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Nir Arieli Captures Top Contemporary Dance Companies as They Collapse Together

ARTSY EDITORIAL

BY

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Self-portrait of Nir Arieli courtesy of the artist. © Nir Arieli

As a soldier in mandatory conscription service in Israel in 2004, the young Tel Aviv-born Nir Arieli was determined to become a military photographer. “I refused to be anything but a photographer,” Arieli tells me. And after eight months, he persevered. “After I won that war, I had the best time; it changed my life.” Thus ensued two years and four months of training his lens on the military—the air force, navy, ground forces, special units—in portraits and documentary work, covering the field or conducting interviews with soldiers and high-ranking officials. “It was then that I learned that I’m not a photojournalist, but more of a director; I like to stage and interact directly with my subject,” he says. Now a photographer based in New York, Arieli notes that his current work is completely different, save for one aspect. “Back in the military, I was photographing a lot of young men in uniforms who were concerned with their masculinity and how well they could camouflage their vulnerability,” Arieli notes. “I always had an agenda to find that gentleness and sensitivity hidden in the soldiers I photographed, which is something I do in my current work.” Arieli’s work now revolves around contemporary dancers. And while it’s a somewhat drastic change of subject, there’s a sense of control and choreographed perfection that one can’t help but trace back to the photographer’s militaristic beginnings.

Arieli’s own determination mirrors that of the esteemed dancers he photographs. “Creating a pile of bodies may sound simple, but it’s very challenging physically,” he explains. He’s referring to his most recent photography series, “Flocks,” for which he’s traveled across continents to capture some of the world’s most acclaimed contemporary dance companies, as they, in his words, “collapse together en masse.”



Nir Arieli, *Batsheva Dance Company*, 2013. Photo courtesy of the artist. © Nir Arieli

The results are large-scale photographs of sinewy tangles of nearly-nude, lithe bodies, of varying genders, races, and ages—which go on view at Daniel Cooney Fine Art in New York this week. The series is stunningly cohesive despite the 16 discrete dance companies (representing distinct styles and cultures) that the series comprises. “Ballet Hispanico’s work, for example, is heavily influenced by the colors, flavors, and style of the Spanish and Latin world, whereas Les Ballet Trockadero de Monte Carlo are dancing on pointe shoes in full drag!” Arieli offers. “They are very different in style but I feel that the images created for my project are shedding light on something fundamental and common about how dancers physically communicate; it exposes a universal intimacy that all companies share.”

“The reason I love working with dancers so much is that they are artists themselves, and are very much collaborators in the process,” Arieli muses.

“They just get it.” He first began shooting dancers while studying at School of Visual Arts in New York in 2010; at the same time, his cousin was studying dance at Juilliard. “My cousin Tal is an incredible dancer,” Arieli explains. “He introduced me to his dancer friends and exposed me to their performances. The first time I went to a dance show, I was already in my twenties, but I found it fascinating right away.” His respect and genuine awe for dancers has come across in multiple past projects. His 2012 series “Tension” focused on the otherworldly range of motion that dancers achieve; his 2014 “Inframen” series of infrared photographs exposed the physical duress that their bodies undergo.

The project originated from a conversation Arieli had with his cousin, in which he recalled that a professor once said “A dancer is always in the -ing,” emphasizing that a dancer is always doing something. “I started thinking about a project that would investigate what happens after the movement is over, and when the dancer’s body is at rest,” Arieli explains. He had already begun thinking about somehow shooting piles of dancers when a friend from Israel’s Batsheva Dance Company asked him to shoot them for a poster to advertise an upcoming performance. The Batsheva dancers took the idea without hesitation and the success of the resulting image inspired the “Flocks” series. A major endeavor followed, which saw the photographer working with some 20 different companies (16 were included in the final project and 9 are represented in the show at Daniel Cooney). “I realized that each company would have a completely different way to approach this task, and I was interested in how that process and result would reflect the company’s unique voice.”



Nir Arieli, *Shen Wei Dance Arts*, 2014. Photo courtesy of the artist. © Nir Arieli



Arieli had exactly an hour with each company, which included time spent explaining the project and setting up the space. He gave them prompts like “release the movement from your body,” “let your body parts intertwine with the other members of the company,” “let your head fall back,” and “don’t allow any spaces to form between you”—but left the specifics up to the dancers to direct and interpret. “In contemporary dance, the dancers are often contributors to the choreography process,” he explains. “They are required to

bring their unique movement and not just imitate the choreographer, but to offer interpretation and originality to the piece created—that is exactly what I was looking for.”

Ranging from images of towering heaps of bodies to close-ups of arms, legs, and faces (with their eyes closed peacefully, as though they’re caught in a deep slumber), the photographs encompass ingenuity, cooperation, collaboration, and diversity. “The contemporary dance world, much more than the classical one, is pretty diverse by definition,” Arieli notes. “My focus was on the quality of work that the company makes and the quality of dancers they have. I wanted the most intelligent and capable dancers because I knew they would produce the most complex images.”

Arieli’s “Flocks” are perhaps his most revelatory works yet. While delving into the intimacy and trust that dancers share with one another, and foregrounding their flawless forms, he offers a window into the behind-the-scenes relationships that don’t come across during a staged performance. Despite being caught in repose, often with their eyes closed, the dancers appear to simultaneously feed off of and find comfort in one another. Arieli captures a sense of energy—a physical and psychological pull that binds them together.



Nir Arieli, *Ballet Hispanico (Close-up)*, 2014. Photo courtesy of the artist. © Nir Arieli

“The truth is, I don’t dance at all, not even at a party,” Arieli admits. “I admire dancers because they can do what seems impossible to me. The training process of a dancer teaches the body to do things that it can’t do naturally. I observe it like a child; it’s like a superpower to me.”

—Casey Lesser

“Flocks” is on view at Daniel Cooney Fine Art, New York, April 21–June 4, 2016.