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Works Inspired By Wonders

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A tribute to the choreographer Alvin Ailey features paintings, sculptures and music.

WITH THE POWERHOUSE, sense-surround show “Edges of Ailey” at the Whitney Museum of American Art, the New York art season gets off to an exuberant, enveloping, though puzzling start.

The show is a major institutional tribute to the American choreographer and performer Alvin Ailey (1931-1989). It’s also a relatively rare example of a traditionally object-intensive art museum giving full-scale treatment to the ephemeral medium of dance.

But if you anticipated, as I did, that this would mean a display of documentary photographs, some archival materials (costumes, stage designs), and — best — extensive examples of dance on film, you’ve got a surprise in store.

“Modern dance seemed to encapsulate all of my ideas,” Ailey said in a 1984 interview. “There was movement, there was color, there was painting, there was sculpture, and there was the putting it all together.”

The show takes Ailey at his word. It’s the

Edges of Ailey
Whitney Museum
of American Art

CONTINUED ON PAGE C10

Center top, Jennifer Packer’s “Not Yet Titled” (2024); bottom, from left, John Outterbridge’s “The Elder, Ethnic Heritage Series” (1971-72); Eldren Bailey’s “Dancers” (1960s); and Richmond Barthé’s “African Dancer” (1933), all part of the “Edges of Ailey” exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art.



CONTINUED FROM PAGE C1

"all" he speaks of that's here. On the Whitney's fifth floor you enter a wide-open gallery dominated by an 18-channel video montage of flickering bodies and talking heads. But it serves as a kind of audiovisual backdrop to many dozens of objects — paintings, sculptures, collages, prints — rich in imaginative variety, diverse in content, and many with no immediate connection to Ailey. Which is where puzzlement sets in: How "Ailey" is the show? And, for that matter, how much about dance?

The Whitney organizers — Adrienne Edwards, senior curator and associate director of curatorial programs; Joshua Lubin-Levy, a curatorial research associate and scholar of photography and performance; and C J Salapare, a curatorial assistant — have clearly anticipated these questions. And they've addressed them by organizing

Edges of Ailey

Through Feb. 9 at the Whitney Museum of American Art in Manhattan; 212-570-3600, whitney.org. During the run there will be more than 90 live dance events in the museum's third-floor theater, as well as classes, workshops and talks.

a kind of parallel show, this one on the museum's third floor: a program of live performances by the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater and an impressive roster of guest artists to be presented throughout the exhibition's run.

What you get in the fifth-floor gallery — which is what most visitors will see — is something different, formally more static, but still dynamic. Basically, it's an evocation of Ailey, and his dance, through the lens of African American visual art, which is a record and reflection of the Black culture that shaped him, and that he helped shape.

Dance was and is part of that culture, and images of it come right upfront in an introductory display, notably sculptures of widely varying styles and dates: Richmond Barthé's classic, ecstatic "African Dancer" from 1933 is here; so is an image of a jitterbugging couple molded from raw concrete in the 1960s by Eldren M. Bailey, a self-taught cemetery sculptor from Georgia; and there's a 1976 abstract work by the American artist Senga Nengudi. Made of nylon pantyhose mesh filled with sand, it was designed to be manipulated in performances, and, as seen in a photograph, suggests a dancer stretching at the barre.

There are also dance-themed paintings. Two by the much-watched figurative artists Jennifer Packer and Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, were produced expressly for the show. A scribbly little black oil stick drawing by the artist-choreographer Ralph Lemon titled "Alvin Ailey Dancing Revelations #3" might easily have been a commission too, but dates from 1999.

From this introductory point, which follows a winding path through a series of island-like displays, the exhibition takes on a broadly biographical cast, with work that evokes Ailey's personal history, what he called his "blood memories."

To someone born, as Ailey was, into a line of sharecroppers in rural Texas, the sculptures here of the Southern artist Beverly Buchanan, in the form of miniature shacks pieced together from scrap wood, might not look entirely fanciful. And to someone immersed early in the Black church — as Ailey was, his signature dance "Revelations" came from it — with its exhortative sonories and Afro-Caribbean overlays, neither the image of a heaven-pointing preacher in a painting by Benny Andrews, nor the presence of a pair of Fon ritual drums, would have felt foreign.

Ailey was raised by his mother — his father left them early on — and her constant quest for employment and safety had them moving around a lot. In the 1940s, they joined the Great Migration out of the rural South. Three smokey-dark, tangled-line paintings of crowds by the self-taught artist Purvis Young, along with Martin Puryear's bronze sculpture, "The Rest," in the shape of a handcart, evoke that exodus.

Mother and son settled in Los Angeles, where Ailey thrived as a museum-going, notebook-keeping gay kid mesmerized by theater, and particularly by modern dance after seeing performances by the Black choreographer Katherine Dunham and meeting, in high school, his close friend and future dance partner Carmen de Lavallade. Both women are present as portraits in a section of the show devoted to images of Black women who influenced Ailey early and late.

The show's idea of using art to demonstrate the personal and cultural influences that made Ailey the artist he was works better in some applications than in others. I don't usually think of his dances — apart from a few pieces like "Masekela Language" — as political in the activist way that



PHOTOGRAPHS BY HERB R. MASURK/THE NEW YORK TIMES



Top left, Lynette Yiadom-Boakye's "Fly Trap" (2024). Top right, a block of the AIDS Memorial Quilt (1987) with a panel for Ailey at top right. Above, Charles White's "Preacher" (1952), left, and Benny Andrews's "The Way to the Promised Land" (1994) at right. From left, Geoffrey Holder's "Portrait of Carmen de Lavallade" (1976), Beauford Delaney's "Marian Anderson" (1965) and Lois Mailou Jones's "Jennie" (1943). Below, Maren Hassinger's "River" (1972/2012).

the show's "Black Liberation" section defines that. But the grouping of work devoted to the theme of "Black Music" seems right on point.

Music — from Ralph Vaughan Williams, to Mahalia Jackson, to Laura Nyro — was the engine that drove Ailey's dance. It's everywhere here. It's in the air thanks to the eclectic score for the mural-like video piece by Kya Lou and Josh Begley, filmmakers who worked with Edwards, the curator. And it's in individual works in the "Black Music" section, with their references to Charlie Parker (in a painting by Beauford Delaney), to Billie Holiday and Nina Simone (in a sculpture by Charles Gaines), and to the pantheon of Black blues and soul luminaries named in Kerry James Marshall's 1998 "Souvenir IV."

Marshall's grandly scaled grisaille painting, a lament for — and shout out to — musicians lost, is just a plain wonderful thing, an outstanding entry in a show that has many. Others include Clementine Hunter's painting of a white-robed Louisiana river baptism; Wadsworth Jarrell's sizzling pointillist portrait of Angela Davis; David Hammons's dark-star explosion of a sculpture made from wire, plastic beads and human hair; and, concluding the show, a monumental excerpt from the Names Project AIDS Memorial Quilt with the panel commemorating Ailey, who died at 58 as a result of the disease.

So the exhibition on the Whitney's fifth floor gives you a lot: an atmospheric soak in cultural history, insight into a creative life (examples of Ailey's voluminous writings — letters, stories, choreographic notes-to-self — are installed throughout), and some terrific art. But what it doesn't give you is sustained in-motion images of dance. You only see Ailey dance in peripheral ways — in quick clips in the video montage and on small screens in a small space outside the main installation.

But there are ways, even in a traditional museum setting, to get dance on the main stage, to make it part of the fixed format of an object-based show. In the treasurable exhibition called "Merce Cunningham: Common Time," at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis in 2017, the galleries were devoted primarily to Merce-related objects. But certain walls were left clear and used as big screens on which performance film were projected. Benches were set up. You could, if you wanted to, and had time — and I did — see long, unbroken portions of Cunningham dances, which gave everything else in the show a living context, an aesthetic utility.

I've visited "Edges of Ailey" twice, and lingered both times. I love the look of it, the sound of it, the ideas it floats. But I miss the element that gives all brilliant dance-makers their edge, the one that counts: dance itself. For that, I look forward to sampling the rest of the show, its performance program, in the months ahead.

