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Maria Hassabi's Distorted Mirror

At Tai Kwun, Hong Kong, the artist presents 'live commissions' that posit a relational fix to our fragmented media environment



BY HARRY BURKE IN EXHIBITION REVIEWS | 17 NOV 23



'What does the baby see when he or she looks at the mother's face?' asked British psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott in his influential paper 'Mirror role of Mother and Family in Child Development' (1967). 'Ordinarily,' he went on to explain, 'what the baby sees is himself or herself.' Known as mirroring, this trust-building process positions us, from our earliest experiences, as relational beings.



Maria Hassabi, *I'll Be Your Mirror*, 2023, exhibition view. Courtesy: Tai Kwun; photograph: Thomas Porvaz

Maria Hassabi's *I'll Be Your Mirror* – her first solo show in Asia – features two new commissions that probe the mirror as a formal and psychological device. Drawing from the vocabularies of art and theatre, the works are what the artist refers to, in the exhibition literature, as 'live installations': two slow, solo dances, which share a soundtrack, performed throughout the show's six week run. *White Out* (all works 2023) takes place in a large, bright-white cube with a white carpet and two centrally placed, museum-style benches covered in gold acrylic. The same reflective polymer coats the walls and floor of the adjacent gallery which houses the titular piece, *I'll Be Your Mirror*.



Maria Hassabi, *White Out*, 2023, installation view. Courtesy: Tai Kwun; photograph: Thomas Porvaz

Unlike many of the artist's prior works, both installations feature objects: in *White Out*, an untitled portrait of a dancer lying on a mirrored floor is draped over a minimalist golden sculpture, while a series of impressionistic photographs hang on the walls of *I'll Be Your Mirror*. The last decade has seen a growing wave of 'hybrid practices' – to use art historian Amelia Jones's label from 'Material Traces' (2015) – that combine performance with material forms, ranging from documentation to architecture. Such work, Jones observes, disrupts art's commitment to stable, saleable commodities as well as performance's emphasis upon process. Here, four untitled prints of performers' bodies merging into hazy, gold mirrors, made during rehearsals, highlight Hassabi's interest in blurring these terms.



Maria Hassabi, *I'll Be Your Mirror*, 2023, exhibition view. Courtesy: Tai Kwun; photograph: Thomas Porvaz

During performances, the cloudy and vague reflections of the dancers in the gleaming acrylic serve to muddy the distinction between appearance and reality. To me, these experiments with distortion read as a commentary upon today's global media environment, which is increasingly flooded with misinformation and manipulation. The show seems to imply, though, that if there's a fix to that monetized and fragmented landscape, it's relational, not technological. Near the end of *I'll Be Your Mirror*, the performer lowers themselves to the ground, their body sprawled alongside a low, golden stage, muscles trembling as they move. Witnessing the prolonged drama of dance stilled almost to a static tableau requires the audience themselves to slow down and, consciously or not, to echo the act in front of them and be part of it. Winnicott stresses that mirroring is a 'two-way process'; likewise, Hassabi's theatre of quiet, mirrored gestures speaks to the value of reciprocity, not just self-reflection. What, the artist asks, do we see in each other?



Maria Hassabi, *White Out*, 2023, installation view. Courtesy: Tai Kwun; photograph: Thomas Porvaz

In the opening section of *I'll Be Your Mirror*, the performer inches along one wall, at first sliding their head, arm and foot against it, then pressing their back and outstretched arms into it. Occasionally, visitors shuffle out of the way, while others drift around the room to gain better views. The exhibition resonates most deeply when these movements are understood as part of the choreography. For, while the solo dances test the limitations of the individual body, these 'live installations' explore the subtle interactions that constitute the collective whole. In a neat paradox, Hassabi's warped mirrors invite us to look outwards rather than inwards.

Maria Hassabi's I'll Be Your Mirror is on view at Tai Kwun until 26 November.

Main image: Maria Hassabi, *White Out*, 2023, live installation. Courtesy: Tai Kwun; photograph: Thomas Porvaz



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