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ARTS & THEATER

# Wesleyan Photo Exhibit Depicts 2011 Nuclear Disaster In Japan

By **SUSAN DUNNE**  
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Eiko in Fukushima, Tomioka No. 1104, 22 July 2014. (William Johnston)

A new art event at Wesleyan University in Middletown consists of a series of still photographs of Professor Eiko Otake dancing, freeform, elegantly, draped in a variety of handsome fabrics. What is extraordinary about the photos isn't just Otake's dynamic presence, but what is in the background: a nuclear wasteland.

Otake, a native of Japan, returned to her homeland after the 2011 Fukushima Daiichi power plant disaster, to fuel her outrage. "[The disaster] really gives a clear end to the mythology that the more development, the better," she said, referring to Japan's post-WWII economic boom. "When something happens that we always knew very clearly would happen, that's negligence. That negligence made it happen. And the greed of corporations."

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On that trip, Otake got as close as she could to the disaster area. "I had to push myself to go first. It's not a pretty place to go. There is such a sense of failure, such devastation," Otake said. "This is another atomic bomb, a different kind of explosion but the same kind of radiation."

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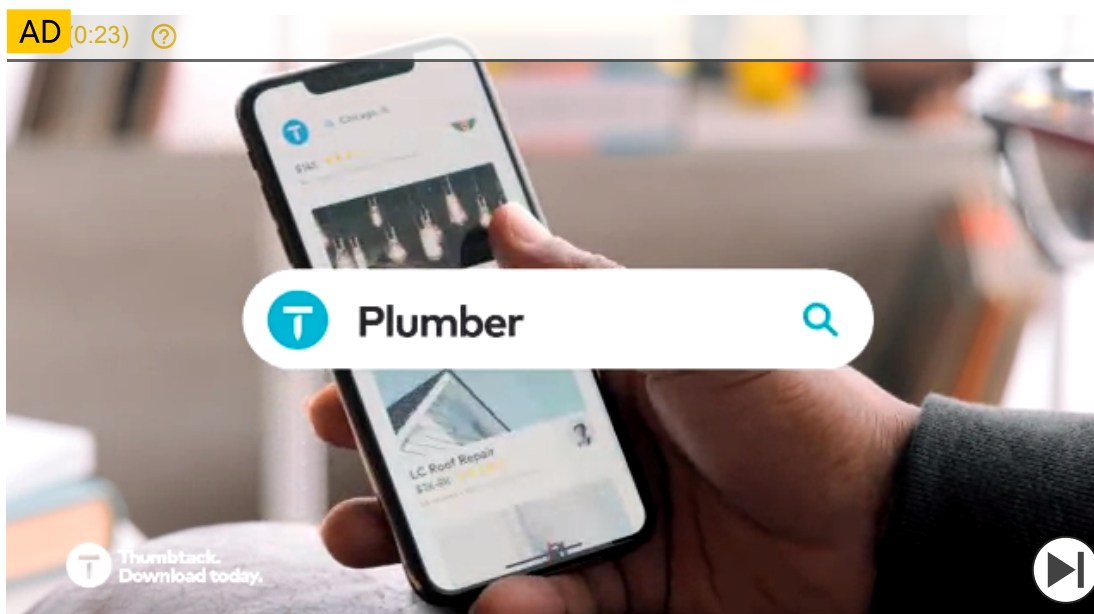
She went back to Connecticut and recruited her colleague, Professor William Johnston, to go back with her and photograph her in the evacuated zones. The result of their two trips to Japan is the exhibit "A Body in Fukushima."

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"A Body in Fukushima" marks the first time the university's three art spaces — the Ezra and Cecile Zilkha Gallery, the Davison Art Center and the College of East Asian Studies Gallery at Mansfield Freeman Center — have mounted an exhibit together. A series of 13.3-by-20-inch photos are in the Zilkha and the DAC, and a 8-foot-by-12-foot slide show of photos is at the Mansfield Freeman.

On March 11, 2011, a magnitude 9 earthquake, followed by a tsunami with waves up to 40 meters high, triggered a meltdown the next day in three nuclear reactors at the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant. In the triple disaster, more than 18,000 people were killed or vanished, hundreds of thousands of buildings suffered total or partial damage and the entire region, hundreds of thousands of people, was evacuated. To this day the irradiated area is unfit for human habitation, for kilometers around the nuclear plant. A once productive area is now a collection of ghost towns: homes, businesses, railroad stations never repaired and glutted with debris, sea walls broken up and scattered all over beaches, farmlands without crops, a fishing industry disappeared, a clock at a beauty parlor stopped at 2:46 p.m., when the earthquake hit.

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Johnston said he and Otake drove to visit the evacuated areas, whose varied levels of damage reflect the triple nature of the disaster. "The devastation was just overwhelming from the earthquake and tsunami, but in the second stories of houses, things were sort of OK still," he said. "Then the reactor happened the next day."

The contents of even less-damaged buildings became contaminated and had to be left behind. To add insult to injury, many evacuees continue to pay mortgages on

homes they may never see again. Many of the evacuees are dying of stress-related issues, Johnston said.

Johnston and Otake, who got as close as 7.9 kilometers from the plant, were especially touched by the railroad stations. "The stations were built for the train to come. That's not going to happen," Otake said. "The waiting room is just sitting there. It's grotesque, the dead-endness."

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and Johnston, and cleanup workers who go home elsewhere at night, the region is eerily empty of human life. But plant life remains. "You see these gorgeous orange flowers, but it's still a melancholy experience," said Clare Rogan, curator at the DAC. "The cherry blossom trees still blossom, and people in Japan love cherry blossoms, but nobody comes to see them. Sunflowers grow, but they are radioactive."

Otake called the photography series "not a call to action, but a call to develop consciousness, to stop and hesitate and see the failure."

**"A BODY IN FUKUSHIMA"** *will be at Ezra and Cecile Zilkha Gallery until March 1, at Davison Art Center until March 5 and at College of East Asian Studies Gallery at Mansfield Freeman Center until May 24. "at Wesleyan University in Middletown. Eiko Otake will perform "A Body in Places" in the Olin Library on campus on Monday, Feb. 23, at 10 p.m. [wesleyan.edu/cfa](https://wesleyan.edu/cfa).*

*Editor's note: This version has been edited from a previous version of the story to correct the spelling of Johnston's last name.*

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