

# Roundtable Review: Maria Hassabi's "I'll Be Your Mirror"

BY THE EDITORS



Hong Kong, 2023. Dancer Adam Russell-Jones. Photo by Thomas Porawa. Courtesy the artist and Tai Kwun Contemporary.

**Oct 13–Nov 26**

**Maria Hassabi: "I'll Be Your Mirror"**

**Tai Kwun Contemporary**

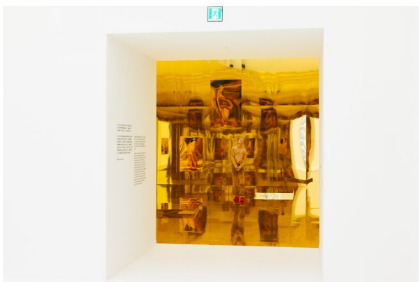
**Hong Kong**

## Explorations of the Gaze

Above a velvet-white carpet, dancers laid on golden reflective blocks, almost frozen in place. As one observed them, a pictorial composition emerged, their bodies sustained by the stillness in the air. Indiscernible sounds came from white-color speakers positioned around the space, a soundscape emerging from through the clashes of long-held tones—another site of tension created through suspension. Cold, white light evenly illuminated the entire gallery, casting no discernible shadows, leaving the dancers and the audience exposed to the gazes between them. The choreography of *White Out* (2023) was marked by minuscule gestural movements that were unsettling yet mesmerizing. Hassabi choreographed a moving canvas that momentarily disturbed our perception of the time-space continuum.

Often, we put stage designs and costumes as supplements to the choreography and the happenings in performance art. Yet, in the works comprising Maria Hassabi's "I'll Be Your Mirror," they are almost as important as the choreography itself for a simple reason: the environment and the installations serve as dramaturgic devices for creating the distance of perspective and the tension between ephemeral bodies and permanent stillness. Such an exploration of gaze extended from *White Out* to the other room through the reflective golden surface covering the whole gallery from floor to the walls, an extension of the visual hints found on the blocks and bench in the first gallery. As remarkable as the spatial contrast is, the "mirrors" amplified and projected our gazes into an echo chamber of infinite reflection. In *I'll Be Your Mirror* (2023) Hassabi created a space of disorientation and further intensified the dramatics between the gazes of audiences and dancers, leading us into the endless mirage of contemplation.

— Alex Yiu



MARIA HASSABI, *I'll Be Your Mirror*, 2023, live installation, mixed medium, dimensions variable, at "Maria Hassabi: I'll Be Your Mirror," Tai Kwun Contemporary, Hong Kong, 2023. Dancer Mickey Mahar. Photo by Thomas Porawa. Courtesy the artist and Tai Kwun Contemporary.

## Experiencing Contradictions Firsthand

For Maria Hassabi's Asian solo debut, the artist transformed a giant gallery of Tai Kwun Contemporary into a white tundra. Confronting visitors was a vast carpeted floor, bare white walls, and possibly even whiter, squint-inducing lighting, complemented by a white-noise audio track of soft whistling, as if winds were billowing inside the room. Audience members lined the walls and sat directly on the carpet, transfixed by the model-esque dancers in the center of the room painstakingly inching their bodies over golden benches. If not for their muscles involuntarily spasming, one could scarcely tell they were moving at all. Juxtaposing with the white desert, the dancers were dressed in gold jumpsuits and neon red Air Force 1s, a wardrobe so disparate from their airy, curated surroundings it appeared as if the cast of a pop-music video had been sedated and wandered into a gallery. But among the many contrasts explored in Hassabi's performance, this one felt underdeveloped.

As time passed, the once-hypnotized audience began to shift their weight, chat, and venture into the adjacent "gold room," a smaller space lined with mirrored panels that reflected everyone's movements into a kaleidoscope of gold-tinted gestures. The visual-auditory appeal of this secondary environment was undeniable, particularly when the ambient, psychedelic track was playing (at one point it unintentionally stalled), but it remained elusive as to what the different expressions of gold that Hassabi presented—"as a color in divination, as a symbolic representation of capitalism, or even a kitsch sample from pop culture"—aimed to convey. Instead, the installation created a meditative, almost overwhelming sensory environment that allowed viewers to experience these contradictions firsthand. Inducing audiences into a trance-like state, the dichotomy between bodies flowing in and out of Hassabi's harsh white room and the ethereal golden expanse appeared all the more striking.

— Anna Lentchner



MARIA HASSABI, *I'll Be Your Mirror*, 2023, live installation, mixed medium, dimensions variable, at "Maria Hassabi: I'll Be Your Mirror," Tai Kwun Contemporary, Hong Kong, 2023. Dancer Mickey Mahar. Photo by Thomas Porawa. Courtesy the artist and Tai Kwun Contemporary.

## Live, but Not Alive

Have you ever been alone in a room with a painting or a statue, and after a while it feels like it is watching you? I had a moment like that with Maria Hassabi performing in *I'll Be Your Mirror* in the towering gold-walled gallery of Tai Kwun Contemporary, when I felt the presence of the performer almost as an uncanny encounter ("Was she looking at me?"). The charged aliveness of that moment surprised me—but, objectively, what should be surprising about a performer being alive? When standing and seemingly staring at her own statuesque reflection in the golden panels, her distorted self-image reflected around the room like the large photographic images embedded in the walls. The liveness of the performance, the fidelity of the pictorial, and the stateness of the sculptural all felt glitched and confused, so that the categories of art and the qualities that we unconsciously associate with them no longer aligned.

In 2016, Claire Bishop wrote about Hassabi's work *PLASTIC* (2015) at the Museum of Modern Art in New York as being a "dead performance," with dancers' lying across the floors and staircases of the museum with an "abject horizontality." The confusions evoked by Hassabi's performance works—between the living and the moving—and the way that she takes performance off the stage and brings it into the static-object realm of an art space does still resonate, though perhaps not as evocatively as it once has. This modality of glacially slow-moving bodies in the gallery space has regrettably become a trope, one appropriated by many other artists and performers. While in awe at the dancers' abilities and intensities, I found myself less captivated by the movements themselves or my experience of their duration as extended and warped by the slowness of the performers. The associations with fashion branding were hard to shake loose though I didn't find them mind-shaking either—given the pristine, highly designed setting. White carpets and shiny gold objects speak to luxury fashion interiors and normatively or narrowly "glamorous" bodies attained by those with the means to afford such manicured appearances. The cold world of *I'll Be Your Mirror* kept the messy, social, human world at bay, which perhaps was why my time with the performers felt much less alive in my mind in the weeks after. The work was live but felt barely living.

— HG Masters