

# The New York Times

DANCE REVIEW | 'MOURNING'

## Human Predators at Large, Butoh Style

By GIA KOURLAS

Published: October 20, 2007

Eiko and Koma, the extraordinary Japanese-American dance duo, have always insisted that they don't practice Butoh, which isn't to say that they're anti-Butoh. Their resistance is about respect. They met in 1971 at the studio of Tatsumi Hijikata, one of Butoh's founders, in Tokyo, moved to Europe in 1973 and returned to Japan in 1975 to continue studying with Kazuo Ohno before relocating to the United States, where — luckily for us — the pair have remained.



Eiko, right, and her partner Koma, left, in their new work "Mourning" at the Japan Society.

"Ohno sensei is too amazing an artist for us to be aligned with, but his influence is deep and long-lasting," they state in the program for their new work, "Mourning," a collaboration with the pianist Margaret Leng Tan. Presented at the [Japan Society](#) on Thursday as part of the festival "Kazuo Ohno 101: 3-Week Butoh Parade," the dance brings Eiko and Koma back to the theater where they made their American debut in 1976.

From the start, "Mourning" is endlessly fascinating. Lying naked from the waist up on a bed of dirt and dried leaves in front of a massive tree trunk, Eiko and Koma remain immobile as the audience files in. It's as if their brand of stillness is a balm to prepare the viewer, as in the case of "Mourning," for entry into a natural world.

Set to Ms. Tan's sparkling renditions of piano pieces by John Cage, Bunita Marcus and Somei Satoh (she is a vivid presence, playing both a Steinway piano and a Schoenhut toy piano), "Mourning" is about grief — not necessarily human loss, but the devastation inflicted by humans on the environment. Wearing shaggy brown vests, Eiko and Koma, moving like bears, alternate slow, anguished twists with sudden lunges. Each time they fall on each other, a mist of white powder rises, creating swirling spirit shapes within David Ferri's vaporous, golden lighting.

In one powerful moment, Koma attacks Eiko, who screams in terror. He grips her fur with his teeth, dragging her motionless body to the front of the stage and then, moving forward on his shoulders, falls off the stage in a shocking crash, both frightening and funny. When Koma reappears, he is covered with leafy branches; soon he engulfs Eiko into the shrubbery until bits of gleaming flesh — a delicate shoulder or splayed, slender toes — are swallowed whole.

As the lighting fades, the dancers prop their legs against the tree, and their limbs, slowly wilting, take on the appearance of gnarled wood. They vanish again, this time into the tree. Yet for all the death and decay, Eiko and Koma leave behind a fragrant bouquet of fresh leaves, soil and wood. Their afterlife, it seems, is the earth.