

CRITIC'S PICK

Review: Eiko, Dancing With Friends and With the Dead

The Japanese dance artist, joined by four collaborators, brings her evolving “Duet Project: Distance Is Malleable” to N.Y.U. Skirball.

By Gia Kourlas

April 17, 2022

Eiko: The Duets Project NYT Critic's Pick



For more than forty years, Eiko Otake — who is known artistically by her first name — performed with Koma, her husband, as a duo. Now as a solo artist, she has forged a new artistic path. Ian Douglas

In “The Duet Project: Distance Is Malleable,” the Japanese choreographer and dancer Eiko Otake has some momentous things on her mind: loss and survival, the living and the dead. Grief is in the air, as is the notion of distance — the carefully measured distance between performers onstage; the distance between objects; and the distance between Eiko, she explains, and her loved ones, now deceased.

Or are they? Sometimes they seem closer to her than her onstage collaborators do. She even wears their clothes: her mother’s slip and a pair of raincoats that belonged to Sam Miller, who, among other things, was the director of Jacob’s Pillow Dance Festival and president of the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council. Miller, who died in 2018, had a long friendship with Eiko and helped to conceive of the duet project. Miller is never mentioned by name, but we learn that his coats were given to Eiko by his wife.

For more than 40 years, Eiko — who is known artistically by her first name — performed with Koma, her husband, as a duo. Now as a soloist, she has forged a new artistic path. One of her experiments is this continuing series of duets. So far, she has engaged with 23 artists, living and dead, and in doing so she offers more than just stand-alone performances.

“The Duet Project” is also about deepening friendships or, as she writes in program notes, it is “like making a quilt that sews together our memories, wishes, doubts and regrets — all reflecting yesterday’s, today’s and tomorrow’s world.”

The evening-length work intersperses live performance with film — in one, Eiko’s nearly lifeless form is shot next to a waterfall alongside a long, flowing piece of tattered red silk that she has performed with many times. Onstage, Eiko appears with four artists: the choreographer and improviser Ishmael Houston-Jones; the painter and rapper DonChristian Jones; the pianist Margaret Leng Tan; and the poet and artist Iris McCloughan, who is also credited with dramaturgy.



In “The Duet Project: Distance Is Malleable,” Eiko appears with four artists; here she is with the pianist Margaret Leng Tan. Ian Douglas

If the timing of the work initially seemed overly measured — artificially rather than penetratingly slow — the pace soon settles in. Eiko, who at a later point tells us that she is 70, stands next to the younger Jones with whom she has just run laps around the stage, and says, “Working with you makes me know I want to die before you. It is the order. I do not want to break it.”

As she continues to question and face her mortality, she and Houston-Jones, also 70, slide off the stage and into the crowd from opposite aisles. Balancing between steps and stretching onto armrests — in Eiko’s case, even standing on a pair of them — they have a conversation.

“Who do you remember?” Houston-Jones asks her.

“Someone,” Eiko replies, extending her arms into the air.

“Where are they?” Houston-Jones says.

“Here,” she says, adding, “Or not.” He laughs.

In another film, moths dance around Eiko's head as she presses white blossoms against her chest and then, more ferociously, slaps herself with them. All the while, Tan, with purpose, crosses the stage, where an open piano sits, and strums its strings — playing it, in a sense, from the inside out.



Eiko with the poet and artist Iris McCloughan. Throughout “The Duet Project,” Eiko is on the move — searching, questioning, and above all, feeling. Ian Douglas

The episodes continue as McCloughan, who uses the pronouns they/them, scrawls words onto large pieces of white paper — “Of Seeing,” “The Work,” “Shape” — and passes some of them on to audience members in the first row. Eiko appears and brashly pulls those pieces scattered onstage to her torso. McCloughan picks her up; for a moment, Eiko is lifeless, her feet dangling, but that doesn't last for long. Throughout “The Duet Project,” she is on the move — searching, questioning, and above all, feeling.

What is she building up to? In a sense, her performance has more to do with what she is carving away. As a dance artist, Eiko has always been raw, but now her body, lean and lithe, moves more fiercely, as if she hasn't a minute to spare. At one point, she disappears through a space at the back of the stage and returns with more paper; inside are white blossoms, the same kind we saw in the film. An image of a woman, a print of her mother, appears; Eiko says, “She died the way she wanted to die,” later adding, “This dance is not for my mother.”

Flying across the stage, she whips noisy glassine paper around, her face transformed to look less like a human than the husk of a ghost. At one point, she screams. When she gathers the flowers, Eiko re-enacts the film in real time, pressing the blossoms to her body and then smashing them against her chest. It's messy and harsh, defiant and awkward — like life.

“The Duet Project: Distance Is Malleable”

Through Sunday at N.Y.U. Skirball, Manhattan; nyuskirball.org.