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STEPHANIE YAO/THE OREGONIAN

Performance artist Eiko used Jamison Square's rising water in her portrait of grief in "Offering."

Gripping performance opens citywide art fest

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SPECIAL TO THE OREGONIAN

Hundreds of arts fans gathered Thursday evening in the Pearl District's Jamison Square to watch a deeply moving — and water-drenched — dance by legendary slow-motion performance artists Eiko + Koma.

Held on the second anniversary of Sept. 11, Eiko and Koma's sober "Offering" was in many ways an unlikely inauguration to the 10-day Time-Based Art Festival, the Portland Institute for Contemporary Arts' mammoth, citywide showcase of music, theater and dance from around the world. Yet in opening TBA with a free public performance, PICA returned the culture to the cultural arts. "Offer-

ing" is an unflinching meditation on sorrow, but it is at essence a communal one.

Crafted as an elegy to the thousands who died in the fall of New York's twin towers, "Offering" is the Japanese-born duo's latest in a series of nature-based works. Eiko and Koma have performed it to critical acclaim using the sparsest of sets — a mountain of soil — to evoke images of burial and rebirth.

In Portland, the pair entirely transformed "Offering," performing it in the ever-changing water patterns of Jamison Square's architectural fountain. The granite walls let loose intermittent cascades of water, became a rising tidal pool, a flowing creek and finally an ocean of tears into which

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the dancers crawled as if to a baptismal font.

Soaked in symbolism, the hour-long dance owed much to the post-Hiroshima art form of butoh, the "dance of utter darkness" that had its origins in the wake of an atomic holocaust. Thursday's performance was in its own way a requiem for unfathomable loss of life in a nuclear age.

Building and receding in intensity like the ebb and flow of the surrounding water, their slow-motion tableaux was at once a chilling requiem to the dead, an unblinking look at the decrepitude of advancing age, and a cathartic hymn to the cycles of nature.

The two dancers appeared in bone-white makeup, with halting steps suggesting the dead and the dying. Eiko, her body hunched and neck wracked in throat-baring spasms, was the embodiment of grief and labored age. Submerged in the rising pool, she reached up to a makeshift raft as if weighted by anguish. Koma, carrying a quiver of arrows, rose slowly to a hero's pose, then turned assassin as he drove the arrows into Eiko's body. It wasn't an easy work to watch, but their embraces gradually suggested redemption.

With Eiko and Koma, no movement or scenic element goes unconsidered. Yellow spider mums tucked behind their ears emerged as a crucial symbol: sustenance

and catastrophe are as natural as the inevitable ebb of life. Like starving nestlings, their mouths gaped and stuttering, they fed on the flowers and each other. By "Offering's" end, the petals were flotsam, strewn in the fountain's tide.

An altar of candles was replaced by Jeff Forbes' expert lighting, which offered a seamless transition into the night's encroaching darkness. The soundscape — a mix of urban street noise that included passing streetcars and the cries of babies — was augmented by a pre-recorded choral score, which, too, suddenly broke the spell; the city's found sounds and surrounding water rhythms provided ample accompaniment to "Offering."

If Portland ever needed an argument for street-based performance to bring avant-garde art to the masses, Eiko and Koma made a compelling case with their reinvention of a community space.