
SHEN WEI, PASSION SPIRIT

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Still from the film *Passion Spirit*, 2020

SETTING THE SCENE

As a curator in the habit of keeping an ear to the ground, in 2011 I jumped at the opportunity to see a new work by the artist Shen Wei. It was a sold-out performance of *Still Moving* in the Metropolitan Museum's grand, solarium-like Charles Engelhard Court in the American Wing. Once inside, I sat down on a folding chair and found myself smack in the middle of the action. Surrounded, I twisted and turned to follow the sensual and instinctual-seeming movements of the willowy performers, whose outfits were as flowing as their graceful actions. The company's members evoked strong emotion in the viewer, as they held poses portraying interpretations of social connection and disconnection, which related to the nearby grand sculpture of Augustus Saint-Gaudens, Harriet Whitney Frishmuth, and Paul Manship. My mind drifted to the work of Auguste Rodin, especially how his sculptures appear to capture the tense, emotive moments of human figures caught between movement and stasis. My thoughts shifted to a more contemporary framework, and I reflected on Shen Wei's work in the context of the pioneering choreographer Merce Cunningham. I first engaged with Cunningham's live events in 1971, and over the years I followed how he effectively joined dance with the moving image. I have since come to see that both Cunningham's and Shen Wei's interests in film and video grew out of a search for new methodologies—and both have skillfully propelled media far beyond straightforward documentation.

At a recent dinner in the home of a friend, I was delighted at last to meet Shen Wei. That evening he opened a portfolio of drawings to show me a different facet of his creativity. I didn't quite know how to pigeonhole the beautiful, atmospheric abstractions in front of me, but I did make a connection between the drawings and the luminous aesthetics of the performance I had experienced at the Met. Such sketchbooks and paintings are components of Shen Wei's 2020 survey at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum.

My first visit to the Gardner was as a wide-eyed child with my family, more than sixty years ago. The fusty, grandly appointed palazzo felt almost grandmotherly; the sunlit rooms made a strong impression, contributing to a lifelong interest in developing my own responses to and ideas about how artwork is displayed in a museum. The Gardner's idiosyncratic juxtaposition—an approachable mishmash of European, Asian, and American paintings, sculptures, decorative arts, manuscripts, rare books, and architectural fragments that has remained intact since its doors opened—was installed by the Museum's founder, who encouraged viewers to train their own eyes and become insightful connoisseurs themselves.

Early visits to this and other museums propelled me in the direction of graduate studies in art history, as I sustained interests in both the old and the new. This is what led me eventually to join the staff of the Museum of Modern Art as a media curator. Committed to deciphering the ambiguous, undefined areas between and beyond traditional disciplines, I remain drawn to how video art has unfolded on the cusp of evolving

technical invention. As video and media art have gained acceptance, I am intrigued by how venerable museums such as the Gardner have developed programs that accommodate the ancient with the contemporary.

SHEN WEI AND THE MOVING IMAGE

Steeped in the tradition of classical Chinese theater from childhood, Shen Wei developed an interest in moving imagery in the late 1990s. It seems natural that an inventive, open-minded young performer and thinker such as Shen Wei would try his hand at the time-based medium of film at the start of his career: he belongs to a generation in China that was able to gather information through word of mouth, occasional travel, and magazine reports about artists far away who were challenging conventions with experimentation in media. Shen Wei appears to be at home on the periphery, where for decades the aesthetics of East and West have dynamically met, and where he evolved to become adept technically.

APRIL

Shen Wei made his first film in upstate New York. He recorded *April* (1998) in black and white, which means the film carries the viewer away from the vibrance of the “real world” and into an imagined, nonverbal realm. *April*'s spare images are striking yet bleak, portraying the artist as he slowly moves alone in a stark landscape. The film reminds me of the sorrowful isolation I have seen in Ingmar Bergman's black-and-white scenes, which are imbued with what the Swedish director once called the smell of eternity. Perhaps closer to Shen Wei's roots is the work of China's Fifth Generation, filmmakers who emerged shortly after the time of Mao and who were bold in their use of abstraction and symbolism. Like Shen Wei, they carved out expressive work in film.

Through my experience as a media curator, I see a loose connection between Shen Wei's *April* and Bill Viola's early videos from the late 1970s. Both artists found their way working independently—Viola influenced by the structuralist films of Michael Snow and the sound installations of David Tudor, and Shen Wei grounded in Chinese opera—and each has had a fascination with time and structure. Their luminous moving image work is a synthesis of real (in other words, lived) time, and edited, cinematic time. Both have merged an interest in art history with an investigation of contemporary life. It is interesting to note that, for different reasons and at different moments in their trajectories, each turned to Renaissance painting and its illusionistic perspective by representing a three-dimensional scene on a flat canvas or screen to convey an impression of unmediated “real” life. In attempts to interrogate our presumptions about realness and authenticity, Viola and Shen Wei were inspired by how fifteenth-century artists coupled ideas about beauty and desire with the portrayal of nature's life, death, and rebirth cycle. This can be found in Shen Wei's latest video, *Passion Spirit*.

PASSION SPIRIT

With *Passion Spirit*, commissioned by the Gardner Museum in 2019 as part of its artist-in-residence program, Shen Wei joins an impressive roster of international artists who over the last twenty years have created new work in response to the Museum's collection, its building, and, in some cases, the founder's legacy.

Passion Spirit demonstrates that media is a powerful vehicle for the artist, who is a masterful producer and orchestrator of large-scale, time-based live art. This new video is an aesthetic hybrid, the synthesis of performance, realism, romanticism, and experimental film.

Shen Wei tells an enchanting story that he based on two Renaissance paintings in the Gardner collection: Paolo Uccello's *A Young Lady of Fashion* (early 1460s) and Piermatteo d'Amelia's *The Annunciation* (ca. 1487). The video conjures the Renaissance paintings' magnificent depiction of space via the milieu of the Gardner's Venetian-style garden. The artist recently explained that his goal was to portray a woman's journey from the past to the present, in relation to history, both in Western culture and in the Gardner itself.

Shen Wei began the video project with a series a photographs, which he took in the Museum's interior spaces. Pairing these with shots from his archive, he selected each according to the movement of the camera's eye and devised a kind of storyboard that he shared with his production team. In shooting the video, his goal was to capture how the sun shines through the Gardner's windows and lights up the historical artworks, giving a positive energy to *Passion Spirit*.

Although Shen Wei is technically skilled—having himself edited his two earlier films, *April* and *Inner Shadow of Movement*—during the postproduction phase of *Passion Spirit*, the artist oversaw an apprentice, who edited the piece in Final Cut Pro at a postproduction editing company in Changsha, Hunan Province. However, he meticulously fine-tuned every frame according to decisions he had made in the storyboard.

The resulting film commissioned by the Gardner represents a journey, told through a kind of dreamlike interior dialogue and driven visually by the movement of the dancer's body. In keeping with the film's title, Shen Wei tells the story of how “passion” and “spirit” constitute a couple, each on an odyssey in search of its other half. When the halves manage to combine, the result is freedom.