

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

Exhibition Review: **Alvin Ailey's Art On Sprawling Display**

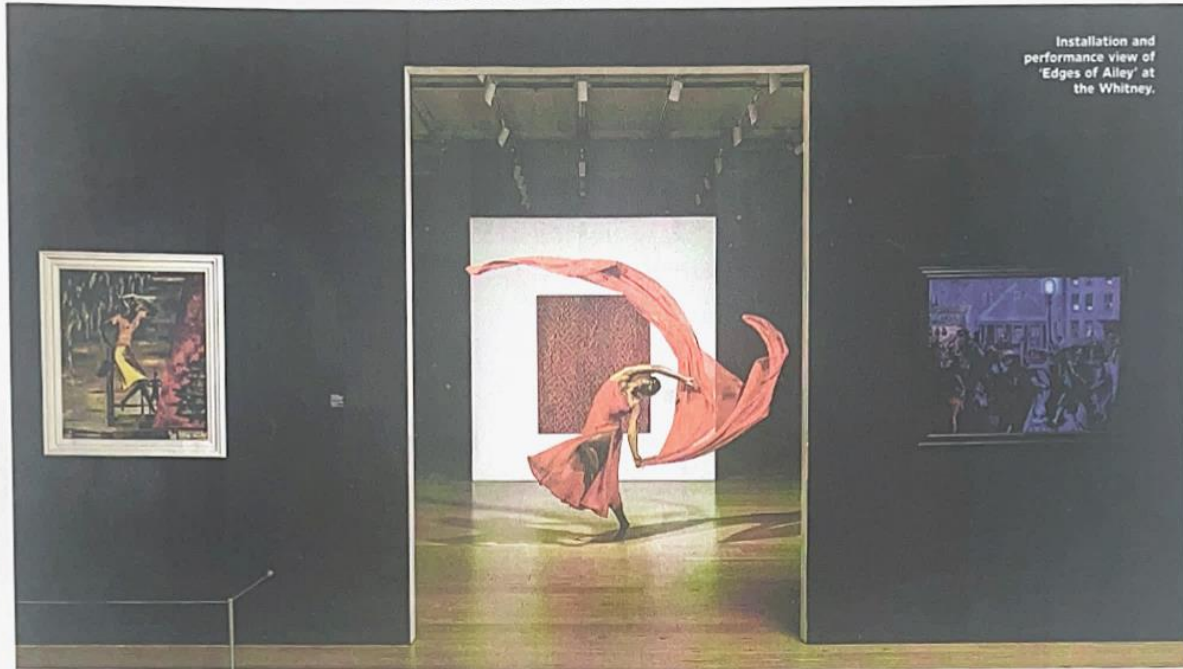
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ARTS IN REVIEW



Installation and performance view of 'Edges of Ailey' at the Whitney.

By ROBERT GRESKOVIC

New York

"EDGES OF AILEY," curated by Adrienne Edwards with assistance from Joshua Lubin-Levy and CJ Salapare, which runs through Feb. 9, 2025, at the Whitney Museum of American Art, mates a full-floor, 18,000-square-foot gallery display with a program of over 90 live dance performances, classes and talks presented two floors below in the museum's intimate theater. Its subject is the life, art and what its promotional materials call "adjacencies" of dancer and choreographer Alvin Ailey (1931-1989), whose career in modern dance led him to international renown.

The gallery installation includes more than 290 artworks by over 80 artists chosen to position them in aesthetic relationship to Ailey, as well as over 150 pieces of ephemera, mostly shown on the perimeter of the space, where they amount to a sprawling scrapbook featuring handwritten pages of Ailey's journal-like jottings and ruminations, as well as family snapshots and photographs, some documenting Ailey's performing days. Streaming above all this is a frieze-like loop of audio and visual projections that make for a large-scale, animated, upper-story element of performance excerpts and talking heads culled from recordings of Ailey's life and works.

This 18-screen expanse reveals sometimes grainy footage with often fuzzy audio that makes it



Ailey circa 1960, two years after he founded his company.

tricky to focus on those speaking amid the gallery's ambient sounds. "I'm Alvin Ailey. I'm a choreographer. I'm a Black man whose roots are in the sun and the dirt of the South," for instance, can be heard in passing if one can home in on Ailey's mellow, delicately resonant voice, but those words are better conveyed as a heading for the "Southern Imaginary" wall label.

Ailey's life as a gay man is doc-

EXHIBITION REVIEW

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The Whitney devotes a show to the renowned American choreographer

umented here through the loose leaves of his displayed writings and grouped into the show's "Black Liberation (Queerness)" section. No related sound bites exist from his on-camera interviews, where his private life remained private as, arguably, the times demanded.

Given their number and often large-scale dimensions, the paintings, sculpture and artifacts—all categorized by headers that range from "Blackness in Dance" to "Ailey's Influences"—dominate the space. There are not only big-name visual artists, such as Jean-Michel Basquiat and Kara Walker,

but—for me—unfamiliar ones. And while the paintings, in general, can often feel more incidental than integral to the performing art that Ailey practiced, I found those of the self-taught Purvis Young (1943-2010) most affecting—at once raw of touch and delicate of color, making for painterly blends offering naïf figures and atmospheric cityscapes.

Museum-goers familiar with the eagerly attended December

seasons of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater at City Center—this year's will run from Dec. 4 through January 2025—might wonder why Ailey's ever-popular 1960 dance suite "Revelations," created two years after he founded his company, and set to spirituals and gospel music, isn't as prominent here. While this, the troupe's signature work, closes nearly every one of the company's programs at City Center, signs of it are fleeting in the Whitney's displays.

One of them comes in a vitrine at the left end of the gallery, where it should not be missed. It's a modestly presented, slightly creased Kaufmann Concert Hall program from the dance's premiere year, when its three parts included 16 numbers; today's now-standard 3-part structure features 11.

Some years ago, Sylvia Waters, a veteran AAADT dancer and the first artistic director of Ailey II, AAADT's second company, spoke of Ailey's basic interest in his dancers' abilities: "Alvin wanted a ballet bottom and a modern top," she noted, meaning he preferred his dancers to have strong, limber and articulate legs and feet, complemented by a flexible and dynamic torso and arms.

The Whitney's performance component began last month. I caught one bill, called "Harmonic

Echo," danced by Ailey II. Its 4-part program offered excerpts from three Ailey dances, plus one by Judith Jamison, who over her long career had been a stellar Ailey dancer and the first artistic director of AAADT following Ailey's death.

The approximately half-hour presentation was danced with authority and ease, with each featured man and woman projecting strength and confidence throughout. It was a special pleasure to see these impressively trained dancers up close, framed within the confines of the Whitney's 109-capacity venue. Theatrical rewards from the stylish and economic means that Ailey deftly employed with simple costuming and props held sway—a neck scarf or a fringed shawl establishing character, or a stool indicating place.

Alvin Ailey died of AIDS-related complications at age 58, having made his last dance in 1988, the year before his death. The nearly year-by-year chronology in the show's hefty and profusely illustrated 388-page catalog continues beyond 1989 with four select years to note significant publications—a 1996 biography and a 1997 dissertation on Ailey's choreography—and special honors that have sustained Ailey's legacy.

"Edges of Ailey" sometimes keeps the man and his art at the physical edges of this expansive exhibition, but even when the show's related artworks tower in size and shape, dominating the gallery's expanse, they do so as Alvin Ailey's spirit accumulates all around them.

Edges of Ailey
Whitney Museum of American Art, through Feb. 9, 2025

Mr. Greskovic writes about dance for the Journal.

ALVIN AILEY: JAMES HAMILTON; AILEY II: JAMES HAMILTON