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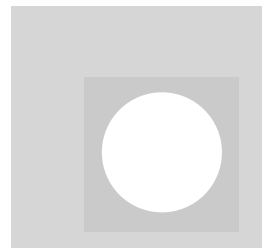


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Motherhood, Memory, and Mortality in Eiko



Otake's "The Duet Project"

BY LINDA BELANS JUN. 12, 2019 6:30 A.M.



Photo courtesy of the artist

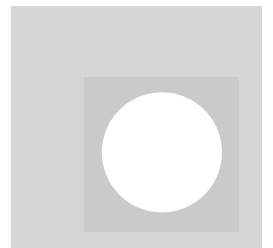
"Meeting Eiko" by Beverly McIver

EIKO OTAKE: THE DUET PROJECT: DISTANCE IS MALLEABLE

Monday, Jul. 8 – Wednesday, Jul. 10, 8 p.m.

Rubenstein Arts Center, Durham

Eiko Otake and **Beverly McIver** had never heard of each other until a mutual friend, American Dance Festival director Jodee Nimerichter, suggested that the New York City-based dance artist and the Hillsborough-based painter explore the possibility of working together. After a whirlwind first encounter that included a viewing of McIver's work at Durham's **Craven Allen Gallery**, their intuition said yes. But they had no idea what form their collaboration would take, because Eiko had to catch a plane for Japan. The process would reveal itself through twists and turns on two continents and result in *The Duet*



Project: Distance Is Malleable, commissioned by ADF and co-presented by The Nasher Museum of Art. The piece is a collaboration with McIver and three of Eiko's former students: visual artist, rapper, and singer-songwriter DonChristian Jones, dancer and poet Mark McCloughan, and filmmaker Alexis Moh.

In the thirty-five years I've been writing about and conversing with Eiko, from her early work with her husband Koma through her solo work, it has always been clear that she interrogates big human ideas. This new work is anchored in questions including, "How can two artists collide and return changed but whole? How can two individuals encounter and converse over their differences with or without words? How can we express both explicitly and implicitly what each of us really cares about?" Eiko thinks and speaks like a poet, and whether her work occurs in silence or is accompanied by sound, it has an inherent score. McIver speaks with the same clarity and boldness found in her paintings. I wanted to capture the music of their collective spirit in anticipation of *The Duet Project's July premiere* at The Rubenstein Arts Center.

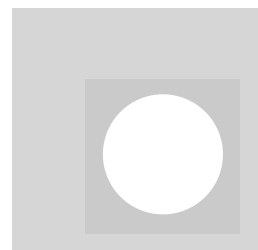
Duets with the Living and the Dead

Prelude

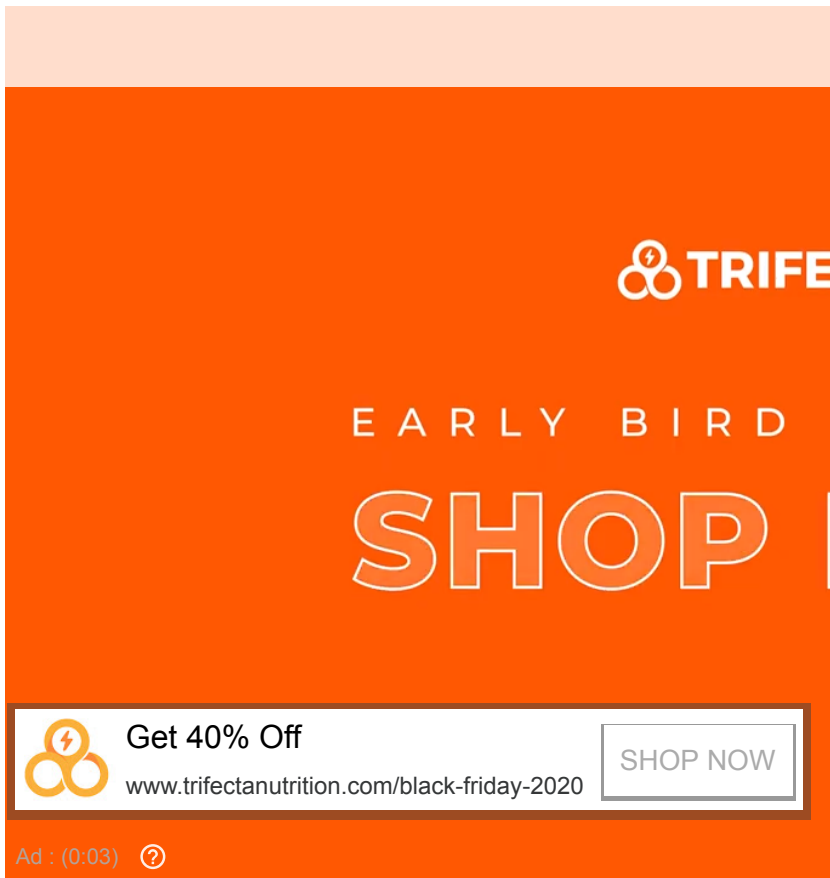
"Another sense of otherness." —Beverly McIver

Snow drifts over the procession. Onlookers line the path. White flakes slowly blanket their umbrellas, the wooden box, and the people who carry it. Eiko walks in mourner's cadence among them. It is scored by silence.

Perhaps Eiko Otake has been preparing for this all her life, combining the existential drama of forty-seven years performing with her husband Koma (who is in the procession) with her more recent solo series, *A Body in Places*, where she interacts with elements in unexpected spaces: in Fukushima. On Wall Street. At the Durham



Farmers' Market. Except this is real life. This is the street in front of the family home in Japan. This is the death of her ninety-three-year-old mother.



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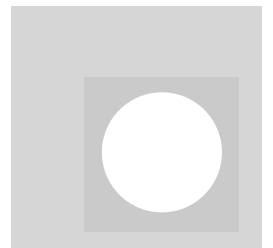
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Beverly McIver is no more astonished to be part of this intimate family procession than the neighbors who respectfully stare at her. It is particularly astonishing because she and Eiko (pronounced A-koh) had only met for forty-eight hours in Durham.

McIver's paintings of this experience will be integrated into *The Duet Project: Distance is Malleable*, which premieres at ADF in July. Eiko tells me: "I have lost many important friends at sixty-seven. Working with younger artists helps me practice my dying. I don't want to die anytime too soon. When I work with extremely young people, it makes sense. I die first. In order. If they die first, it's a tragedy. I miss my mother. It's not a tragedy."

Counterpoint



“Thrusting forward is contagious.” —Eiko

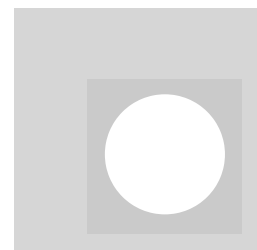
Collaboration for Eiko requires a conversation—usually an animated one, often over a meal that she prepares in her tiny, well-stocked New York apartment kitchen, where a hunk of ginger sits next to the constant pot of rice. The meal is consumed at a rectangular table in the small adjacent dining room that also served as Eiko’s video-editing station for *A Body in Fukushima*. Eiko: “Sometimes talking makes it harder to jump over the distance.”

So, the conversation might spill over into a sudden improvisational movement session on the well-worn parquet living-room floor, a surprising oasis of open space in the otherwise fully lived-in apartment she shares with Koma. It also houses a piano, a lifetime of costumes, videotapes, computers, nests of cords, memorabilia, and remnants of their two grown sons whom they raised there.

Or, the collaboration might begin at 10:45 p.m. on the Hillsborough doorstep of McIver, who greets her in pajamas. Eiko was making a quick detour on her way to see her mother. But first, she is following ADF director Jodee Nimerichter’s intuitive suggestion—that these two artist and scholars, who have never met, should work together.

Eiko, who brings the same intention to relationships as she does to her art, has a long history with ADF. I can still conjure *Eiko & Koma’s 1984 Reynolds Theater performance of *Elegy**, their naked bodies drenched in pools of water and light, all dripping and luminous. And the gasping impact of what they did with all that rice in *Grain*. The duo returned frequently over the years, performing in a Duke Gardens pond, under giant oaks, and other outdoor settings. Always with glacial slowness.

Eiko began her solo work a few years ago when *Koma* injured his foot. (He has since recovered and performs his



own work.) It is her trusting relationship with Nimerichter, whose vision brought *A Body in a Farmers' Market* to Durham one May morning in 2016, where Eiko interacted with people and produce, darting through startled crowds.

McIver had never seen her work. What might she make of Eiko's four-hour mesmerizing Fukushima film where she illuminates irradiated ghost towns and immerses herself in radiation-soaked water? Coming from opposite sides of the world, experiences, and cultures, at first glance, the two couldn't seem a more unlikely match.

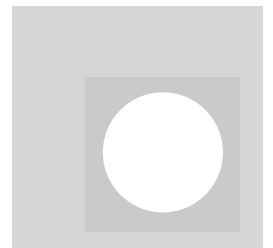
Eiko chose to drop out of college in the 1960s to join Tokyo's political revolution. Her work is ephemeral and transitory. She asks people to fill in what isn't there. "We develop our imagination to get smarter," she tells me. My own experience with *A Body in a Farmers' Market* became stronger as time advanced, compelling me to write about it for no one but myself. And, for Eiko.

Fifty-seven-year-old McIver was born into activism in Greensboro's housing projects, where the **Klan infamously killed five people** in front of her house. She was seventeen. Her portraits, permanently visible on canvas in thick, bold, here-I-am strokes, confront us with identity and unify us with family, sometimes at the same time.

Eiko describes herself as frugal: She carries her futon prop on subways and flies economy. McIver refers to herself as high maintenance: She lives alone in a large house in the woods and flies first class.

What connects them is their willingness to be vulnerable through their art. Their fearlessness about confronting death and dying. And their mothers. That's where their stories converge.

McIver: "I do get called to do things. I must pay attention even if I don't understand it. But this was probably the



most extreme.” Two days after meeting and departing, she felt compelled to photograph Eiko’s mother. But she died two days before McIver arrived.

“In some ways, it was like reliving my mother dying [twelve years ago]. Eiko was just how I was at my mother’s funeral. She cried. But for the most part, when my mother was sick and dying, I decided I was going to be an artist and make paintings. I was not going to be emotional; I could capture this moment with some sense of clarity. Eiko was like that. It was easier for me to direct than to be a daughter. Eiko and I are similar in that regard.”

“Collaborating with the dead.” —Eiko

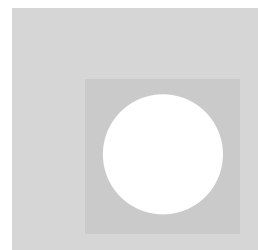
“In the afterlife.” —McIver

Eiko coached McIver on the Buddhist rituals of kneeling, chanting, bell ringing, and incense. She also fed the community who came to pay their respects. The body was at home, packed in dry ice, waiting five days for cremation. There was no embalming. The grieving daughter made sure her mother’s body was never alone, instructing McIver: “Go talk to my mother.”

“It’s the closest and most time I have ever spent with a corpse,” McIver says. “No one gets this noble honor.”

At the cremation, McIver’s English-speaking partner instructed her to pick up a remaining bone with chopsticks and place it in the urn. But she had never held chopsticks before. She managed the moment by resting hers on the bone with her partner’s and following it to the urn. At dinner, the urn was placed at the head of the table. There was laughter and storytelling.

McIver photographed her entire experience, including the body, family-crafted origami, photographs, and other non-metal objects to accompany Eiko’s mother into the afterlife, as well as the cotton slip that Eiko bequeathed her when the two women cleaned out the apartment. And



the food. McIver will transform some of these into paintings for the performances.

Coda

“My mind is going forward so my leg is going forward.”
—Eiko

Eiko says that she has become bold. *Become*. What might we expect moving forward from this fearless woman who has been naked in performance, who plunges into nuclear-disaster water and renders it exquisite. Who stops Wall Street pedestrians in their trading tracks. Who perches atop buildings and crows over the city. Who stands nose-to-nose with a stranger and holds their gaze. Who challenges us to reconsider definitions and boundaries. What will “bold” look like for this woman who will be written about long after she’s gone?

Eiko: “When I die, I don’t need a Buddhist funeral. Just show the [Fukushima movie](#) and have a good meal.”

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