



A Body in Fukushima – A Window To Awareness

By CHARMAGNE ECKERT/Photos By William Johnston

It began in a train station with the contemplation of motion and stillness, place and destination. It began with contrast and friendship, with aesthetic expression, and the



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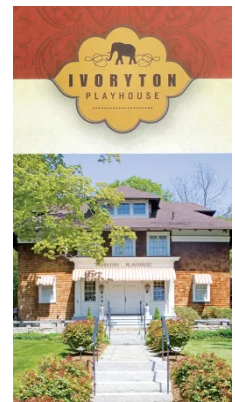
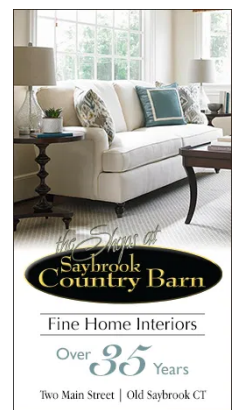
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recognition of human responsibility. For choreographer/dancer Eiko Otake (Eiko) and photographer William Johnston, their collaborative exhibit titled, A Body in Fukushima and Eiko's complimentary solo performance, A Body in Places, is truly a journey – not only for the artists, but also for any viewer fortunate enough to encounter this commanding presentation.

Opening Thursday February 5, 2015 at Wesleyan University in Middletown, Connecticut, the exhibit is a fusion of Eiko's expressive movement captured by Johnston's stunning, large format photographic images taken at Fukushima, Japan in the aftermath of the devastating tsunami and nuclear disaster. While Johnston's representations of Eiko at Fukushima project an austere beauty that is effective from a purely aesthetic perspective, he is clear, that in this instance, the beauty is in service to the impact it might have on the perceiver. He needed the photos to be a window through which the observer might have a visceral encounter with Eiko's expression. He explains, "It was important to me [that I] create [images] with Eiko which are so powerful that they have to capture the viewer's eye in a way that makes [the viewer] confront these large issues. That's what this is all about for me." In keeping with Eiko's creative exploration of 'body' and 'place' as a conduit for understanding, the works will be displayed in all three of the university's gallery spaces simultaneously; and Eiko will perform A Body in Places in a variety of locations across campus.

Eiko, (who has danced for the past 40 years with her husband and creative partner Koma as the duo Eiko and Koma), is for the first time expanding into the realm of solo artist. She brings to her lone venture not only her remarkable sensitivity as a dancer, but also the expertise gathered from her years of collaboration with Koma. She thoughtfully employs a keen understanding of choreography and visual elements including sets, costumes, and sound-design to create a complete sensory experience for her viewers. As with Johnston's images, her dances employ heart wrenching beauty in the service of provoking thought. Her first solo performance, A Body in a Station, presented by the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts in Philadelphia's grand 30th



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Street Station, was executed over four consecutive weeks in October of 2014.

It was from this initial piece, A Body in a Station, that her current work was born. As she was beginning to develop her concepts for the busy train concourse in Philadelphia, Eiko recalled the very different stations she had visited in 2011 in Fukushima; uninhabited as a result of the Daiichi nuclear plant accident. "When I saw those empty stations, I felt such deep anger and remorse – [having] studied and taught about the atomic bomb – why did I not pay deeper attention to nuclear energy and [the potential] environmental hazard? I wanted to face that remorse, to dance that remorse," she recalls. To help her explore the correlations of the dynamic between the crowded bustle of the 30th Street edifice and the deserted platforms of Fukushima, Eiko sought out her long time colleague and friend, William Johnston.

Johnston, Professor of History, East Asian Studies, and Science in Society at Wesleyan, is also an accomplished photographer. He has studied photography with J. Seeley, Ralph Gibson, and platinum printing with George Tice, Robert Hennessey, and Sal Lopes and has produced several bodies of photographic work. For Johnston photography is a "creative compulsion," and though he continually strives to develop techniques in both film and digital formats, he retains an intuitive spontaneity that is reflected in the dramatic clarity of his photos. His interest in images goes back to a childhood fascination with the scenes captured in the National Geographic and Life Magazines that his family collected. In high school he adopted his parents' Argus c3 camera and shot frame after frame of the hills near his home in Rawlins, Wyoming; even then, looking for the interplay between light, contrast, form, and space. From an early age he gravitated towards painting and drawing and credits his exploration of those mediums during college and graduate school with the development of his sense of color, form, and composition. He also brings to his creative expression a thorough knowledge of historical context (his academic specialization is Modern Japanese History) and his sensibilities as a dedicated practitioner of Zen Buddhism.

Though this is the first artistic collaboration between the two, Johnston and Eiko have co-taught courses on Japan and the atomic bomb, and more recently on the environmental ramifications of Mountain Top Removal mining in West Virginia.

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Both are passionate about the need for environmental stewardship and about their desire to find ways to communicate the importance of the relationship between humanity and our shared ecosystem. The result of their creative collaboration is a fascinating interplay between Eiko's live and in-the-moment performance work and Johnston's dynamic images captured through the aperture of his camera.

In January, and again in July of 2014, Eiko and Johnston journeyed to the abandoned Fukushima prefecture in Japan and it was there that the diptych of *A Body in Places* and *A Body in Fukushima* began its genesis. Although the original intention had been to focus on the train stations, once Eiko and Johnston arrived in Fukushima the visual and emotional impact of the site immediately demanded a broader perspective from them. They found themselves near a deserted farmhouse where evidence of displaced domesticity lay in stark contrast to mangled concrete and metal. Struck by the raw imagery, Johnston suggested that Eiko begin her interaction with the devastated environment right there, rather than limiting it to the stations.

"We went by this big old farm house, and it just blew me away; so I said [to Eiko] why don't you do something here? She did, and that's where suddenly it became, 'A Body in Places.' At that point there could be a non-material connection with the people there – through Eiko's body interacting with the material place [of Fukushima]," Johnston says. As Eiko danced a physical and emotional duet with the environment of Fukushima, the concept clarified for her as well, "I started to dance in people's yards – no one was living there – so then the [original] idea transformed. I liked this idea and [utilizing] Fukushima as a place and how that might [link] to other places. Because Bill was with me, I was able to expand – if I had been alone, I would have been focusing on only the stations."

Since the performance of *A Body in a Station* in October, Eiko has developed the intention of utilizing her body as a direct medium of expression and communication even further. She is finding her identity as a solo performer...what it means to dance without having Koma to provide the dramatic tension, instead exploring ways to find the interaction within herself and with her new partners – the audience members and the place of performance itself. "When I am alone I don't have another person so I [am able to] do moves of my own and I am [simultaneously] choreographer

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and dancer. So everything is within my relationship to place and the audience. I become both the passive and the active. I have to be very aware of this tension. Sometimes I will dance more with the space, sometimes more with the people; and then, sometimes with my own memories of Fukushima," she explains.

This aspect of utilizing her body as a conduit through which to share place and experience – what Johnston refers to as the, “non-material connection through the body’s interaction with the material place,” is part of what Eiko wants to express in her presentations at Wesleyan. For her performance in the Olin Library she anticipates finding additional movement partners within the books on the shelves and, through them indirectly, with the writers and the readers of those books. She hopes to eventually move off campus into community settings and her enthusiasm escalates as she describes the possibilities, “I want to perform in banks, post offices – after hours. People have a vision of [what a place is and means], and then I appear and I spoil it. And then there is memory, so next time they come to the post office they remember. People will see the place in a new way every time they return to it. They all have bodies, I have a body, this will give them the opportunity to share – through the human body.”

The particular questions around atomic energy and environmental responsibility that are so clearly expressed by Johnston’s images of Eiko dancing in the post-tsunami landscape remain central to the upcoming A Body in Fukushima exhibit at Wesleyan. For both artists, the desire to help viewers to a fuller understanding of themselves and the world remains fundamental. As Johnston expresses it, “For me art is something where the person having experienced it, then perceives the world differently somehow. If my work has done that in some way, I’m really, really happy.”

Artist Talk with Eiko Otake and William Johnston:

Thursday, February 5, 2015 at 5:30pm

CFA Hall. Following the talk will be a walking tour of the three galleries with a reception in each location. The event is free of charge. Snow date: Tuesday, February 10, 2015

For Additional Information Visit: <http://www.wesleyan.edu/cfa>

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