

Review: Eiko Otake Holds a Mourning Service at Rush Hour

By Siobhan Burke

June 24, 2015

A strong wind was picking up on Tuesday afternoon as the choreographer Eiko Otake drifted along one side of the new Fulton Center in Lower Manhattan. In a pale yellow robe, with paler powdered skin and a bouquet of weeds in hand, she cut a striking image at rush hour, slower and ghostlier than anything around her. Onlookers trailed her with smartphones and cameras as she approached a propped-open door. She paused to shed her sandals, as if entering someone's home.

For the next 60 minutes, Ms. Otake offered “A Body in a Station,” the latest phase of her first solo project, “A Body in Places.” (For most of her 40-year career, she has performed with her husband, Koma.)

Part of the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council's River to River festival, this was the first in a series of New York performances that will continue in the East Village next winter, presented by Danspace Project. Mark your calendars now.

The term site-specific tends to get tossed around, but Ms. Otake's work is actually specific to its site, profoundly and urgently so. This iteration of “A Body in a Station,” which follows last year's marathon version in Philadelphia and the related exhibition “A Body in Fukushima,” captures the impact of 9/11 on the Fulton Street station, where nine subway lines meet, and the surrounding blocks. It's a sublime mourning.

A pool of red fabric and a thin futon, covered in a white silken sheet, awaited Ms. Otake on the station's upper level, at the end of her long entrance. Sinking to her knees, she pulled back the sheet with brittle fingers, slid under it and back out — all at her arrestingly glacial pace, a quality refined over decades of moving slowly. A swatch of red appeared in her palm, the beginning of something less cool and more carnal, of red engulfing white, as she upended her place of rest.

It's impossible to recount every detail, yet tempting: Each resonated so intensely, from her breaking apart of the parched bouquet to her brandishing of the red sheet, as she descended to the lower level and back up, gathering speed. The audience members did their best to follow. The distractions of a bustling transit hub, including T-Mobile ads flashing “fast just got even faster,” barely registered. There was Ms. Otake and little else, until she slipped out another door, back onto the street.

The next few hours brought thunder and lightning and a sunset that everyone was talking about. It seemed as if she had summoned them all.