

Eiko: A Dancer's Urgent Body in a Sacred Space

By Gia Kourlas

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“Look!” Eiko Otake said gleefully, pointing to a group of schoolchildren visiting the Cathedral Church of St. John the Divine, where she is an artist in residence.

“Sometimes I scare them,” she said. “But not to the point of nightmares.”

As part of a three-year residency, Eiko, the 65-year-old Japanese dance artist who is known by her first name, often performs solos in the cathedral — they happen when the moment takes her. She is acclaimed for her uncanny ability to move with extreme slowness, which she has done for years as half of the performing duo Eiko and Koma. Now that she works in the solo form, Eiko's vulnerability as a stark, lonely figure is even more intense. She might stand as still as a statue and then wilt gradually, with her long black mane veiling her face, or arch backward, grasping at strands of hair with slender fingers. Her eyes see past you.



“I become smaller in scale, not only the scale of the space, but of scale in time,” Eiko said of her dances in the cathedral. Sasha Arutyunova for The New York Times

But there is also urgency in her dancing: It's no longer unusual to see her dash forward in a sudden, violent spurt or to hear her voice erupt in a yelp. As a non-Christian in a cathedral, she said, she tries to be polite, but sometimes she can't help herself.

One of Eiko's most unusual skills is to manifest pain through her body. Right now, a profound source of torment for her is the 2011 Fukushima nuclear disaster. She visited the site last summer with the historian and photographer William Johnston, who has taken numerous pictures of Eiko performing as part of her solo project “A Body in Places.” (They took their first trip to Fukushima in 2014.) As part of an exhibition at the cathedral, “The Christa Project: Manifesting Divine Bodies,” Eiko is shown performing in contaminated shrines and forests. Wasn't she scared of the possible effects of radiation exposure?

“At first, I was — and crying,” she said. But that changed. “When you are there, you kind of get used to it in a day or two. It's very weird. So it's like, ‘Oh, this is a new place we never got to before.’ There's a certain excitement.”



Long half of the duo Eiko and Koma, Eiko finds a new intensity in her solo performances. Sasha Arutyunova for The New York Times

On Saturday, Eiko will observe the sixth anniversary of the Fukushima disaster with “Remembering Fukushima: Art and Conversations,” a four-hour event at the cathedral that includes performances by John Kelly, Geo Wyeth, Jake Price and Carol Lipnik. Eiko will dance, too, first alone and then with DonChristian Jones, the musician and visual artist. In a way, it is a continuation of her 24-hour event for the fifth anniversary, part of Danspace Project’s “Platform 2016: A Body in Places.”

Eiko said she did not want the horror of Fukushima to dissipate. “Now who has a nuclear button?” she asked, referring to President Trump. But, she stressed: “I’m not a political activist. What I can offer is time and space to gather and reflect.”

For Eiko, the cathedral is a place for exploration; her residency is a way to expose people to her art and a way for her to encounter them. In other words, it’s not just a gig, but an opportunity for her to consider the direction of her work. And with Eiko’s presence, the cathedral, which first appointed artists in residence in the early 1980s, is figuring out what a residency program could look like today.



Her dances might startle visitors to the cathedral, Eiko said, especially youngsters: “Sometimes I scare them. But not to the point of nightmares.” Sasha Arutyunova for The New York Times

Mark McCloughan, a former student of Eiko's at Wesleyan University and now her dramaturge, likened her residency to a laboratory, but one that is unusual because it is so public. “All of these experiments have to happen in the context of the passing gazes of tourists and the people who are stumbling across it unexpectedly,” he said.

And there is the grandness of the cathedral itself. When Eiko performs in the vast space, she is aware of how tiny her body is. “I become smaller in scale, not only the scale of the space, but of scale in time,” she said. “Because this cathedral is human-made. It's not just the scale of how big it is, but it's more like people actually made this, and how did they do it? That is a history, and there is me again — this is me going not to the Japanese river, but to a totally different river, like the Amazon or something. I'm really an outsider.”

Sometimes after her impromptu performances, people recognize her from the photographs on display. Some even hug her. “I feel like it's actually rather nice for people to see something strange,” she said. “I think life is better with some stranger. And I'm an immigrant. I am not a citizen. Which is no big deal in the dance community, but perhaps it is in a tourist attraction like this. It's exciting to be on a new train. I have an appetite for that.”

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