

BROOKLYN RAIL

ArtSeen

Eiko Otake: *I Invited Myself, Vol. III: Duets*

By [Jacinda S. Tran](#)



Eiko Otake, *With Mother In Twilight*, 2019. 3 minutes 26 seconds. Camera by Rebekkah Palov. Photo: Rebekkah Palov.

“How can I ask the visitors to be my audience without me being there?” ponders Eiko Otake of her exhibition, *I Invited Myself, Vol. III: Duets*, at the Fabric Workshop and Museum (FWM) in Philadelphia. For Otake, *Duets* is not only an installation showcasing the artist’s collaborative movements, experimental performances, and media works, but also an opportunity to solicit viewers into her choreography. Organized by Chief Curator DJ Hellerman of FWM, *Duets* is the second part of *I Invited Myself, Vol. III: A Body* co-presented by the Asian Arts Initiative (AAI) from September 9 – December 9, 2023, and co-curated by Joyce Chung and Eiko Otake.

Staging these conversations—between FWM and AAI, artist and audience—exemplifies Otake’s insistence on relationship-building through her dance, visual media, and being. Whether through choreographing *Duets* or interpolating landscapes with *A Body*, Otake’s practice remains invested in forging a sense of partnership and intersubjectivity, perhaps in a continuation of her decades-long engagement as a collaborative performance artist in the duo Eiko & Koma. Two pieces from this era, *Lament* (1985) and *Undertow* (1988), appear in *Duets*, though the rest of the exhibition presents new works that seek to assert the artist’s presence even in her absence.

Absence preoccupies the septuagenarian who contends with death and disappearance throughout *Duets*. In the video *Soak* (2018), the artist rehearses dying with the help of DonChristian Jones, an artist wearing Otake’s mother’s white chemise. The camera surveys a sunny pool, trailing a listlessly floating Otake and her limp shadow: the stark contrast of her silhouette in the water rendering it as much a figure as the body it stalks. Jones also features in the video *Visit* (2020) as an apparition reaching out to a similarly gossamer Otake.



Eiko Otake with DonChristian Jones, *Soak*, 2018. 5 minutes. Camera by DonChristian Jones, Inci Eviner, Merián Soto. Edited by Eiko Otake.

Elegies (2019) is the artist's first time speaking in a work, as she and John Killacky recite individual dirges to their deceased mothers while staring straight into the camera and, as a result, into the eyes of a viewer yoked by the short leash of headphones, compelled to confront their intimate words. In another homage to her late parent, Otake dances with a lengthy, enlarged print-out of her mother in her coffin in *With Mother in Twilight* (2019). Filmed in single unedited takes, *With Mother in Twilight* and *A Night with Moths* (2019) feature Otake grappling with the vitality of nature: against wind, flowers, and moths. Her duet with moths projects on an old mosquito net suspended from the ceiling in the middle of the gallery, casting a doubled projection on its back panel, further distorting and distancing the recording from its origin.

With Mother in Twilight comprises one of four videos that must be viewed at the bottom of a long white boxlike structure. While shading the brightness of the small screens, the four structures force individuals into a semi-private experience of peering into the intimacies of Otake's partnered performances, for instance with the dancer Wen Hui in *Stone Wall* (2020) or with choreographer Merián Soto in *Fools* (2019).

But perhaps the most striking box is the only one adorned with a red scarf draped over its perimeter. This structure houses *Ahhh* (2023), a piece the

artist urgently added to the exhibition amid the ongoing genocide and destruction of Gaza. The video—Otake’s sole text-only piece—consists of a duet with her late friend and collaborator, Kyoko Hayashi (1930 – 2017), who had survived the atomic bomb the US dropped on Nagasaki during WWII. Linking imperial atrocities in Japan with Palestine, Otake’s letter to Hayashi reflects on the boundlessness of mass destruction, while simultaneously preserving individual lives through what remains in Otake’s memory: “The bodies you saw on August 9th in Nagasaki had no outlines. You asked me to think about that kind of body when I perform.” Despite its lack of imagery, *Ahhh* elicits an indelible encounter with gallery visitors as it produces enduring screams that pierce the sterility of the gallery. Otake’s cries remain audible as the three-minute film loops, further carving the artist’s grief and anguish into visitors’ psyches.



Eiko Otake with John Killacky, *Elegies*, 2019. 9 minutes 15 seconds. Camera and editing by Brian Stevenson with John Killacky and Eiko Otake. Photo: Jean P. Cross.

Eiko Otake’s insertion of her body within landscapes deemed political—including the site of exhibition itself—hedges a boundary between representation and embodiment that exposes and interrogates the traces of memory having taken place. In *I Invited Myself, Vol. III: A Body* at AAI,

the artist's body acts as a screen of the liminal space between projection and interpretation. *A Body* features an array of filmed performances—almost all within the last decade—that transpose Otake's body into an alley, City Hall, Philadelphia's 30th Street Train Station, the East Village, a cathedral, a Swedish quarry, Wyoming, Tokyo, and Fukushima, choreographing an engagement with the violent histories of placemaking.

Through Otake's performative and filmic repertoire, the artist maneuvers her body—at once spectral and spectacular—to “invite” herself into new spaces and facilitate connection. This is evident even in how the artist inserts herself into the wall texts, all of which feature her added insight. In addition to marking the *having been*, Otake's presence conjures both the remarkable and banal inheritances of dispossession to likewise invite viewers and participants to wade into the horizons of what *could be*. Eiko Otake's choreography of *A Body* and *Duets* portrays her deeply affective rhythms of engagements with collaborators, audiences, and landscapes, ultimately demonstrating how history and memory impresses upon and resides within every body, everywhere.

Contributor

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