

DanceTabs

Shen Wei Dance Arts – Undivided Divided – San Francisco

By Aimee Tsao on April 1, 2013



For the past ten years, since I first saw Shen Wei's *Folding*, I have been an admirer of this artist's work. His commanding vision and painterly aesthetic make him one of the most intriguing contemporary creators working today. Wei's most recent piece shown here in San Francisco is *Undivided Divided*. Originally created during a 16-month residency at the Park Avenue Armory in New York, it premiered in November 2011. Although lasting only 40 minutes, there is so much material to absorb that, like a boa constrictor after having swallowed a chicken, I am still digesting the entire animal, slowly and completely.

The performance takes place in The Forum, a large empty space about 77 by 87 feet with a 30-foot high ceiling and a wooden floor. Seven-foot square white panels are laid out in a grid of six rows by six. There are four-foot aisles between the panels that allow the audience to circulate inside the grid. In two adjacent corners the panels are replaced by plexiglass cubic rooms seven-feet in all three dimensions; two others are filled with plexi cubes stacked up like sculptures. Two more are covered in bungee cords; another pair have thick hunks of hair or fur; many of them have plate-sized puddles of paint in a variety of colors.

Eighteen dancers lie on their backs, motionless, in half of the squares. Both men and women are clad only in flesh-coloured lycra shorts. They begin slowly to move while the music, a frequently haunting original score by So Percussion, alternates with Lawson White's concrete soundscape. The changing lights and video projections often create sudden shifts in one's visual perception of time and space. Sometimes the physical grid takes on the aura of being an ancient ritual site. The dancers continue to move, rolling in the paint and making abstract art on the panels and the interiors of the plexiglass cubes at the corners. One of the most powerful moments occurs when they slowly merge into performing movements in unison, all briefly pausing with one arm extending above their heads.

This format is new for Wei who previously created for the traditional stage. He says, "I am forever fascinated by what the brain knows and what it may not be aware of. Because of this fascination, I have found endless parallels between the tangible world and our impalpable surroundings." This is a rationale for wanting to allow the audience a closer inspection of, and interaction with, the dancers. For most of the audience this may be the first time they have been so close to, and intimate with, live performers and I commend Wei for giving them this opportunity. For us dance critics and former dancers there is no novelty. Instead I find myself constantly irritated that spectators are always blocking my view. I want to see everything and think about how all the parts relate to each other. I slowly circumambulate the entire grid several times, reversing direction when something catches my eye. At least I can find places where I can watch unimpeded. At the corners I have clear sight-lines to observe two exterior rows at a time, often with seven or eight dancers in view. Ultimately each viewer sees an entirely different show from every other audience member and also each time (s)he might see it. (A Yerba Buena staff member told me later that one man was so enthralled that he came back the next day for both the matinee and evening performances.) In many ways *Undivided Divided* reminds me of Sacha Waltz's *Insideout*, another multi-media extravaganza that invites the audience to meander amongst the dancers. However Wei's piece is much more concise and does not attempt to manipulate the audience to watch the work in a specific way. The difference between watching a performance through a proscenium arch and walking through a space where dancers and audience share the very air they breathe, remains much the same as the disparity between being a voyeur and being an active participant.