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Review: In 'Monochromatic Light,' Artists Saturate and Vacate Space

Tyshawn Sorey's music, initially written with Mark Rothko's abstractions in mind, comes to the Park Avenue Armory with art by Julie Mehretu.

by Jason Farago (September 28, 2022)



The composer Tyshawn Sorey, center, conducting his "Monochromatic Light (Afterlife)" at the Park Avenue Armory, where illuminated reproductions of paintings by Julie Mehretu surrounded the audience.
Credit...Jeenah Moon for The New York Times

If you write a musical composition in homage to Morton Feldman's "Rothko Chapel," and if you premiere it in the actual Rothko Chapel in Houston, you'd seem to be anchoring its meaning and context in rather firm ground. But the American composer and percussionist Tyshawn Sorey is a more restive and conjectural artist than that; and his "Monochromatic Light (Afterlife)," which commemorated the 50th anniversary of the chapel earlier this year, has come to New York rewritten, reorganized and reinvigorated.

This latest, and now staged, version of "Monochromatic Light" premiered at the Park Avenue Armory on Tuesday, and it retains the spare and ritualistic tenor of Feldman's "Rothko Chapel," with long rests between its inquiring viola phrases and soft rumbles of the timpani. Here in New York, though, Sorey's music is heard in the company not of Rothko but of another American painter: the contemporary artist Julie Mehretu, whose dense and digitally conversant abstractions flow and swarm where Rothko's brooded. The production, by the avant-garde journeyman Peter Sellars, has been souped up for the Armory's cavernous drill hall and augmented with young dancers. The running time has ballooned, too, from under an hour to a good 90 minutes.

In scaling up, Sorey may have sacrificed the ecclesiastical concentration that both he and Feldman before him had found in Houston. The night has its longeurs. But this rethought and more antagonistic "Monochromatic Light" strikes a new richness in New York, and it affirms how abstraction can give form to suffering and freedom in ways more straightforward expression so often cannot.

At the Armory, “Monochromatic Light” is staged in the round. Sorey, at center, conducts an ensemble of just three musicians, playing viola, keyboards and percussion: nearly the same instrumentation as Feldman’s “Rothko Chapel.” Singers from the Choir of Trinity Wall Street sit at a distance, and behind the audience is an octagonal gangway, with one massive reproduction of a Mehretu painting hanging above each side. Three of the eight abstractions were seen in her 2020 exhibition at Marian Goodman Gallery; one appeared this year at David Zwirner in a group show devoted to Toni Morrison; and four are new, incorporating dense layers of halftone dots, sprayed clouds of bright yellow or green and seething black squiggles.

The staging echoes Philip Johnson’s octagonal nave of the Houston chapel, but from the opening moments of gently struck tubular bells, it’s clear that Rothko’s dark reticence is being left behind. For Mehretu’s works here are not paintings but blowups on translucent screens, lit from front and back by colored spots. (The lighting designer, James F. Ingalls, a longtime Sellars collaborator, synchronizes the color adjustments across all eight paintings so that, at a given moment in the score, their backgrounds will all glow purple or aquamarine and their tremulous blacks will emerge or recede.)



Deidra “Dayntee” Braz, one of the eight dancers who performed in the Brooklyn-born style known as flex.
Credit...Jeenah Moon for The New York Times

Up on the gangway are eight dancers, one per painting, who bend and writhe throughout in a Brooklyn-born style of dancing known as flex. The performers are athletic, the men among them perform shirtless, but choreographed by Reggie Gray (also known as Regg Roc) they appear vulnerable, fragile, under threat; they contort their arms as if they’re fractured or disjointed and draw in their stomachs as if taking a punch.

The score is rangy and spatial, the tempo largo to larghissimo. (There’s no beat as such; Sorey marked time with strokes of his baton lasting a second or longer.) Its opening minutes are especially minimal. Against a long and attenuated trill of the viola, Mehretu’s backgrounds become a lurid green or mysterious blue and the black lines of the paintings start to look more querulous. The dancers moonwalk and roll their necks; their motions are smooth and spasmodic by turns, and several of them present bulging eyes and pained expressions that recall the existential intensity of *butoh*.

The dancers' broken movements, and Mehretu's colliding layers and shaking lines, bring out an anxiety in Sorey's score that probably did not come through in front of Rothko's hushed paintings in Houston. There's an angst and frailty in the scattered notes Kim Kashkashian brings from her viola, while the percussionist Steven Schick bows between the bars of a marimba to produce a spooky, theremin-like keening. The silky ah-ah-ah choral lines, a Feldman quotation that I imagine worked better amid the Rothkos, feel out of place against Mehretu's unsettled paintings, though there is sharper accompaniment from Davóne Tines, the solo bass-baritone, walking through the audience and later circumnavigating the gangway. As he wrenches forth fragments from the spiritual "Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child," the words octaves apart and isolated by long silences, the evening takes on the tone of a funeral march.



The solo bass-baritone Davóne Tines singing in front of an enlarged reproduction of a painting by Julie Mehretu, with the flex dancer Jeremy "Opt" Perez lying on the gangway below.
Credit...Jeenah Moon for The New York Times

Sorey's interpolation of a spiritual into "Monochromatic Light," as well as the dancers' channeling of Jamaican vernacular movements and the violent news imagery that Mehretu abstracts into her churning backgrounds, all imbue this threnody with the particularities of Black grief. But it resists resolution throughout. This is a work of Blackness (or blackness) in abstraction — one that defies the supposed blankness of nonobjective painting or art music on the one hand, and current market demands for social advocacy on the other. Blackness in abstraction, as the curator Adrienne Edwards has written, is a more capacious and immanent model of artistic creation than many of our institutions can handle. It requires a dual engagement with form and identity, which, in Edwards's words, "shifts analysis away from the Black artist as subject and instead emphasizes blackness as material, method and mode." It can draw as much from Rothko, whose murals in Houston are black with purplish-blue undertones, as from Du Bois or Eastman or O'Grady. It pushes past biography or storytelling, and enters the realms of the psychic, the global, the cosmic.

What I most admired about Mehretu's midcareer retrospective at the Whitney Museum of American Art last year was how she used magnitude to defy the diminishment and simplifications that even our "diversified" cultural institutions still assign to artists outside the dominant representation. Sorey's "Monochromatic Light," for all its spareness, does the same. Where Mehretu saturates space, Sorey vacates it, yet both painter and composer offer vital examples of how to create at full scale when the times impel others to reduce their ambition. This is how you speak to some and to all at once; this is how you mourn and stay free.