

OBSERVER

Edges of Ailey Brings Dance to the Whitney

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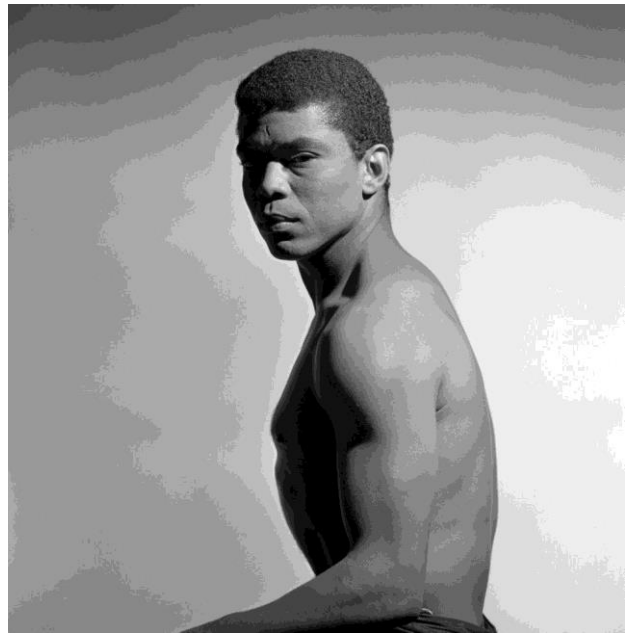
At the edge of Manhattan, in an 18,000-square-foot gallery on the fifth floor of a bright asymmetrical building, is the first large-scale exhibition about the life and work of the groundbreaking Black American choreographer Alvin Ailey (1931-1989). This show is a long time coming, both for Engell Speyer Family Senior Curator Adrienne Edwards (who has been working on the show for about six years) and for fans of Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, founded by Ailey in 1958 (I, for one, have been looking forward to it for months).

An exhibition at an art museum about dance is the kind of thing I live for. But when I first stepped into *Edges of Ailey* at the Whitney Museum of American Art, I was surprised. The walls are deep red, the space is not quiet and the materials are not arranged chronologically. There is—to be honest—not that much dance on display. It was not at all what I expected, and I am so glad for that.

What I quickly came to understand as I walked around the immense, immersive exhibition—which Edwards delightfully calls an “extravaganza”—is that it is not a solo retrospective. It is a group show. An ensemble performance. A jam session. It is less bio-pic than avant-garde film, more ode poem than biography. It contains artwork from eighty-two visual artists, a wide range of archival materials from Ailey’s personal and creative life and a multi-screen video installation drawn from interviews and performance footage.

What this collaging of art forms and artifacts does so well is put Ailey and his work in a larger artistic and social context. Ailey once said, “I wanted to paint... I wanted to sculpt. I wrote poetry. I wanted to write the great American novel.” For him, dance held all those things. *Edges of Ailey* holds all these things, too.

The exhibition is organized into sections inspired by Ailey’s life and work: Southern Imaginary (he was born in Rogers, Texas in 1931 and said, “I’m a Black man whose roots are in the sun and the dirt of the South”), Black Spirituality (“My roots are also in the Gospel church”), Black Migration (he moved from Texas to Los Angeles and then San Francisco before settling in New York City in 1954), Black Liberation (Edwards said, “For Ailey... the body becomes the vehicle through dance in which to express that freedom, practice that freedom, embody that freedom...”), Black Women (he surrounded himself with strong Black women including his mother Lula Cooper and close friend Carmen de Lavallade), Ailey’s Collaborators (Maya Angelou and Langston Hughes among them), Black Music (Duke Ellington and Charlie Parker were favorites), Ailey’s Influences (ranging from Martha Graham to Katherine Dunham to Jack Cole), and After Ailey (he died from AIDS-related complications in 1989 at age 58, leaving behind an important legacy



The artworks on display span from 1851 to 2024—in some cases, contemporary works were created specifically for this show. Some pieces relate specifically to Ailey and his company, such as a large portrait of de Lavallade painted by her husband Geoffrey Holder in 1976 and Ralph Lemon’s 1999 painting *Alvin Ailey Dancing Revelations #3*. Others do not have a direct connection to Ailey but are in conversation with his aesthetics and ideas, such as Norman Lewis’ 1943 lithograph *Untitled (Jazz)* and Terry Adkins’ 2012 sculpture *Other Bloods* (from *The Principalities*). Edwards



explains that “there are all of these ways in which there’s a sort of sinew, obvious or not, between Ailey and these various artists in the show.” Among the other artists with work in the exhibition are Jean-Michel Basquiat, Romare Bearden, Faith Ringgold, Alma Thomas, Jacob Lawrence, Rashid Johnson, Kevin Beasley and Kara Walker.

Throughout the gallery, there are selections from the Alvin Ailey Archival Papers and the Alvin Ailey Dance Foundation Archives Collection held at the Library of Congress. These include pages from his many notebooks (choreographic notes and lists along with his own poems and short stories); performance programs, posters and footage; and recorded interviews.

The three animations of visualized data charting Ailey’s impact on dance throughout time and space are an unexpected delight. Researchers Harmony Bench and Kate Elswit spent almost three years combing through over thirty thousand documents in the archives to create them. The animations are fascinating, quite beautiful and worth a view.

One of the most powerful parts of *Edges of Ailey* is the montage of Ailey’s life and dances that plays on a loop across an 18-channel video installation created by filmmakers Josh Begley and Kya Lou with Edwards. At one point, I stood in awe at the center of the room while several versions of *Revelations* played simultaneously on the screens. Later, I was gazing at Lawrence’s 1942 painting *Tombstones* when I heard a voice say, “We hope you feel better soon!” I looked up at the screens to see a series of video messages to Ailey from his company members in the late ‘80s. “We love you!... See you soon, Alvin!... Come back.”

The exhibition itself is only one part of *Edges of Ailey*. The extravaganza also includes extensive live programming—over ninety dance performances, classes and talks taking place throughout the building over the coming months.

The impressive performance series is inspired by Ailey’s commitment to building a platform for Black modern dancers and choreographers. Upcoming highlights include a dance by the Ailey company’s interim artistic director Matthew Rushing set to the omitted songs from the original production of *Revelations* (*Sacred Songs: A Journey of the Spiritual*, Nov 1-3), a performance by Bill T. Jones followed by a conversation between Jones, artist Glenn Ligon and Edwards (*Memory Piece: Mr. Ailey, Alvin... the un-Ailey?*, Nov 16), and the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater Program II: Excerpts from New Works (Jan 22-25). The lineup also includes Trajal Harrell, Ralph Lemon with interdisciplinary artist Kevin Beasley, Sarah Michelson, Okwui Okpokwasili with Peter Born, Will Rawls, Yusha-Marie Sorzano and Jawole Willa Jo Zollar.

Edges of Ailey is best experienced in its entirety. I recommend visiting on a day when there is a dance performance. Walk through the exhibition, go see some dance and—if time allows—return to the show so you can better understand what you just experienced.

Edwards says, “If you look at Ailey dancing, there’s something so visceral and vital about the way that he held a stage.” He did hold a stage, and he holds this space, too. If you go, you will feel it: he is there.

Edges of Ailey is on view at the Whitney Museum of American Art through February 9, 2025.

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