

DARIA

DENVER ART REVIEW INQUIRY + ANALYSIS



Eiko Otake: I Invited Myself, vol. II

Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center at Colorado College

30 W. Dale Street, Colorado Springs, CO 80903

February 3-July 29, 2023

Admission: Adults: \$10, Seniors and Military: \$5, Students, Teachers, Children 12 and under, and Members: free

Review by Stacy J. Platt

To see the work of Eiko Otake is to become acutely aware of raw emotions that are universally felt but uniquely experienced. Watching her movements in space is like being conscious of your own pulse—the moments when it races, slows, or becomes almost undetectable. Her work dwells meaningfully in the territory of what it is to be alive and what it is to be moving around and towards death.



A view of Eiko Otake's exhibition *I Invited Myself, vol. II* at the Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center. Image courtesy of the artist.

Otake's oeuvre encompasses a wide range of practices. She has worked as an internationally recognized movement and media artist for nearly fifty years. *I Invited Myself, vol. II* at the Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center (FAC) is in keeping with the multidisciplinary character of her work. In part, it is a survey of five decades of art. It is also a contemplation of space and time—indeed, the works on display rotate through a series of literal "seasons." Additionally, *vol. II* includes live performances that engage directly with the work on display and three symposiums with Colorado College that feature artists, curators, and scholars in dialogue with Otake and each other.



A video still from Eiko Otake's *Visiting Manzanar*, 2019. Image courtesy of the artist.

The exhibition's spring iteration begins in an alcove with the video piece *Visiting Manzanar*. The title refers to a World War II-era Japanese internment camp in California's Owens Valley. In the eleven minute work, Otake sits next to a young Korean American woman, the pair visually separated by a large ash tree with the Sierra Nevada mountains behind them.



A video still from Eiko Otake's *Visiting Manzanar*, 2019. Image courtesy of the artist.

They speak to the camera about identity, personal history, and their feelings about being in a place where, as Otake says, "I am not them but I look like them—and you, too, look like them." There is a generosity in the video that is characteristic of Otake's work overall. The piece focuses on intergenerational experiences, the positions of two cultures that have historically held animosity towards each other, what occupation and incarceration meant in the time of Japanese internment camps, and what it means now.



A view of Eiko Otake's *A Body in Tokyo*, 2021, on view at the Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center. Image by William Johnston.

In the two main galleries on the second floor of the FAC, large screens and wall projections show a range of Otake's solo work, though there are notable inclusions of her decades-long collaboration with Takashi Koma Otake. All of the dance work is site-specific and often involves water, wind, and other natural elements. Each piece affirms that she can and does make a performance in any and every kind of space.



A still from Eiko Otake's *Dune*, 2020. Image by William Johnston.

In *Dune* (2020), Otake wanders through desert sands like a cursed mad woman, dancing but also buffeted and tossed by intense winds. Gestures of bending and yielding become characteristics of the performance—in the face of such an elemental force, what point would there be in not submitting? In the galleries that contain multiple screens and locations, the viewer must choose where to direct their attention: you may be watching a piece with Otake in a lush, funereal setting illuminated by hundreds of moths flying around her face lit strongly on one side (*Night with Moths* (2019)), but be simultaneously aware of water, echoes, and something heavy being moved across concrete in an adjacent work (*A Body in Tokyo* (2021)).



A video still from Eiko Otake's *Night with Moths*, 2019. Image by DARIA.

While the pieces in the exhibition span decades, Otake would not refer to them as an archive or a retrospective. As she describes the show, it re-imagines her work activated through live performance:

“I refer to this as different 'mountains.' One mountain is actually an archive of performance, which I of course edit... The second mountain is the performance; I perform for the camera and it's about how the camera is set and framed and how it is edited.

...I have many different cards to play, which I can construct and reconstruct. As a performer, that kind of flexibility is our essence.” [1]

Performance art and dance occupy a strange sector in institutional art spaces. The form largely exists in their documentation. “Marina Abramovich comes from the white box, whereas I come from the black box,” Otake said to me recently. While “white cube” performances translate more readily into museums, those in the “black box”—a smaller setting meant for a more intimate experience—take a little more entrepreneurial savvy to manifest. [2]



A view of works in the darkened gallery space in Eiko Otake's exhibition *I Invited Myself, vol. II* at the Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center. Image courtesy of the artist.

Otake uses this savvy to create her own opportunities, and the exhibition is titled *I Invited Myself vol. II* for this reason. She envisions the “volumes” as consisting of many parts and potentially many future volumes. [3] Notably, the volumes themselves are not a static re-staging of existing work, but a constantly evolving

one—a major piece of what Otake refers to as her "ten-year project" and, in other moments, "the practice of my dying."



Eiko Otake, *A Body in Places* (Green-Wood Cemetery), 2020. Image by William Johnston.

At 70 years old, Otake has recently been performing overlapping bodies of work, one of which, *A Body in Places*, has involved honoring the dead through the vehicle of dance at sites as varied as the toxic Fukushima region of Japan to the Green-Wood Cemetery in Brooklyn. Her mother passed in 2019 in what Eiko termed "a good death." [4] "If Otake creates a practice of her own death, she exercises the ultimate agency by performing in front of an audience and "inviting" herself to locations that will host her and her practice.



Eiko Otake performing at the Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center on February 3, 2023. Image by Stacy J. Platt.

Her performance at the FAC on February 3, began with deliberate eye contact and a slow acknowledgement of the individuals in the room as a collective. Wearing a three-quarter length brown plaid blazer, Otake opened the garment wide, revealing a long white night shift underneath. Taking a few more beats to close the coat around her—as a mother might drape a blanket over a shivering child—she then wrapped her arms around her body in a self-embrace, with her left hand patting her right shoulder.



Eiko Otake performing in the foyer of the Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center under a Dale Chihuly sculpture. Image by Stacy J. Platt.

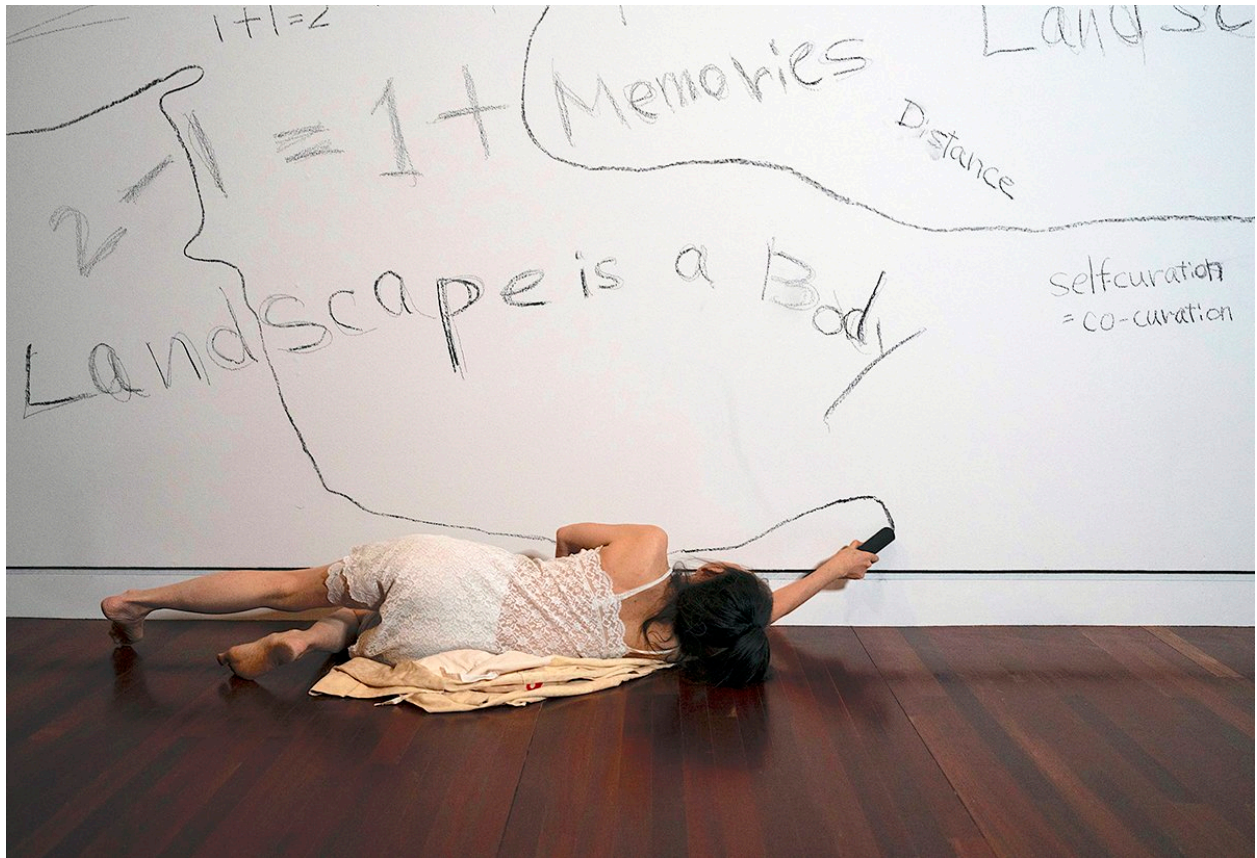
She walked towards the assembled audience and to a wide set of cushions where a half dozen people were seated underneath a sprawling Dale Chihuly sculpture. Eyeing an opening, she dramatically dropped face-first and prone onto the cushions. She remained there, to the consternation of those who had removed

themselves and those who had remained seated, thereby consenting to be touched or jostled by her performing body.



Eiko Otake performing outside of the Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center on April 7, 2023. Image by William Johnston.

At Otake's April 7 performance at the FAC, she traveled outside the museum's entrance to a grave-sized mound of dirt between two pylons. She playfully picked up a pylon and vocalized through it, a loud *AHOOOYEEEE* that trailed off. After this seemingly light, playful gesture, she pivoted to an emotional counterpoint, and, facing the "grave," she began moving her body into heaving postures of grief alongside the dirt mound. [5]



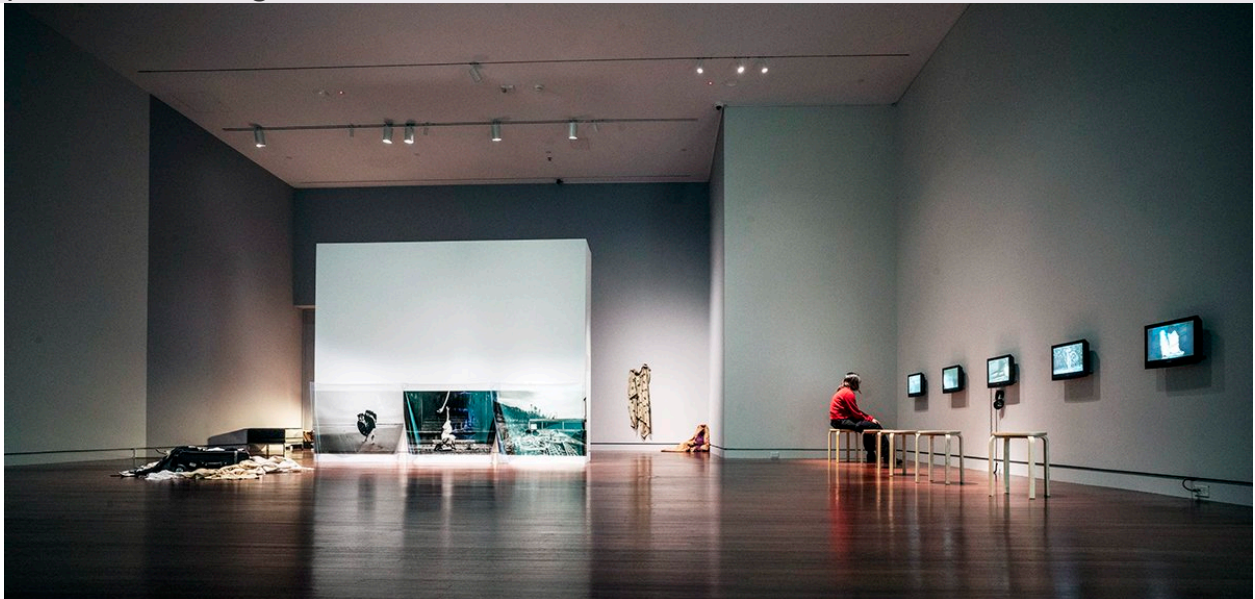
Eiko Otake performing in the exhibition space of *I Invited Myself, vol. II* at the Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center on February 3, 2023. Image by William Johnston.

Her “ten-year project” refers to the fact that while now, at 70, she continued to perform as she still possesses full bodily autonomy; in ten years from now this may not be possible. “My work stays with my body. So then: how do I do this with my aging body? Thirty years from now when I no longer exist or I’m not capable—it helps me to think that some of my work can linger.”



A video still from Eiko Otake's *A Body in Fukushima*, 2022. Image by DARIA.

Otake's contemplation of death through her body does, by necessity, compel anyone who is watching to contemplate their own death within their own bodies, a fact that all of us will experience and none will escape. How long can you sit with that contemplation? How comfortable are you with the thought of your own death and being made to think about it for the duration of her movements? Will your death be a good one or a bad one?



A view of *I Invited Myself, vol. II* at Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center. Image by William Johnston.

I Invited Myself, vol. II is Eiko Otake's ambitious bid to leave the viewer with a sense of her lived presence through her work, whether or not one experiences her live performances. Like a Zen Buddhist death poem, Otake's oeuvre reflects upon finality through a continuous invocation of the power, passion, and transient performance of life. [6]

Stacy J. Platt is an artist, writer, and educator living in Colorado Springs. She is interested in making (and/or writing about) art that tells personal stories about what it is to live and make art today as a member of the Global Majority at the end stage of capitalism. She holds an MFA from Columbia College of Art and teaches visual arts at the University of Colorado at Colorado Springs. You can find other examples of her writing at hyperallergic.com.

[1] All quotes come from my virtual interview with Eiko Otake conducted in January 2023.

[2] "Black box refers to a theatrical or performative space, usually a dark and square room with a horizontal and black painted floor, which was introduced in the early 20th century by Western avant-garde theater and also became increasingly popular in the 1960s as a rehearsal space...The white cube exhibition model also appeared in Europe at the beginning of the 20th century and is characterized by its squarish shape, white walls that help to reduce distraction and a main light source mostly coming from the ceiling that limits light reflections on paintings. [...]" See "Black Box/White Cube," Susanne Franco and Gaia Clotilde Chernetich, *Dancing Museums Glossary*:
<https://www.dancingmuseums.com/artefacts/black-box-white-cube/>.

[3] The first volume occurred at the School of the Art Institute in Chicago in February 2022.

[4] In a recent interview with *Frieze*, Otake declared her mother's recent passing as a "good death," meaning it happened at the long-lived age of 93, wearing her favorite kimono and holding Otake's hand through the transition. The existence of a good death begs the question of what a "bad death" might consist of. One hypothesis based upon Otake's definition would be one in which the dying person had little to no agency in their time of dying and did not get to choose the circumstances, surroundings, or conditions of their final passage.

[5] Her movement work is part of the lineage of the Japanese *Butoh* tradition—a dance form originating in the 1960's. *Butoh* is characterized as an improvisatory form that resists fixity, incorporates the playful and the taboo, and is often referred to as "the dance of darkness." Dancers move in slow, deeply controlled and contorted gestures meant to elicit unease in the audience. Otake and her partner Koma both studied under the founders of *Butoh*, Kazuo Ohno and Tatsumi Hijikata. Otake's incorporation deviates from *Butoh* in its underlying thread of gentleness and empathy.

[6] A series of events and a live performance will take place July 6-8.

DARIA: Denver Art Review, Inquiry, and Analysis a publication devoted to art writing and criticism focused on the Denver-area visual art scene. *DARIA* seeks to promote diverse voices and artists while fostering critical dialogue around art.

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