

# Chinese choreographer Shen Wei to debut painting & dance show during Art Basel Miami Beach

BY JORDAN LEVIN

JLEVIN@MIAMIHERALD.COM

11/26/2014 7:01 PM

11/29/2014 7:44 PM



Choreographer and painter Shen Wei in his studio with some of the paintings for "Shen Wei - In Black, White, and Grey" which will premiere at Miami Dade College's Freedom Tower during Art Week Miami

Choreographer Shen Wei is renowned for his dancemaking, with an exalted artistic reputation that got a rare popular boost when he set thousands of performers in motion for the spectacular opening [ceremonies](#) of the 2008 Beijing Olympics.

But long before he was making pictures with bodies, Shen Wei, 46, was making them on paper and canvas. He grew up in China, and his parents — traditional Chinese opera professionals — set their son to studying watercolor and ink painting and calligraphy at age 6, part of the immersion in a range of artistic disciplines required for a traditional opera career.

"I have been painting since I was little, even before I started dancing," [Shen Wei](#) said from New York, where he has lived since the mid-'90s. "Until I was 15 I studied oil painting. I have been painting constantly until now. When I was little [my parents] wanted me to be a painter more than a choreographer or Chinese opera performer."

This week, the MacArthur Genuis Award-winning choreographer will step onto one of the visual art world's most prominent stages with *Shen Wei — In Black, White & Grey*, the first major exhibit of his paintings, during the high-profile hubbub of Miami Art Week and Art Basel Miami Beach. The show, presented by Miami Dade College Museum of Art + Design and MDC Live Arts, will be paired with site-specific performances by Shen Wei's dance troupe.



A performer in Shen Wei Dance Arts in "Undivided Divided" at New York's Park Avenue Armory in 2011 | Christopher Duggan

Although he has had several small gallery shows, this will be Shen Wei's largest and most ambitious visual art exhibit by far. *In Black, White & Grey* will occupy an entire floor of Miami's Freedom Tower, with 11 paintings ranging from 16 to nearly 30 feet wide. A number of collectors, followers and journalists are coming from China and elsewhere for the occasion.

"This year is the time for me to say I am ready to show people I am a painter," Shen Wei says. "It's such an important time and such an important project for me. It is one of the nicest things that has happened to me in my life."

Jeremy Mikolajczak, executive director of the MDC Museum, says the project is significant for the college and for Shen Wei's expanding artistic identity.

“He’s known in the visual art world as a creative figure,” Mikolajczak says. “As the art world becomes more entwined with the performance world, he’s going to become better known. His craft has perfected over time, and he’s become a global phenomenon. So now in looking at this aspect of his career, there’s no separation for him as an artist.”

The project was conceived by Kathryn Garcia, executive director of MDC Live and a fan of Shen Wei’s choreography since MDC presented his company in Miami in 2003. Soon after she started at MDC three years ago, Garcia began talking to Shen Wei.

“I’ve always loved him,” Garcia says. “Every time I’ve seen his choreography I’m stunned by the compositional brilliance. I’m not surprised he’s a visual artist — composition is at the forefront of what he does in dance.”

Garcia says the ability to collaborate with MDC’s museum also inspired the project. “One of the exciting things about [MDC] cultural affairs is it embraces an interdisciplinary sensibility,” she says. “I was interested in finding those intersections.”

They will be on view most clearly in five free performances, when 12 dancers from Shen Wei Dance Arts will move among the audience in the gallery in an immersive show unique to Miami.

“It’s been a jaw-dropping experience to see this artist transition between the dance and visual art world,” Mikolajczak says.

The possibilities helped Shen Wei overcome his initial hesitation. “They asked me two years ago, and I said I’m not ready,” he says. But his attitude changed over a series of conversations and visits to Miami. He has long designed his own sets and costumes, which play an unusually integral role in his dances that has grown in recent years.

“Once the dance is on the stage I want to have a total connection to all the human senses,” Shen Wei says. “Recently the visual element and the dance element are more influenced by each other. That is why I have been doing more performances in museums and site-specific situations.”

They include site-specific performances at New York's [Metropolitan Museum of Art](#) and the [Guggenheim Museum](#) in 2009, and at Shanghai's Rockbund Museum in 2011. For *Undivided Divided* at New York's Park Avenue Armory in 2011, and *Re-Turn*, staged last year at a private art collection in Italy, he had the dancers use their paint-covered bodies to create impressions on the sets — which he also designed.

Painting has served as an increasingly important form of creative mediation for Shen Wei. On breaks from his dance work, he will spend days shut up in his studio for 18 or 20 hours at a time, closing himself off from the world.

"I spend so much time touring and around so many people I need time to be alone," Shen Wei says. "I don't let my assistant or anyone come in. The whole process is alone. It's really, really personal. When you're in that kind of mood or space it's so beautiful. You're really alone and so free at the same time, with expression and imagination and in time and space."

But Shen Wei's solitary creative practice in painting is connected to his dancemaking by the way he uses his body to paint, in what he describes as a kind of picture-making dance.

"I have been studying and practicing how my energy and movement affect my brushstrokes, or whatever I use to touch the canvas, including my feet, my arms, my fingers, all my body parts," Shen Wei says. "As a way to connect to the canvas, I like the energy of a human being ... my human body touching something. It makes the paintings so alive. I am a dancer, I like to use my body for expression — why not work not just with the brush, but with my body?"

Mikolajczak says that physicality is apparent in *Black, White & Grey*. "They're very large, gestural, raw, but very lyrical and rhythmic paintings that visually relate and play with the choreography he's known for," Mikolajczak says. "Like in his choreography, they're very structured and very free and open at the same time."

Shen Wei's physical and mental immersion in the creative process stems from the ancient Chinese philosophy of Taoism, says Lidu Yi, an assistant professor of art history

at Florida International University, Chinese art specialist and curator of several Chinese shows at the Frost Art Museum.

“When Chinese people create art, it’s never just using the hands alone — the body must be part of it.” Lidu Yi says. “They forget themselves, they forget the object. In Taoism the ultimate level is when you forget yourself, when you are able to integrate yourself and your body with your art, to combine your soul with the object.”

In a way, Shen Wei’s growing visual art practice expands the way he has bridged Western and Chinese culture in his dance career.

“He’s looking at the West as a brand new canvas,” says Charles Reinhart, the former longtime executive director of the American Dance Festival in Durham, North Carolina, who is responsible for Shen Wei’s dance career. In the mid-’80s, Reinhart hosted seven Chinese visitors at ADF. One came to Reinhart, confused about why students fell to the ground in a modern dance class. “I looked at her and said “Why not?”” Reinhart says. “Two days later she came back and said “Will you help me make a modern dance program in China?””

The result was China’s first contemporary troupe, the Guangdong Modern Dance Company — whose inaugural members included a teenage Shen Wei (who left a position at a traditional opera company). In 1995 Reinhart brought Shen Wei to ADF to create a work with the festival’s students and helped him form his company, Shen Wei Dance Arts, there in 2000, continuing to foster and present Shen Wei’s work and troupe for the next decade.

“It has been interesting for me to watch Shen Wei walk the borders of two cultures,” Reinhart says. “People in the West say his work looks Asian. Asian people say it looks Western.”

Reinhart says certain qualities in Shen Wei’s choreography, like the way the dancers move continuously, without breaks or transitions, or its elegant composition, seem very Chinese. But he says Shen Wei’s openness to new ideas, and the boldness that made him ask for 16,000 dancers for the Olympics ceremony, break with tradition. “His

freedom of creativity opens the eyes of Asian audiences, especially in China,” Reinhart says. “He combines the cultures into a kind of third millennium.”

Just as Shen Wei does not separate cultural influences in his art, he increasingly does not separate between the mediums he uses to express himself.

“Now I may do more exhibitions and paint more, because I think I’ve found my voice,” he says. “I could not stop dancing — that will always be my passion, because it’s in my body. But everything to do with art will always be my passion.”

**IF YOU GO:**

What: “Shen Wei – In Black, White & Grey”

When: Exhibit with performance: 1 and 8 p.m. Friday Dec. 5 and Saturday Dec. 6, 1 p.m. Sunday Dec. 7

Where: MDC Museum of Art + Design, The Freedom Tower at MDC, 600 Biscayne Blvd., Miami

Info: Free with reservation at [mdclivearts.org](http://mdclivearts.org).

Note: Exhibit only continues Dec. 10 to Feb. 1, 2015, Wednesday to Sunday, noon to 5 p.m.

**Artist Talks:**

What: Cocktails & Conversation - Shen Wei in conversation with Karin Oen, Charles Reinhart and Weng Ling (Invited guests and Art Basel VIP cardholders only)

When: 4 p.m. Friday Dec. 5

Where: Viceroy Miami, 485 Brickell Ave., Miami

What: Art Basel Miami Beach Salon Talk with Shen Wei, Jeremy Mikolajczak and Weng Ling

When: 6 to 7 p.m. Saturday Dec. 6

Where: Miami Beach Convention Center, 1700 Convention Center Drive, Miami Beach

Read more here: <http://www.miamiherald.com/entertainment/ent-columns-blogs/jordan-levin/article4167726.html#storylink=cpy>