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DANCE, PERFORMANCE ART REVIEW

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At ADF: Moving Performances by Eiko Otake and Friends

By [Andrea McKerlie Luke](#)

July 8, 2019 - Durham, NC:

Guest performer [Eiko Otake](#) appeared at the 2019 [American Dance Festival](#) in collaboration with painter [Beverly Mclver](#) and Otake's students-turned-collaborators. The evening was performance art at its most intense, a personal expression of Otake's loss of her mother as well as outpourings of confusion, disillusionment, anger, and love by her collaborators. While the works played with the relationships between physical and emotional space, each duet challenged our perception of love, loss, silence, art, history, and interpersonal relationships. Otake is known for her site-specific works, and although this iteration of *Distance is Malleable* is performed in a relatively standard black box theater with a thrust stage, elements of it certainly could not have been possible at any other location. The collaborators had worked to integrate painting, movement, music, and video in interesting and sometimes challenging ways, and their performance certainly was interesting – and, at times, challenging.

This episode of Otake's series *The Duet Project* was born organically out of Otake and Mclver's friendship and then filled in with collaborations with others, but the overarching theme is Otake's loss of her mother. The piece opens with a recording of Mclver, discussing a phone call she had with Otake concerning Otake's ailing mother in Japan, whom she needed to move out of the nursing home and into hospice care at Otake's home. Mclver was struck with the everyday ritual of the process and decided she needed to come to Japan. While Otake's mother passed before Mclver could arrive, Otake and family opened their home to her and invited her into the ceremonies of a traditional Japanese funeral.

Images Mclver saw and photographed from this experience led her to paint, and Mclver's paintings led Otake to conceive a performance art work. Much of the piece is intensely personal to Otake, and, as she confessed during the post-show talkback, seeing Mclver's paintings of her mother's funeral "obliged" her "to deal with it." During the show, she spoke about how her mother had "a good death," surrounded by family, flowers, and the meticulous ritual of helping someone die. Otake's movements throughout the show are therefore usually measured and solemn, representing the lingering of a long, illness-wrought death.

The two women entered the stage in slow, deliberate movement, flanked by several of Mclver's paintings displayed in the performance space. Mclver's work is colorful and realistic yet stylized. There is a scene from the funeral: a colorfully shaded image of Otake's mother in an open casket, surrounded by daisies, with faceless mourners gathered behind her in all blacks and grays. Other works appeared later on, sometimes on easels and sometimes shown in videos taken by Otake in Mclver's studio. After a brief duet of slow, magnetic movement between the women in which they ceremonially shared sips from a large bowl of water, Mclver sat, and Otake took the stage for a beat before performing a variety of duets with [Alexis Moh](#), [DonChristian Jones](#), and [Mark McCloughan](#), punctuated by intense solo time.

Moh, a filmmaker concerned with global issues like climate change, has been creating dance films and video installations with Otake since 2015 and now appears in a video portion as well as onstage in a live performance in *The Duet Project*. Moh and Otake introduced themselves as Korean-American and Japanese, respectively, briefly touching on what that means to them and discussing the relationship of their generations; one generation has passed down

EVENT INFORMATION

Durham -- (Mon., Jul. 8, 2019 -
Wed., Jul. 10, 2019)

[American Dance Festival \(ADF\),
Nasher Museum of Art: Eiko
Otake, The Duet Project:
Distance is Malleable](#)

Performed by Beverly Mclver,
Alexis Moh, DonChristian Jones,
and Mark McCloughan
\$33 -- von der Heyden Studio
Theater, Rubenstein Arts Center

apathy towards climate change to the younger, one generation must carry on the older one's legacy. Moh's narration was understated and matter-of-fact – it was easy to tell how uncomfortable the filmmaker was in *front* of a camera – but it came from a place of honesty and genuine concern.

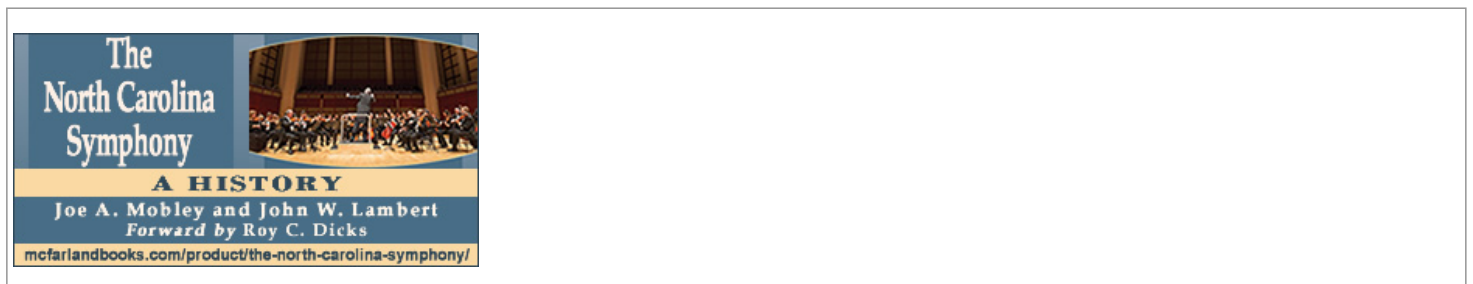
Jones played a more visual part in the performance, participating in a duet of movement with Otake that ranged from the slowest possible gestures to frenetic running in large circles around the performance space. He lent his plaintive voice in fragmented song that evolved throughout the duet until he was lost backstage and his voice could barely be heard. The use of incredibly slow movements permeated the evening, and it was especially beautiful to appreciate the inconsistencies of the human body: the slight hesitations, wobbles, and twitches were a part of the aesthetic. The performers demonstrated beautiful motions and also uncomfortable, awkward positions, illustrating life's many unpleasant and uncertain emotions, along with the pleasant.

From Jones' duet, McCloughan emerged immediately for another movement-based duet, featuring their scrawling words on large sheets of paper while Otake gathered them up to either hand to the audience or interact with. The pages contained statements and poetic fragments, such as "I refuse," "I know," "White flowers," and "You Can." Both performers interacted with the paper sheets in different ways: McCloughan carefully gathering them up like precious treasures before exiting, Otake waving them and hurling them up at the screen upstage. They shared a moment of movement together that appeared to reflect first Otake comforting and raising McCloughan up, then McCloughan taking on Otake's weight as Otake gradually collapsed. The show ended with Otake as a soloist, often very plaintive in her speech and movements, but she did release primal, guttural wails in grief.

There are more important moments in the show other than these, but it does no good to analyze every single one. Watching all of these outpourings of such complex emotion was not easy, but sitting back and taking in each moment as it came ignited just as many varied emotions, based on the current space, cultural context, and personal experience. There are moments of empathy scattered heavily through the work, and some of them emerged through something as simple as watching an old woman drip water over a young man's face. As one audience member commented during the talkback, "it was scary, it was cathartic, it was everything. I'm going to sit with this for a long time." Otake's work is about opening up to another person's experience, which is how the performers challenged each other and now challenge us, the audience.

This performance will repeat July 9 at 8 pm and July 10 at both 2 pm and 8 pm. See our sidebar for details.

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