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'Slow Dance' show at the MCA is an invitation to just 'be.' Don't mind the live bodies.



Dancers Amanda Maraist, left, and Hanna DiLorenzo perform in the "Slow Dance" exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art on Oct. 13, 2026, in Chicago. (Armando L. Sanchez/Chicago Tribune)

By LAUREN WARNECKE | For Chicago Tribune
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A new exhibit at the Museum of Contemporary Art poses the question of how it feels to sit still.

"What is the exhibition space actually for?" asked artist Gordon Hall, whose work is part of "Slow Dance" at the MCA. "It's a place to be, to look and to think."

"Slow Dance's" six works explore various states of anticipation, preparation and idleness. Nearly all include some sort of performance activation, so depending on when you come, you could find dancers draped across the architecture at some point along the circular journey through the Sylvia Neil and Daniel Fischel Galleries.

Curator Jadine Collingwood said this sometimes creates moments of surprise as patrons come across other humans reclining on the art. It is both an invitation and a provocation to stay and witness as these sometimes literal slow dances unfold.

“Performance has been something that was always in the DNA of the MCA,” Collingwood said.

Indeed, Carolee Schneemann performed “Illinois Central” in 1968, just a year after the museum opened. It was an example of what Schneemann called “kinetic theater,” in which eight performers built quasi papier-mache shells around themselves over the course of 90 minutes. During a 1975 exhibition called “Bodyworks,” performance artist Chris Burden reclined on a gallery floor for 45 hours until a staff member brought him a glass of water, bringing the performance to an end.

“When we built our new building, we now have a full proscenium theater,” Collingwood said. “And there was this moment that bifurcated where performance was happening.”

Bifurcated, yes, and nearly severed altogether as the museum’s Edlis Neeson Theater got increasingly less use by the MCA itself for about the last decade. Bringing in Joey Orr, a new chief curator with a performance background, along with a major financial gift has helped the MCA return some of its focus toward live performance. And “Slow Dance,” brings a sense of liveness back to the galleries themselves.

“We’re really in a moment where we’re returning back to our roots and thinking about how the legacy of in-gallery performance has been important,” Collingwood said. “This exhibition is thinking about that legacy, but also what we understand performance to be.”

By we, she means all of us: the sculptors, textile and sound artists, the performers who take up “Slow Dance’s” six rooms — and the patrons invited to witness it.

“I was particularly interested in thinking about, on the one hand, the literal performance of bodies in space,” Collingwood said. “And then, on the other, the contemporary demands to ‘perform’ that we encounter: whether that be in an economic sense, where we’re constantly asked to adapt, optimize, or on social media. We all know that we adapt these personas.”

Geumhyung Jeong’s “Making Show,” for example, is a table strewn with partially built humanoid animatronics, accompanied by video of the artist laboring over them.

In “Warm Up,” Cally Spooner performs calisthenics beside an antique wardrobe, preparing for a performance that never takes place.

The view of Melanie McLain’s “Peripersonal,” which had its final live activations on Oct. 18, seems loosely informed by some of life’s most intimate moments and the semi-privacy afforded by, for example, a not-quite-full-sized curtain at the doctor’s office.

In its final showing, performers Erin Kilmurray and Amanda Maraist, dressed in mauve and sage gym shorts and socks to match the installation's dingy tones, were partially occluded no matter where you stood. They fold themselves across and around partitions in intentionally awry postures not totally unlike the contortions required while getting a mammogram.

Our challenge as spectators is to see how long we can watch and what happens internally as we do. The choices patrons make encountering those live bodies — and sometimes, how startled they are by them — are part of the magic for Collingwood and artist Brendan Fernandes, whose 2019 piece called "Inaction" is part of the show.

Dancers perform an improvised score fashioned after children's games, interacting with structural elements loosely based on geometric playground structures. Those activations take place in January.

"Thinking through my work, it's always about using the etiquettes and the structure of theater and dance but then inverting it and giving a new form to it," Fernandes said. "Dance in the museum is not new, but the way that this exhibition does it allows it to be more interactive."

Hall's "Hands and Knees" doesn't get its turn until February, when Maud Grauer, Jamilia Greene, Steven Hou, Michael Orr, Jessica Taylor, Tina Wang and Jean Wildest will perform several times in one-hour stretches. During the performances, "lifters" move gurney-like platforms, in the process creating reclinable structures out of pairs of unsuitable chairs for the "recliners" to sit or lie in repose.

That is only half of the performance. Perhaps an unintended nod to Burden's 45 hours on the MCA's floor, a second movement score involves museum staff rearranging the pieces out of view, after hours.

"I wanted to make something that didn't have one final arrangement but always had the possibility of being different and changing," Hall said.

But Hall considers himself a sculptor, not a choreographer. So, you're not missing anything if you come upon "Hands and Knees" outside the performance windows.

"I think of the work as completely done even if there's nobody performing with it."

The piece was first curated in 2025 for The Kitchen, a New York gallery. This iteration of "Hands and Knees" is more antiseptic, placed in a bare, white-walled, windowless gallery in the belly of the exhibition.

"I was so thrilled to see it in a space where you could really see the objects more clearly," Hall said.

For years, he has been researching the idea of waiting. “What’s fascinating to me about waiting as a topic is this huge range of experiences that happen within it,” he said. “How much power and status you have in a society can be directly mapped onto how much you have to wait — for all kinds of things.”

Asylum claims, prison, a police interrogation room or a hospital waiting room, for example. These are some of the more hostile forms of waiting imposed on people when they are most vulnerable.

“On the other hand, in small doses, when it’s consensual, or when it’s made tolerable in various ways — including something as simple as a bench in public space — it can be an incredibly rich experience.”

The more pleasurable aspects of waiting is also increasingly rare as life’s more mundane moments of in-betweenness — waiting in line at the DMV, waiting for a bus, waiting to see the dentist — are filled with pacifying tiny computers in our pockets and handbags.

No one’s taking away your phone at the MCA, though some entertainment venues and artists have experimented with requiring patrons to leave their devices at the door.

It’s more a challenge than a requirement to sit, be, think — do a slow dance with the art, so to speak.

“What we’re asking from our audiences is participatory,” Fernandes said. “You can come to a museum. You can saunter and wander and look at things — which is also choreography and performance — but here, we’re asking the audience to pay attention. To do things differently.”