

VAN DOREN WAXTER

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Alan Shields' art in motion at the Aspen Art Museum

by Andrew Travers | July 7, 2016



“Everybody Knows Korolowitz” Photo by Jeremy Wallace

The curious and often large-scale sculptures and paintings of Alan Shields prod you to move. You have to walk under them, around them, lean over them. Twenty-four of Shields’ multi-colored works hang from the ceiling, rise from the floor and wrap the walls of two galleries at the Aspen Art Museum.

“The works affect you — they’re in your physical space, but you also affect them when you’re in their physical space,” Aspen Art Museum director Heidi Zuckerman said last week on a walk through of the exhibition, “Protracted Simplicity (1966-1985),” which is on view through Oct. 2.

The anchor of the show is the massive cylindrical “Everybody Knows Korolowitz” — measuring more than 7 feet high and 16 feet in diameter, you must walk around it to take it in piece-by-piece and tie-dyed color scheme by color scheme. Meanwhile, its girth won’t let you see the whole gallery at once, making you migrate around it. Other works resemble tents and pyramids — there

are tall painted poles and there are mobiles that sway as you pass along with a netted canvas rising from a mirror on the floor that beckons you to lean over it and see yourself and the undercarriage of the painted sculpture.

Because these works relate so directly to the body and motion, the museum this spring commissioned a site-specific dance piece to respond to it. Choreographed by Adrianna Thompson, best known locally as the dance director of the Aspen Fringe Festival and as a teacher at the Aspen Santa Fe Ballet School, it will be performed for the public today by her San Francisco-based dance company, Soulskin. The company made its local debut at last month's Fringe Fest, performing Thompson's "A Pop Culture Journey."

"His work is so much about negative space, and so is contemporary dance," Thompson said. "The dance is complementing the art."

Shields' works — many of them not exhibited in years — are on loan from galleries, museums and private collectors across the U.S. He grew up in Kansas, moved to New York in 1968 and, soon after a wildly successful first show at Paula Cooper Gallery, retreated to Shelter Island, New York, where he fished in his handmade boat, captained a ferry and made art until his death in 2005. He often makes use of fishing tools in his artwork.

"It's important to note how much time he spent on water, on boats and fishing, because when you get that idea of how you throw a net or create a line or feed a line, you can see those influences formally in the work," Zuckerman said.

As Thompson choreographed, she commissioned original music for the performance from Berkeley-based composer Noah Solomon. Apropos of Shields' life on water, Solomon built an instrument for the composition that uses fishing line as guitar string.

"When I first heard it I was like, 'Whoa, I haven't heard anything like this before,'" Thompson said.

Thompson and her five dancers prepared for the piece on the West Coast, working from photos of Shields' work and drawings of the exhibition's layout. This week they have been rehearsing after-hours in the museum, perfecting a ballet that will run through both of the ground floor galleries.

"The dancers are moving in both rooms, so the audience has to move with it," Thompson said.