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Dance review One piano, two dancers and music's secret

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TIM DuROCHE

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When dancers Eiko and Koma and innovative pianist Margaret Leng Tan performed their work in progress, "Mourning," on Saturday evening at Reed College, a small, rapt audience of 70 was let in on a secret or two: The poetic skeleton in music's closet is silence, and dance's most closely guarded formulas involve space and stillness.

Presented as part of Reed Arts Week, the evening showcased three spectacular, idiosyncratic performing artists at the top of their game.

Eiko and Koma create lyrical, measured dances that are downright transcendental. With its richly reductive, slow-mo metamorphosis, "Mourning" presented, through movement and music, a stunning comparison of form in nature to the sculptural landscape of the body -- at moments feeling like an artful, up-close nature documentary.

"Mourning" opened on a spare stage (a tiny toy piano illuminated in the center of a large square filled with 50-plus bags of topsoil, a smattering of tree cuttings, and a partially shrouded grand piano) with pianist Tan lying in the earth.

One of the musical avant-garde's more theatrical, magnetic presences, Tan has a vibrant conceptual approach to her work, and it's hard to imagine any of her piano contemporaries, say Jean-Yves Thibaudet, or Ursula Oppens, getting their hands dirty in the same way or playing that tiny piano.

When the lights came up again, Eiko and Koma were lying side by side, unmoving. The silence was salient, almost aching. Tan, at the "real" piano this time, boldly began John Cage's "In the Name of the Holocaust" -- an evocative, string-plucked delight that careened between a mannered harpsichordlike tidiness and the exotic sounds of the three-stringed Japanese shamisen.

Throughout the evening (she also performed the spare and lovely "Merry Christmas, Mrs. Whiting," by Bunita Marcus and a last-minute substitution, Henry Cowell's "The Aeolian Harp," among other pieces), Tan executed a delicious balance between the playful and a masterful, spot-on rigor -- an ideal conceptual match for the slowly unfolding, mannered cosmos of Eiko and Koma.

Nearly 10 minutes into the work, the first birth pangs of movement were ventured. This is hallmark Eiko and Koma: monumental in its incremental minimalism, rich in gravity and grit -- a visually arresting human slide show

in which time collapses. Is it movement in reverse, suspended or just patiently, painstakingly in the here and now?

The best moments of "Mourning" were in the first half, when the performers engaged the hypnotic surge between menacing quiet and otherworldly piano -- bodies moving through slow frames -- arching, yearning, wrenching, raising billowing dust across a dirt expanse of stage.

Eventually, "Mourning" succumbed to tragic visual overtones -- a Butoh-meets-Pre-Raphaelite "dying swan" denouement left the piece feeling underdeveloped and somehow conveniently resolved. But overall it resonated with a deep abiding sense of urgency, decay, regeneration and transformation.

You couldn't help but feel you'd seen the beginnings of something profound and beautiful.

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