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Interview with William Forsythe, choreographer of art

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Si Newhouse and Anna Wintour in 2014. Photo: ©Patrick McMullan.

American artist William Forsythe's contemporary art installations are an extension of his work as a choreographer and his exhibition, which celebrates the body's movements, has just opened at the Gagosian du Bourget gallery near Paris. We talk to him about his installations, from its huge robots to the unique feather duster installations.

As William Forsythe knows, an artist doesn't start out knowing the end game. "I don't think art is particularly bounded by any form of preparation," he says in a recent interview at the Gagosian Gallery in New York. "when I first started making my very first work, a beautiful choreographer named Glen Tetley came to me very conspiratorially and said" - (whispers) "There are no rules." Clearly for this choreographer, youthful and lithe at 67, that advice has turned into something a mantra. "I now take it to mean is that there are a gazillion rules, and it's just which ones you decide to investigate," he says. "You have to find out. It's all trial and error — really." He has, as he put it, spent a lifetime trying to not repeat the same things. As the director of the Frankfurt Ballet from 1984 to 2004, Forsythe pushed his art form to physical extremes, before forming the Forsythe Company, a laboratory for a more experimental, theatrical work. "Which for me was basically fulfilling my dream of doing musicals," he says, with a laugh. He stepped away from that company in 2015, but he hasn't slowed down. In recent months, Forsythe has returned to ballet — notably, working with the Paris Opéra, Boston Ballet and San Francisco Ballet. He is the artistic advisor at the USC Choreographic Institute. He's also building a studio in Vermont, where he is based, and has continued work on an artistic project that has kept him busy since the early 1990s: a profound series of installations he calls *Choreographic Objects*. This fall, the Gagosian Le Bourget, near Paris, will host its first exhibition of *Choreographic Objects*. In these spellbinding pieces, Forsythe expands the

definition of choreography; even though dancers are absent, the works all deal with the body. Yours.

Nowhere and Everywhere at the Same Time requires spectators to weave and bob their way among hundreds of swinging pendulums. In *Scattered Crowd*, the objects are slowly shifting white balloons — gorgeous and unsettling, it takes on the eerie quiet of a blizzard. In *The Fact of Matter* the viewer is presented with the choreographic task of climbing gymnastic rings. It's harder than it looks, as Louise Neri, the director of the Gagosian Gallery, discovered firsthand. "I'm reasonably fit, and with the rings, I thought, sure," she says. "I realized how different an adult body is. We all played on jungle gyms when we were kids, but you realize how this environment is so destabilizing and so exhausting and it immediately puts you back in your body in a really humbling way. It looks so extremely simple." For Forsythe, this was partly the aim of this exercise: "You get on the rings, and you realize how heavy you are in this environment, how uncoordinated you are and how weak you are. Suddenly your body is really out of its comfort zone. The objects reintroduce you to something other than the image you had constructed of yourself as a physical being."

How safe are they? How close can you get? Developing strategies for watching the hulking objects is all part of the experience. For Forsythe, that relates to how we live now in the phenomenon of terrorism. Recently, he was in Paris with a friend; they found themselves walking down an arcade. "This particular one has no entrances to the shops, only into the center of the galerie," he says. "It was fairly recently after the last attack, and I turned to him and said, "Do you think this was a bad idea?" And he said, "Exactly."

"In other words", Forsythe continues, "this is our current reality and, like it or not, we must develop strategies for survival." In *Black Flags*, the robots infect the viewer, or the body, with a visceral reaction. "You're literally positioning yourself according to your best assessment of what would secure your survival."

The Gagosian show contrasts *Black Flags* with the smaller, decidedly delicate *Towards the Diagnostic Gaze*. In it, a feather duster sits on a block of stone. The task is to pick it up and hold it completely still. As those trembling feathers attest, it's impossible. Again, Forsythe has discovered a way to put you back in your body. "We think of ourselves as either at rest or moving," he says. "Whereas, in fact, we are constantly in motion. I didn't even realize it myself. These feather dusters register every micro-movement that your body is making." Forsythe made the discovery one day when he was in his studio, using a feather duster to brush charcoal off of a drawing. It shook and a fear overtook him: Did he, like his father, have Parkinson's disease? "I realized I could hold myself very still, but I couldn't control micro movements, which is simple muscles reacting to gravity," he says. "Is it pathological? Am I shaking too much? Is this controllable?"

strategies play a part here, too. Spectators hold their breath or adjust their arm positions. Yet the quivering persists. "Trembling is associated with weakness or vulnerability and failure, but I think it just simply points to your community," he says. In other words, you're alive. While *Towards the Diagnostic Gaze* is a miniature in comparison to *Black Flags*, both share a choreographic intent: They isolate states of being and in doing so allow the viewer to experience choreography in a way that a dancer would. More importantly, they generate a genuine reaction. Nothing, in the *Choreographic Objects* series, is dictated. Another integral component of the work is that while it may be visually beautiful it is not meant to be looked at, but experienced.

The visual art world is currently captivated by dance and performance. Few are better positioned to bridge both domains than Forsythe, who cites Marcel Duchamp and John Cage as major influences. “I would not be able to sit here in this room with you without Cage and Duchamp,” he says. “The fact that I’m crossing over is nothing new.”

“In dance, I’ve been part of the big conversation,” he explains. “I would like to be able to contribute in the same way to the visual arts. I’m trying to develop a particular facet of observation with *Choreographic Objects* that I haven’t seen anyone else do.” He smiles. “I’m like, good. That’ll be my thing.”