

A World of Glacial Movements, Tense With Emotions



G. Paul Burnett/The New York Times

Cambodian Stories Revisited, by the dance team Eiko and Koma at Danspace Project, includes Eiko looking over the stricken Charian for signs of life.

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Like snails, like glaciers, Eiko and Koma move slowly, so slowly, and yet even in stillness their bodies seem at all points suffused with meaning and, more particularly, feeling. The mind doesn't go into slow motion while watching them. They keep us in a state of almost continuous suspense, so that we're returned to that most basically pleasurable of theater sensations: wanting to know what will happen next.



For perhaps 30 years — I had heard of them long before I first saw them in the late 1980s — this Japanese-American duo have been among the great performers of New York, indeed the world. And they are supremely dramatic. They take us way beyond the excitement of what will happen next and into uncharted areas of intense emotion.

Since there are two of them, the adjective unique doesn't quite work, but they are extraordinarily unlike anybody else. Their movement is often more animal than human, and as effortfully, painfully, they inch their way along the floor in various lying positions, they remind me of nothing so much as beached seals. It is exceptionally hard to imagine anybody else's replacing them in their own repertory, and yet this year that's what will happen: they are passing on one of their most renowned vehicles, "Grain," to two Cambodians — Charian (female, 17) and Peace (male, 18) — to perform at the American Dance Festival in Durham, N.C., from June 25 to 27.

G. Paul Burnett/The New York Times
Koma on the ground, with Charian, in "Cambodian Stories."

Charian and Peace appear alongside Eiko and Koma in “Cambodian Stories Revisited” at [Danspace Project](#) (as they will at the American Dance Festival world premiere of “Quartet”), but here the drama arises from the contrast between the two generations. Charian and Peace, as physically beautiful as they are young, can move with extreme slowness too, and dramatically. But theirs is often the motion of radiantly expressive classical sculpture in motion.

They both make gorgeous entrances with heads, torsos and legs profiled in two-dimensional bas-relief, and later each holds ravishingly statuesque positions on one leg. In one scene together — it is the moment when “Cambodian Stories” shifts into a new and more tragic key — they no sooner touch than they come apart, she to fall, he to leave the stage.

Nothing here is more mesmerizingly eloquent than Eiko’s subsequent return, advancing toward Charian’s supine body as if numbed by a mother’s worst fear, averting her eyes as if a new thought has struck her. She nuzzles the body of her perhaps dead child, and then apparently finds faint traces of life in her.

There are many strange, powerful and enthralling twists in the tale or tales that follow: images of grief, mourning, reconciliation, denial, parting — all come in a bewildering, irresistible flow, all heartfelt and compelling even when inexplicable.

“Cambodian Stories Revisited” occurs in one unbroken sequence: I was content to follow its mysteries as if it were indeed one unfathomable story — although I do not see how the opening painting episode connects to anything else, and I confess that there were two brief moments in the hourlong performance when my concentration broke.

Presented in association with the [Asia Society](#), this astonishing show is offered free in the graveyard of St. Mark’s Church, beneath the trees, in view of Second Avenue and in earshot of its traffic.

“Cambodian Stories Revisited” runs tonight and tomorrow at Danspace Project, St. Mark’s Church, 131 East 10th Street, East Village; (212) 674-8112, danspaceproject.org.