some inconsistency in the look. Some dancers were dressed in contemporary workout gear — tops with crew-cut neck-lines and flair-leg spandex pants. Meanwhile, others looked like extras from "Star Trek" — especially the men who must have drawn the short straws and had to wear black tights, grey leotards, and skullcaps.

They could have worn snowsuits, however, and the importance of Shen Wei's work would still shine through. It's true that there are times the dance becomes so absorbing that the painting fades from attention. But just when that starts to happen, another dancer turns up with paint and adds a stealth streak where you weren't looking. By the end, the resulting painting has its own aggressive beauty and chaotic energy of its own.

I wanted very much to sneak backstage, roll up a piece of the flooring, and spirit it home, if only to have a tangible reminder of this performance.