

# THE RECORDER

INDEPENDENT NONPROFIT NEWS FOR BEDFORD, LEWISBORO, POUND RIDGE & MOUNT KISCO, NY

October 17, 2025

## Paintings dance and dancers paint at the KMA



**By JOYCE CORRIGAN**

Imagine having an “aha” moment with 2 billion people from 220 countries streaming it live. Minutes after choreographing the spectacular “Scroll Painting” segment at the Opening Ceremony of the 2008 Beijing Olympics — still regarded as the ultimate prelude to a Summer Games — the boundary-defying artist Shen Wei had a profound professional and spiritual reckoning. He had transformed the Beijing National Stadium into a breathtaking living canvas, with thousands of performers moving in flowing patterns that mirrored Chinese calligraphy. The choreography unfolded like a monumental scroll, blending dance, visual art and cultural tradition into a kinetic masterpiece.

“As soon as ‘Scroll’ was over and I knew we’d pulled it off, I realized it was actually better than I dared to dream it could be,” Wei recalled from his Manhattan studio. “There had been such huge pressure with this massive audience, so subconsciously I’d been managing my expectations. But I learned one thing: if you can imagine it, you can achieve it.”

Since then, he’s dreamed bigger.

Following the Olympics, not only did the New York City Ballet and Paris Opera Ballet come calling, but the Hunan-born Mr. Wei, who now divides his time between Paris and New York, became a global cultural icon — not for choreography alone, but also for integrative collaborations in opera, theater, visual art and film. His paintings evoke the fluid grace of Chinese calligraphy and the haunting beauty of traditional landscapes, each brushstroke pulsing with movement and intention. With subtle references to American Abstract Expressionism, his work also bridges East and West, creating canvases that feel timeless. Museums such as the Metropolitan, the Guggenheim, Tate Modern, Centre Pompidou, and the Asia Society Hong Kong Center have hosted his work.

Dreaming big works remarkably well in small spaces, too. From Oct. 19 through April 19, 2026, the Katonah Museum of Art presents “Shen Wei: STILL/MOVING,” commemorating 30 years of his visionary career. On Saturday, Oct. 18, the First Look Program includes a private exhibition viewing and a live performance of Wei’s signature “Connect Transfer” in the museum’s Sculpture Garden, followed by an Artist Talk with KMA Director Michelle Yun Mapplethorpe, who curated the show. A second KMA performance takes place Oct. 19, while there’s a concurrent Shen Wei exhibition at Tarrytown’s Pocantico Center.

“We are thrilled to be staging two performances of the iconic ‘Connect Transfer’ outdoors in the Garden,” Mapplethorpe said. “The work features dancers recording their movements with paint on their hands and feet on a 32-foot square canvas — literally transcribing space and time with their bodies.”

Wei said his ideal dancer has extensive training in both ballet and modern dance, “and it’s wonderful if they’ve had martial arts, too. Discipline and an open mind are key.” His daring performers have been described as “imploding and swirling into a gorgeous knot on the floor and then swelling and shrinking like an accordion.”

“As a former dancer myself, I was always impressed by Shen’s strikingly innovative choreography — especially how he integrated ink paint into the compositions,” Mapplethorpe noted. “Seeing his paintings in a New York gallery a few years later was a revelation.”

While his works incorporate meditative layers of Chinese calligraphy and landscapes, he also, he revealed, “connected with the drips and gestures of 20th century American abstract painting.” Every stroke is created through a calligraphy-inspired circular motion of the wrist, curving, rising, and breathing — so, in effect, his canvases dance.

“Shen always says he considers his practices — whether dance, painting or poetry — to be connected and influenced by the others,” Mapplethorpe said. “His creativity is boundless.”

Artists from showbiz families often claim they “grew up in the theater,” but Wei literally grew up in one. He and his brothers lived in the family apartment directly behind the stage of the Hunan State Xiang Opera Company. His father was the company director and an ardent calligrapher; his mother, the producer.

“Everyone in the Opera company lived there, and all our family friends were artists,” he recalled. “There were always people around, but I was happy by myself — doing calligraphy, painting, always dancing to whatever music was playing.”

Wei was 8 years old and beginning his formal artistic studies when the Cultural Revolution ended in 1976. “By the mid-1980s, China had become very open to Western art and culture,” Mapplethorpe

said. “Universities reinstated programs teaching Western techniques, providing ample opportunity for artists like Shen to experiment.”

“Unfortunately, the world seems set up to be divided, but it shouldn’t be,” Wei commented. “Once I learned Western techniques, I couldn’t imagine not incorporating them into my work. Many layers in a piece of art are more interesting and unifying for an audience.”

Mapplethorpe agreed: “The less people view other cultures as ‘foreign,’ the more society can embrace the value those cultures bring to a civil society.”

Asked about the KMA’s exhibition title, “STILL/MOVING,” Wei said it reflects how his “still” paintings and “moving” dance are forever linked. “Notice there’s no space between the words,” he remarked. Is there perhaps also a nod to the fact that he’s still moving at 57, long after the age most principal dancers retire?

“I will always dance when showing my company new choreography,” he said, “but I don’t have time to perform as often anymore. That said, I will perform a solo at the Joyce Theater in December, a tribute to dance world legend Charles Reinhart, who passed away at 94 this past July.”

It was Reinhart who urged Wei to start his own company, Shen Wei Dance Arts 20 years ago. As Reinhart was there for Wei at the beginning, Wei will be there for him at the end. For Wei, the meticulous calligrapher, everything comes full circle.



*Multidisciplinary artist Shen Wei with his Chinese-landscape inspired paintings. “Brush Movement and Music, No 4” by Shen Wei. Shen Wei dancers as human paintbrushes. Shen Wei Dance Arts performs with paint at the Guggenheim.*