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DANCE; Like a Painting In Slow Motion

By VALERIE GLADSTONE

TRADITIONALLY, art reaches the Whitney Museum by truck, heavily guarded and insured. This week, in a radical break from custom, an exhibition will arrive -- completely unprotected -- by subway.

It's not that the museum suddenly became lax or cheap; it's that the art is human. Eiko and Koma, the celebrated Japanese-born dancer-choreographers, haven't decided whether to take the No. 1 or the C train from their loft in TriBeCa in lower Manhattan. But from Wednesday through June 21, they will spend seven hours a day naked on a large platform filled with hand-dyed silk leaves, as the main elements in an installation called "Breath," at the museum's film and video gallery.

"It should be very restful," said Eiko, pushing her long black hair off her face.

"We've promised ourselves a good time," added Koma.

David A. Ross, the director of the Whitney, said: "I'm very happy to have them in our house. We welcome pioneers."

For 25 years, Eiko and Koma, who are husband and wife, have created eloquent, slow-motion dances that deal abstractly with life, death, rebirth and other aspects of nature. It took them six months to prepare for this event. Known for their incremental, almost trancelike movements, they will spend the day gradually changing postures, almost the way light filters through a forest. "We didn't rehearse," said Koma. "We lay in the bed of leaves to get used to the texture, and other times we meditated."

They call "Breath" an exploration, not a performance. "It's in a continuous state of evolution," Koma said. "Nothing should be taken literally. Our bodies serve as windows only, as the intersection of our senses."

Their video of indistinct images of themselves -- it appears miragelike in the darkened gallery -- will be projected behind the platform. There will be no music. "We want people to hear their own," said Eiko.

Matthew Yokobosky, the associate curator in the film and video department, arranged Eiko and Koma's debut at the Whitney in "Breath." He thought the museum, with its history of breaking boundaries, was ideal for their work. "Their movements are so slow and sculptural," he said. "What they do is more like painting than theater."

Many artists have preceded Eiko and Koma in performing the art that they create, going back to the Dadaists, the German sculptor Joseph Beuys, the early Pop artists, the creators of "happenings" in the 70's and theater's magic-man Robert Wilson. Eiko and Koma take another step along that road.

"As we enter the 21st century," Mr. Yokobosky said, "we have to keep reconsidering what art is."

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