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Eiko Otake and Margaret Leng Tan Reflect on Art, Friendship, and Life

BY AMANDA LEE KOE



Photo: Courtesy of Kirsten Tan

It is four in the afternoon, and the Japanese dancer-choreographer Eiko Otake, 70, is making coffee for the Singaporean pianist Margaret Leng Tan, 76—her first cup of the day. We are in Otake’s apartment overlooking midtown Manhattan, and the two women, who have been friends for 20 years, are teasing each other about how incorrigibly nocturnal they are.

“I hate matinees,” Tan says breezily, turning to Otake. “I’m pretty sure you do too.” While working out our schedules for this interview, I replied to an email at a little past 3 a.m., and was surprised to see a reply come in from Otake 20 minutes later. Then, a response from Tan at a quarter to four in the morning: “What a coven of vampires we are!”

Otake and Tan are celebrated avant-garde artists from storied lineages. Otake spent time with Manja Chmiel, an exponent of the German modern dance movement *Neue Tanz*, and the Butoh legend Kazuo Ohno; Tan was the protégée of pioneering conceptual musician John Cage. Both women are self-professed workaholics, and Otake gives a wry smile as she says: “I told Margaret, if we want to see each other, we need to work together.”

They have only one rule when they collaborate. “The right of refusal,” Otake explains. After they first performed together in *Mourning*, a 2007 Japan Society commission for Ohno’s 101st birthday, Tan came to Otake with other ideas, but at that point, Otake was craving silence in her work. “I understood and respected that,” Tan says. “It’s what you needed, at that time in your evolution.” Otake agrees, and adds that for their most recent collaboration, her invitation to Tan was to join her onstage not as the child prodigy who was the first woman—of any ethnicity—to earn a doctorate at Juilliard, nor as the virtuosic pianist who has been the muse of composers from Cage to George Crumb, but as her friend. “I didn’t want a dancer-and-pianist relationship with you anymore,” Otake says, “just a Margaret-and-Eiko relationship.” Tan readily accepted.

Otake and Tan have had the pleasure and privilege of watching each other’s bodies of work evolve over two decades. Fearless trailblazers, both women have expanded the possibilities of expression in dance and music and are still actively making new work. They last appeared together onstage at the NYU Skirball Theater for Otake’s *The Duet Project* in April, which *The New York Times* called a momentous meditation on “loss and survival, the living and the dead.”

In a year that has seen a 339% increase in hate crimes against the Asian American community, often targeting vulnerable elders, it was beautiful, and radical, to watch two septuagenarian Asian women artists sharing a stage and their visionary practices, making and holding space for each other’s presence. “Friendship is radical because it can protest against the norm,” Otake says.



Otake and Tan performing at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, 2018. Photo: Courtesy of William Johnston

Friendship has been a comforting balm, and also a galvanizing force, in both of their personal and artistic lives: Allen Ginsberg, the revolutionary Beat poet, was a friend and collaborator of Otake's, as was Anna Halprin, a cutting-edge figure in postmodern dance; Crumb, the Grammy and Pulitzer-winning composer, personally handed the score of his final work, *Metamorphoses (Book II)*, to Tan when she visited him at home in Media, Pennsylvania last year, with the words: "I hope to hear you play this very soon." Tan previously performed Crumb's *Metamorphoses Book I*, which was written for her, at the National Gallery of Art in Washington D.C. in 2017, with Crumb in attendance. Following performances of her music-theater portrait, *Dragon Ladies Don't Weep*, in Singapore and Australia later this year, she will present *Metamorphoses (Book II)* at the Library of Congress in November and at National Sawdust in Brooklyn next season.

Mortality has weighed on both their minds throughout the course of the pandemic—both women lost their nonagenarian mothers in the last few years—and wended its way into the physicality of their art. Tan dedicates *Dragon Ladies Don't Weep* to the memory of Cage and her mother; and Otake tells her that Crumb, who died in February, will be there at the Library of Congress not only through his music, but through Tan's actual performance too, because "our bodies remember being watched." Otake herself, who performs in the clothes of dead friends and family, and has been wearing only black since the war on

Ukraine began, will dance at [Greenwood Cemetery](#) this winter, followed by a major multi-site exhibition in Colorado Springs and the next phase in an ongoing collaboration with performance art pioneer Joan Jonas.



Tan playing Henry Cowell's "[The Banshee](#)" as part of Otake's *The Duet Project* in April. Photo: Courtesy of Ian Douglas

I am struck by the sense of urgency both women have; how deeply in love with their crafts they still are; how busy they have been and will continue to be. The work goes on. After I leave, they tell me, they will stay on to sow the creative seeds for a new project. "And we better do it soon," Tan adds. At one point during our conversation, Otake opens a bottle of bubbly rosé just to celebrate the grand nothingness of being alive on this day.

In our interview-scheduling email thread, after Tan's vampire remark, I responded, at four in the morning, to express my pure delight at what fabulous role models they are: iconoclastic artists who have never conformed to what is expected of them, still as nocturnal and impulsive as millennials. I thought I had the last word, that they must have gone to bed by then, but the next morning, I realized I had been mistaken. There was another email from Eiko, after mine, from close to 5 a.m.: "For Margaret and me, we need to breathe every breath we still have!"



From Otake's *A Body in Fukushima*, 2016. Photo: Courtesy of William Johnston

Seventy has never looked so gorgeous, so hungry. To cap off Asian American and Pacific Islander Heritage Month, Otake and Tan talk to *Vogue* about art, freedom, bodies, mortality, and their friendship.

***Vogue:* Can you describe your embodied relationship to your instruments—the piano, for Margaret; the body, for Eiko—at the moment of performance?**

Margaret Leng Tan: The piano is an extension of my body. The ultimate moment of truth for me is when my fingertips make contact with the keys or the strings. My entire body is poised in a state of supreme alertness.

Eiko Otake: For me, the real performance has to come as a betrayal to the preparation. Although I practice and prepare, I never want a performance to be derived purely from good preparation. I want to be open to the moment before the audience, because I'm still thinking, still deciding, still changing, as I perform.

MLT: I guess that's where we differ. When I am performing, I simply monitor the exits on the highway. It plays itself; I am not actively doing anything. All the work is done already.

Vogue: How do your practices converge, and diverge? What have you noticed about each other's craft?

MLT: What connects us is our unspoken understanding of the three-dimensionality of space. We share an acute awareness that the space is alive: when we occupy this living space there is an energy that binds us. Perhaps that is why we enjoy working together.

EO: Margaret is impeccable. I adore her and completely respect her craft. But I have a side of me where I don't want to be "just right." I want to *fail* and survive it. I see this as a deep manifestation of being a child of the Japanese post-war era. Additionally, I was physically weak. So when I became a movement artist, it was important to me that I did not have a body or a practice that might intimidate those who are less able-bodied than what mainstream society considers to be a person with a productive physicality. "Productivity" can be a very alienating word. I am more interested in what my body can hold.



Tan's toy piano debut at Lincoln Center, 1993. Photo: Courtesy of Jack Vartoogian

MLT: Eiko, what you do is so radical, there is no precedent for it. You personify what Cage said about error: "Error is merely our inability to adjust immediately from a preconception to an actuality." That is so wise, so Buddhist, and so Zen. And so utterly forgiving! In a performance some things may work out better than others but there is no right or wrong way to get there. This sense of freedom that Eiko has, I

love it, and I envy her. You are the epitome of what Cage wanted—that artists should come out from their ivory towers.

EO: I was never in the ivory tower, so I didn't even have to come out! *(They both laugh.)*

You both left your countries of origin at a formative age. How did you end up in New York?

MLT: In 1962 I came all the way from Singapore to New York to audition for Juilliard. I was 16 but I probably looked like I was 12. In Singapore back then, our schools were segregated by the sexes. I had never dated a guy in my life. When I first arrived I was staying with a Chinese family who took me every Sunday to church in Chinatown where the sermon was in Cantonese. There was this young man of about 20 who started taking an interest in me. I was petrified and homesick, but I still had to focus on my Juilliard audition. Then one Sunday afternoon, as we were driving down the FDR, the sun was glinting on the East River. All of a sudden, all that homesickness dropped away and I felt: *I'm going to make it. I'm going to conquer this town.* I loved being at Juilliard. The conservatory was a goldfish bowl but I thrived in that intense and competitive environment. When I finished my master's, the dean invited me to be in the pioneer class of the doctorate program—I didn't even have to audition. Nine guys and me. That's how I became the first woman to graduate from Juilliard with a doctorate in 1971.

EO: My background was completely the opposite! I was a radical activist back in Tokyo. I was a political science major in college, but I dropped out to protest the Vietnam War. We were trying to stop the airplanes. My father had been drafted into the military during World War II. He realized he would likely be killed and worse yet, he might have to kill. He did not think he could survive either, so he faked tuberculosis to get out. In a collectivist society like Japan, if one person lies, the entire family can be punished, but he did it anyway. I am from that kind of a family. We are not intellectual. But we are hardcore anti-system, anti-violence. I wasn't in school much, but I was learning all the time—from great books and films. George Orwell, Nagisa Oshima. I worked in an arthouse cinema so I could watch those films for free. I was the person who tore the ticket stubs. I did so many different jobs, even performed in cabarets, saved enough money to leave on a ship to Europe. When I got to New York, in 1976, I was 24.

Your friendship and artistic collaborations have spanned two decades, and you are thinking of working together again soon. Can you share random observations about the process with us?

MLT: When we first talked about working together all those years ago, I remember that this is how Eiko put it: "You don't need me. I don't need you. But it would be nice to work together." Isn't that wonderful? I love how frank she is. And it's still the same now. That trust remains a springboard for our collaborations.



Otake performing at the Japan Society, 1976. Photo: Courtesy of Osamu Honda

EO: When you and I work together, it's about *now*. It's about our past. It's about our friendship. But it's also about our future—and that is still so exciting to me.

MLT: This will probably be our last big collaboration. That's a sobering thought, isn't it?

EO: Actually, talking about death makes me love life even more! Being here with you, talking about where we might go next, makes me love working, and friendship, even more. You know, 40, 50 years ago, dancers retired early. Now, it's different. Movement, as a form, has evolved. We can go on longer now.

MLT: I remember hearing Mieczysław Horszowski play at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine when he was in his nineties. He walked up on stage, played these beautiful Chopin mazurkas, then walked right off the stage, unassisted. Until my body tells me otherwise, I'll keep going. But I *will* listen to my body.

EO: Yes. Our bodies hold so much knowledge. They absorb people, places and time.

MLT: Meanwhile, I think we should continue for as long as we have something to say.