

Art Basel: Shen Wei dance casts a spell



Shen Wei Dance Arts members performing at The Freedom Tower Thursday

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I knew that Shen Wei, the choreographer and dancer, used his body and his movement instincts to create the paintings in his debut museum exhibit, *Black, White & Grey* – painting with hands and arms, sweeping brush across canvas. But it was still startling to see how his 11 paintings at the MDC Museum of Art + Design seemed to surge across the canvas, how the splashes and flows of paint pulled your eye forward and back, how the energy of their making seemed to leap from the surface.

Shen has drawn from that energy with the performance he created for his troupe Shen Wei Dance Arts, which had a VIP opening preview Thursday night. The dance extends his paintings into three dimensions, into movement that swirled through the galleries at the Freedom Tower. The effect was hypnotic, quietly magical.

The exhibit marks a new creative and career milestone for the MacArthur Genius Award-winning choreographer, and is one of the biggest artistic projects that MDC has ever done. Thursday's opening drew 400 people, including dozens of friends and supporters of Shen's from China and New York. The galleries were filled with elegantly gowned and suited Chinese, and echoed with the sound of a language almost never heard in Miami. They besieged the quiet, patiently smiling Shen with congratulations, greetings, requests to pose for photos in front of his paintings. Even his parents and brother were there, come all the way from China.





Choreographer and artist Shen Wei watching his company perform Thursday

Shen's reputation and cross-genre appeal also drew Miami dance and visual artists, as well as Zimbabwean choreographer Nora Chipaumire (who's doing an "under the radar" performance at the Little Haiti Cultural Center at 7 p.m. Friday.) Also on hand was MDC president Eduardo Padron, who said he'd admired Shen Wei's work since the college presented his company back in 2003.

The 12 dancers, wearing softly draped, Shen-designed pants and tops in – yes – black, white and grey, performed in the middle of the crowd, which formed a deep circle around them. The formation increased the feeling that the dancers were drawing energy from the paintings around them. They started in trios, slowly and continuously curving, arching, reaching out or up, curling to the floor, to a liquid ticking rhythm suspended between a clock's ticktock and dripping water. The irregular, random-seeming shapes of their spiraling, twisting bodies echoed the surging, splashing images on the walls, as if the paintings were flowing off the walls and coming to life. Rotating around a central pillar, the dancers came together in groups of six, then twelve, so that they seemed like a single shifting, multi-part organism - or a softly but precisely morphing machine.

Despite the stress of dancing in a tight space surrounded by a crowd, many filming or snapping photos, the seven men (many with monk-like, close-cropped hair) and five women stayed serenely, but utterly focused – their quiet gaze helping to draw you in.





Shen Wei Dance Arts surrounded by a crowd Thursday evening

The audience followed them into a second, larger gallery, where the dancers energy rose, legs or hips suddenly snapping out, one or the other dancer briefly whirling into faster motion, even as their group moved in a tighter circle, like an irregular, slow motion whirlpool. And then they subsided quietly into the flow, as if the metaphoric wind and water they'd summoned from the canvas was also pooling, coming to a natural end.

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As will the performance – which takes place five times Friday through Sunday, never to be repeated – or at least not in this space or these circumstances. Although reservations for the free performances are maxed out, MDC organizers expect some spaces to open up as people change their minds or are otherwise derailed by Art Basel chaos – which they'll open up on a first come basis. It's worth lining up for the chance.

Shows are at 1 p.m. and 8 p.m. Friday and Saturday, and 1 p.m. Sunday, at the Freedom Tower, 600 Biscayne Blvd., Miami. Free parking at MDC Lot 7, between NE 5th and 6th Streets and NE 2nd and 1st Avenues.

