

## Beverly McIver

ARTIST PROFILE (/ARTICLES/CATEGORY/ARTIST+PROFILE) · JULY 5, 2019



BEVERLY MCIVER'S STUDIO

PERFORMANCE:  
THE DUET PROJECT: DISTANCE IS MALLEABLE  
([HTTPS://AMERICANDANCEFESTIVAL.ORG/EVENTS/EI  
KO-OTAKE-THE-DUET-PROJECT](https://americandancefestival.org/events/eiko-otake-the-duet-project))

ON DISPLAY:  
JULY 8TH - 10TH, 2019

HOURS:  
8:00PM - 9:30PM

LOCATION:  
VON DER HEYDEN STUDIO THEATER AT THE  
RUBENSTEIN ARTS CENTER  
([HTTPS://ARTSCENTER.DUKE.EDU/EVENT/AMERICAN-  
DANCE-FESTIVAL-EIKO-OTAKE-THE-DUET-PROJECT-  
DISTANCE-IS-MALLEABLE/2019-07-09/](https://artscenter.duke.edu/event/american-dance-festival-eiko-otake-the-duet-project-distance-is-malleable/2019-07-09/))

I have sat down so many times to write this intro...to write about this artist that I respect and adore. And, yet, every time I set to work, I hear, "Lizzie, Beverly said it all... leave this one be." So, I will do as she teaches and listen to my intuition.

Trust me, you are in for a treat.... Beverly McIver and her work are nothing short of magnificent.



**Lizzie Cheatham McNairy:** I'm happy to be back!

**Beverly McIver:** Happy to have you!

**LCM:** The last time I saw you, we were at your exhibit at Craven Allen. A lot of the works you showed there were from your time in Rome. Can you speak a little about that body of work as well as the great prize that took you to Rome?

**BM:** Yes. So I was selected to be a Rome Fellow, and they only select five artists out of thousands of applicants. "Visual Artists" is the most competitive pool. I was selected, and what it meant was a year in Rome at the American Academy, where they feed you and give you a private room and a lovely studio space and you just work. Just do your work... You're surrounded by forty-eight total Fellows that are there: various art historians, architects and writers. I was in desperate need of a break and time to just paint. But I was terrified at the same time. I didn't think I was going to get it honestly. I was like, 'What are the chances?' When they told me I had it, I was like, 'What??' The reality of *now you have to go* was a bit overwhelming. I remember telling my best friend Kim—because you can't confess certain things to everybody because people think you're crazy.

**LCM:** Those good friends are so important, that you can confess it all to.

**BM:** I totally said to her, "I don't want to go. How can I get out of this?" And she was like, "Have you lost your mind?!"

**LCM:** 'You've been working towards this for a long time!'

**BM:** "You have to go! We've been wanting this prize for years!" This was only the second time I applied to the Academy. I had applied... maybe it's been 15 years ago and I was going to take Renee with me. I was a finalist, but I think the fact of taking Renee—you can bring your family, but I think it scared them and they were just concerned with liability...What if she trips? What if she falls? It was a great idea for her not to be there in hindsight. So she [Kim] was like, "You have to go!" And I said, "I think this is everybody else's dream and not mine."





THE SCREAM  
BEVERLY MCIVER

**LCM:** What scared you the most about having won it?

**BM:** I, like most humans, hate change! Even though I crave it and I need it to survive, to be creative, I definitely fight it. I just thought—there's this article coming out where there was Magic Johnson and I think it was Arsenio Hall were shopping in Italy and they were sitting on a bench in Rome, in fact, with shopping bags. Someone Italian said: "Look! Those are the immigrants that are taking all of our jobs." And I thought, 'Oh God! They're treating them bad, I definitely don't want to go.' I didn't know the language. I just think all of it—being away from my home and my family, my dad who's 93 and depends on me, and Renee. I needed to be pulled out of that, but it was terrifying to go and be by myself and not have to think about Renee or my dad or caring for them but just focus on me which is really very challenging. I spent my whole life being in Renee's shadow and that was going to be taken away. I did what any other human being would do; I went there and I found



PARTY HAT, 2015  
BEVERLY MCIVER

someone to take care of, one of the other Fellows that needed it. That's what I did. Right there, I was like...

ME & RENEE  
BEVERLY MCIVER

**LCM:** 'Where are you?'

**BM:** They were great! They loved it because they needed— they were being taken care of by their family that *they* had left behind, I should say... It was tough and I was depressed for a good month in Rome.

**LCM:** You have mentioned Renee, and I knew some of the story and then learned a lot more last night when I watched *Raising Renee*, which kept me up till midnight I loved it so much! I had planned to watch half of it in the morning, but I couldn't go to sleep!

**BM:** Did you cry?

**LCM:** I did cry! I totally cried! But for people who aren't familiar with your story, Renee is your sister who is two years older than you?

**BM:** Yes. She's the oldest. I have two sisters and she is the oldest— I'm the baby. Renee is 59 but she has the mindset of a third grader, and she has epilepsy. When my mother died 12 years ago, she asked if I would take care of Renee in her absence, so I'm Renee's legal guardian even though I have no experience raising anything but cats.

**LCM:** In that documentary, I could see and you very honestly expressed this struggle with being pulled away from your work and from Arizona and from showing a lot in New York, to come back to North Carolina. As you've stayed in North Carolina longer and having then won—received the Rome Prize, do you still feel pulled? Is it still hard being in North Carolina sometimes feeling like you left what you were doing to come with your family, or have you settled into it more?

**BM:** Yeah, I've made peace with that. I feel like I am where I'm supposed to be. I feel like there's another big change on the horizon for me that will require me to move out of my comfort zone—which, I'm just trying to be brave and say, 'Okay, I'll do it! I'll do it!' I'll take Renee with me wherever I go. If I move, she'll come with me... Actually, I don't know if that's true or not because I asked her, I said, "Renee, I want to move to California, northern California." At first I thought she'd be like, 'You're not gonna leave me here are you??' But I think she's become quite settled in her home with Snowball, her cat. She was like, "When are we gonna move?" And I said, "You don't have to. Don't worry about it now. It's gonna be in the future." And she said, "Oh. Okay." She's older now and her eyesight's gotten really poor in one eye; she's legally blind... She doesn't like to go out as much... She's just aging, like all of us.





MEETING EIKO  
BEVERLY MCIVER

**LCM:** When we were last together, you had a big trip coming up which you have returned from. You survived! It looked like on Instagram you enjoyed the food that you were a little nervous about the last time we were talking! You were going for a special reason and one that you've been working the last semester on completing for this summer. Can you tell me about that trip and the performance that it's for?

**BM:** Well Jodie, who is the head of American Dance Festival here in Durham—the dance festival comes every year to Durham in the summer months. It's kind of a big deal; people come in from all over to participate and also to see world-class dancers. Back in December or November last year, she wrote me and said, "There's something I want to talk to you about..." "Okay." So I talked to her and she said, "I really want you to collaborate with this dancer Eiko," and I was like, "Who's that?" It's Eiko and Koma, but Koma doesn't perform with her anymore. That's her husband; he's had some injuries and they don't perform together. So she said, "Eiko wants to perform with someone here locally, and I think you'd be perfect to do that." And I said, "Why do you think I'd be perfect to do that? I have no real history of collaborating with *anyone!*"

**LCM:** Caretaking but not collaborating!

**BM:** So she said, "I just think you all would like each other and hit it off and that you'd find some commonality." So then I tried to meet with Eiko but she travels more than I do and she was like, "Look, in January I'm going to Japan to see my mother who is aging. And she's in this facility and I'm hoping that I can take her home, to our home in Japan." She's talking to me on the phone but she's talking to herself, thinking about logistics like 'she can't walk, so I think we'll have to take her up the stairs in the wheelchair.' She's like a size 2, so I'm thinking, 'How in the world are you gonna do that?'

She said, “My son Uta is coming from Taiwan and he’s a tall guy and he can help me. I think together we can carry my mother up these stairs to our home.” I’m like, ‘Oh my God!’ And I started getting these visuals in my head about carrying your mom, literally. Just caretaking and the importance of generations: you, your mom, your son. And I said, “I want to go to Japan with you!” And she was like... “We don’t even know each other!” As a Sagittarius, I’m a tiny bit impulsive. I bitch about change, but yet... I’m like, ‘Yeah!’

**LCM:** I joke that I love change, so long as it’s all my idea!

**BM:** That’s great! That’s so human! That’s it! I’m gonna steal that... Jodie was like, “You want to go to Japan? You’ve never even met her. What if you get over there and you hate each other? Y’all should meet first!” Eiko calls me up and she says, “Look, I’m leaving Colorado but instead of flying home to New York I’m coming to your house—because we should meet. We just really should. I’m gonna come to your house; I’ll stay a few days.”

**LCM:** Everybody was really worried you were not gonna get along!

**BM:** Right! But for some reason I just felt like it was gonna be just fine. She did a performance in here for me. I was still like, ‘Okay, I have these images...’ and she was like “I’m going to Japan—work with what you got,” kind of. And I was like, *I don’t have it*. I don’t have enough! I really think I need to go to Japan. So I wrote a grant to go to Japan in April ‘cause she said, “I’m going back in April.” In January, she called me and said, “My mother’s dying and if you want to meet her... chop-chop!”

**LCM:** How amazing, though, that in such a time she even was willing to bring you in!

**BM:** Yeah. Well I think, this is going to sound crazy and weird and I can’t explain why I feel this way, but I think we needed each other at that time.

**LCM:** Doesn’t sound crazy to me.

**BM:** So she said, my mother’s dying. I was like, shit! The school year had started, and I didn’t have any money to go to Japan! I thought, ‘So I’ll just charge it! Who cares?’ This...

**LCM:** It was supposed to happen.

**BM:** There was a very strong pull to go to Japan and I couldn’t explain it, so I went to my boss after teaching. I was like, *I’m gonna go talk to her without sounding completely crazy!* and I sat down and said, “I’ve been asked to do this collaboration... When this dancer was telling me about carrying her mother in a wheelchair, she and her son, up the stairs to their home, I was like, ‘I gotta go meet this woman,’” and I said, “I don’t even know what to expect or what’s gonna happen. I don’t even know what I’m going to do. I have no idea. I just feel inside that I need to go.”

**LCM:** There’s something about listening to that intuition; sometimes it takes you crazy places, right?

**BM:** No joke! And it’s always right! Even when you can’t—I’m like, ‘Dammit, how can this be right?? This is crazy!’ I don’t even know...! I don’t even eat Japanese food! I don’t know this woman!

She died before I got there. So then, I’m like, ‘Now I really feel stupid,’ like *why are you going?* But I had to go. Still like, you can’t stop this. The next day, Eiko says, “My mother is at home, she’s lying on the bed. We’ve had to put her in a box and dry ice pack her so that she does not decay, because they do not embalm.” So I go and see her mom and there’s this whole ritual of sitting or kneeling and lighting an incense and chiming and praying before you say hello to her mom. So I did that, and she was just lying there like she was asleep. She didn’t look dead. She didn’t have that embalmed, dead look like Americans do. She just looked beautiful and peaceful. Eiko’s like, “We can’t get her [cremated] for seven days because the crematory’s full.” For that whole week Eiko and I would have lunch or something, and then I would go and be with her mother. You can’t leave the body by itself. You’re not supposed to leave the body.





FAMILY GRIEF (IN PROGRESS)  
BEVERLY MCIVER

**LCM:** For spiritual reasons, cultural reasons?

**BM:** Right. And I think because her mother had said at one point, “Don’t leave me!” There’s always a friend and there were people coming by in the community to say goodbye. There’s a bowl of rice, fresh rice, every day for her mother, along with water. So it’s pretty intense.

**LCM:** It’s been intense to paint, now that you’ve been home?

**BM:** You have no idea. So I just photographed this whole experience in Japan, all the way up to the crematory and pictures of them sending the body. The family goes upstairs and waits for an hour and a half. Then they come down and the bones are like on a cookie sheet. The crematory guy is picking them up with chopsticks and saying, this is the femur, this is... Identifying. Eiko’s standing beside me and translating because it was all in Japanese. I didn’t know what the heck was going on. It was a lot of ritual involved, but it didn’t feel spiritual, like my mother’s funeral. It wasn’t loud. It was very quiet and peaceful. There was a Buddhist monk—priest who chanted for a good forty minutes. Then to the crematory. Then they had all these rituals where you’re paired with your partner— which I didn’t have a partner there but this guy whose wife stayed home...

**LCM:** He got to be your partner for the night!

**BM:** There’s this ritual where you pick up chopsticks and you pick up the bones and place them in the urn. So they were like, ‘Come on, come up!’ And I was like, ‘I don’t even know how to *eat* with chopsticks, much less pick up somebody’s bones! Are you kidding?’ But I did, and I just rested my chopsticks on the bone and he really carried it and put it in the urn. It was really, really intense. After that we all went to dinner, including her mom. It started *snowing*. It never snows in Japan! It was like, all of a sudden, it was snowing during the funeral which was unbelievable! What a way to exit this life in grand fashion. It was intense.

I think—I honestly believe this—I think that if humans had the opportunity to experience another culture grieving over a family member, instead of thinking, “Those Japanese people, they don’t know how to grieve the right way. They’re not Baptist,” or whatever. You’ll realize that the commonality is humans grieve over loved ones the same way. There’s a sadness and there is fragility and there is loss and anger and grief and all those things—that stuff is real. I don’t care if it happens in Japan or North Carolina or Rome for that matter. I think I want to make paintings about—I mean, I don’t know if I could survive, but if somebody asked me to go to a funeral in another country, I would do it. I would do it because I grew by having that experience even though it was challenging for me. But I became a better human being for it. And I made a friend in the process, who I feel completely connected to

spiritually: Eiko. She's my sister, which is crazy because I couldn't tell you what her favorite color is or even when her birthday is.



FAMILY GRIEF (IN PROGRESS)  
BEVERLY MCIVER

**LCM:** As we were looking for some of your paintings, you mentioned that some things were moved around because you had a friend recently digging around in your studio for... something in a couple years, but that is really exciting. Can you tell me a little bit more about that?

**BM:** The Scottsdale Museum of Contemporary Art in Scottsdale, Arizona is going to have a retrospective of my work. I taught in Arizona for 12 years, so that's the connection. Also, in addition to having my work up, at the same time they're going to have the work of my students exhibited, which is really sort of lovely because I've been back in touch—some people, like Damien (Stamer) is one of my students. So we recently just went to his studio to look. I think it's going to be a really, really great show. It's going to travel and have a catalog with it. She looked at everything from a few paintings I had when I was an undergraduate—and she's like, "These aren't good paintings"—to graduate school, all the way up to the present. It's quite interesting. What an interesting journey to see the progression and the development; it all comes together and it comes full circle, you know? The same things that shaped me



growing up are the things I paint most about right now: hiding behind Renee because she was such an attention monger in the family because she was special needs, to putting on Blackface because I desperately wanted to be a clown before I wanted to be a painter.

**LCM:** As you looked at the progression of your art for your retrospective, would I see this pattern of eyes shut? In the work that I've seen of yours, a lot of the eyes are. Is there meaning behind that?

**BM:** Yes.

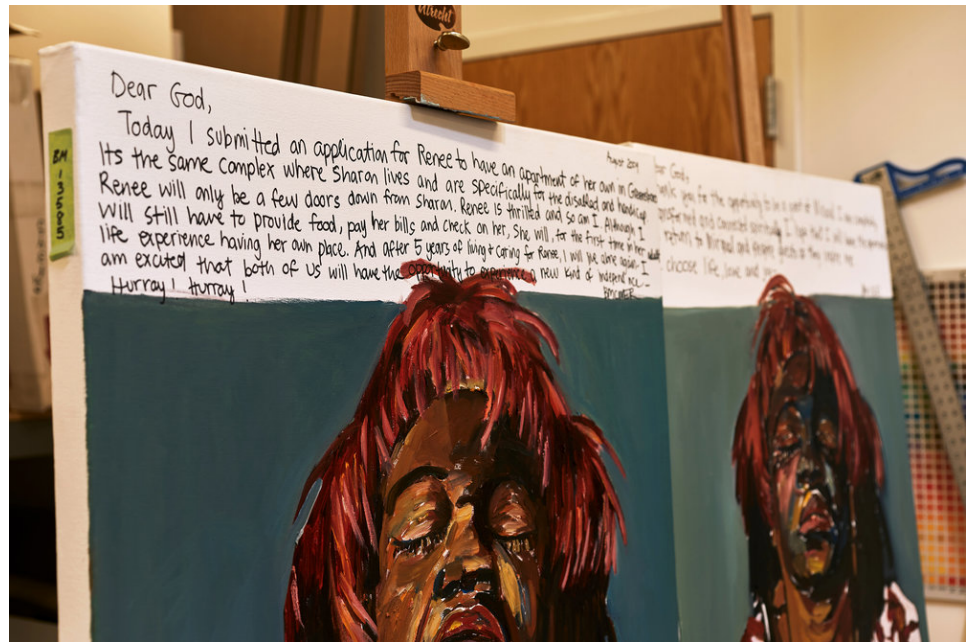
**LCM:** I'm sure there is. Can you share with me what that is?

**BM:** It started in Rome in terms of painting. I started way before then painting with my eyes shut. I've been doing that for years. Part of it is a way of not letting a person that I'm talking to in. I just shut my eyes, or I put eyeglasses on to cover them so you can't really see me. Which is part of growing up with someone with special needs where they just take up all the attention and you fall behind them and become invisible. Rome, I believe, was the first time in my adult life where I didn't feel invisible because I didn't have Renee or other distractions to hide behind. Now being at the bathhouse in Japan where there was no hiding, there were no towels, there was nothing! I was just exposed. So now I'm just thinking, it's okay to be me. It's okay to let people see who I am. This sort of self-acceptance that is really, really challenging for me.

**LCM:** It's so hard.

**BM:** Way hard. It's just really, really hard but I think I'm open now in my life to revealing all of my demons and things that I've struggled with for all of my life, like my weight for example. The universe is sending me things to not look away from that—like being stuck in a Japanese bathhouse. To make me address some of those things or to address—I have a profound sadness in me for the world and all the people that are hurting. I carry that with me daily and I get to express that in my artwork. People when they meet me, they're like, "Oh, you're not a downer! We thought you were a Debby Downer because of your paintings. Or that you were morbid or something."

**LCM:** It's interesting, when we did your exhibit visit, I remember somebody saying, "I look at your art, and there's this heaviness to it, and then I speak with you and you're so bright and exuberant!" He asked, "Which one is you?" I'm a huge believer that life is a lot more of *ands* than *buts*. That they both exist.



DEAR GOD 4 & 5  
BEVERLY MCIVER



RED TULIPS  
BEVERLY MCIVER

**BM:** That's right. Yes, I remember him saying that, too. I think a lot of people view it that way. I'm just trying to find the beauty in something that is sad. It's how I live, it's how I walk through this world. I'm so keenly aware of people who are in the margin. Differences. People who are suffering. I'm just the big ol' - here, take it! Come get some...whatever. But recognizing you can't save the entire world. You just have to do your part and be committed to that. I probably will never likely paint happy pictures totally.

**LCM:** Your tulips were the attempt!

**BM:** The tulips were the attempt, so I know that I can. But I have some dead peonies that I think are to-die-for-gorgeous.

**LCM:** They're unbelievable. So beautiful.

**BM:** This famous artist Nick Cave asked me, because we started...

**LCM:** Who is a big fan of your work.

**BM:** Yes, who's purchased two paintings out of this show. For years he's purchased paintings. I mean, he must own about seven of my paintings. But we started out together twenty years ago, as Nick and Bevy. He was like, "I think I'm gonna do a trade." I said, "Okay!" This was before the sound suits and all of



that. I said, "Can you make me a coat?" Because he was doing clothing. He was like, "What do you want?" "I'll let you know when I see it." It never happened, but years later, he asked me, he said, "You are such a good painter. I can't believe you're not as famous as I am. Why is that?"

Like any human being, you start to make up excuses. But then I really had to ask myself that question and what I realized was, unlike Nick, I was not willing to make myself completely uncomfortable and completely vulnerable. That I was actively blocking opportunities because I didn't want to change or feel pain. Someone would ask me to give a talk and I'd be like, "What? For what? It's too far. I'm not going." There's always an excuse for *no, I can't*. So now I'm trying consciously to really be aware of opportunities.

I want to be out there, and I want to share my artwork and this story. I'm excited about this retrospective because I think it's going to be beautiful. We were talking about chronologically, certain paintings in certain times of my life and it just made me feel sad at certain points. I remember Kim asking, "Is this depressing to talk about?" I said, "Yes, it is!" All those growing pains over the years. But I'm getting better with every opportunity and every new adventure. My job is to just to remain open to it, which is very hard.

**LCM:** It's very hard.

**BM:** It's very hard! Do you have that problem?

**LCM:** I do.

**BM:** Really?

**LCM:** I do have that problem! I think you and I share a lot of the same struggles, which is why we connected that first night.

**BM:** How do you get over it?



DOROTHY P'S SUNGLASSES  
BEVERLY MCIVER

**LCM:** I think having really great friends that you can run things by really helps. I think also starting to be able to spot the signs of when I'm closing down or when I'm triggered from my childhood. Or recognizing old tapes that aren't true but that I believed as truth for so long. Being like, *Oh, wait! Uh-uh! Or, You're not a little kid anymore! You can choose differently! Or, You can do this.* Just today, in my mind I messed something up and it was like every part of me just wanted to disappear, crawl back in a hole! I have to be like, nope. *It's a learning opportunity. You can do this! Stay open! Stay open!* It's a lot of pep talks.

**BM:** It's a lot. Every day. All the time. That's really the good news about creating this little black doll Gracie, who I call my alter ego and who was that black kid from the projects that grew up poor, that grew up incredibly shy, who's still such a part of who I am and who sometimes still gives me bad advice based on her poor experiences. It's good to physically separate that out for me.

**LCM:** There's kind of this idea, this belief system of trying to learn to re-parent yourself in another way. Something that I've certainly been working on. But it is also, like, 'Wait! No! That's my thirteen-year-old! She really wants to misbehave

right now!' Or, 'That's the seven-year-old who's totally shutting down.' Lovingly accept those parts of myself but maybe don't let them drive the bus, right?

**BM:** Right. 'Sit down!'

**LCM:** 'Here, have a popsicle.'

**BM:** 'I got this.' That's what you have to do. And it's hard. It's so hard, but the rewards are just unbelievable. It's so worth it. So I'm just trying to get out of my own way.

**LCM:** Make your art.

**BM:** Make my art, which is very important to me. And sell Renee's potholders. That too.

**LCM:** Don't forget your *real* job.

**BM:** That's right. 'Not that you teach at Duke.'

**LCM:** I'm *so* grateful that you said yes to this interview.

**BM:** Yes! Which I almost said no. It has nothing—it's all in here, you know. *It's okay to be open. It's okay.* I'm telling myself that. *You're good enough.*

**LCM:** To be open and willing to be seen.

**BM:** Which is hard. Every day.

**LCM:** I get it. I have to hibernate occasionally.

**BM:** I still totally do that. Guess what I'm doing tomorrow? Oh, nothing. Me and the cats, we're watching TV.

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PREVIOUS

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NEXT

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