

Shape-Shifting

Choreography creates moving images through stillness

by Deborah Jowitz
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A dance performance rarely begins with the leading lady apparently dead. But this is Eiko of Eiko and Koma, and she can lie supine and immobile on a nest of blue-green net far longer than it takes an audience to enter St. Mark's Church. Nothing stirs in the breeze of the sweltering spectators' fans but the little white fluff islands on the blue floorcloth and the mottled blue mosquito netting suspended above the dancer.



Life alongside art in death: Eiko
photo: Koma

The pair's luminous new *Death Poem* is even sparer than last year's *Tree Song*. Except for what sounds like a somber medieval march (played on tape at *Death Poem*'s beginning and end by the Kronos Quartet), the only sounds are of crickets. Every arduous move takes an eternity. You feel as if you're growing into your chair.

Eiko & Koma

Danspace Project at St. Mark's Church
June 23 through 26

We absorb this soul's mysterious voyage in terms of small goals: Ah, now she's trying to get her feet to touch each other. Now . . . is she actually turning in place? A blink is a big event. Koma makes only brief appearances—custodian, priest, lover? Wearing a long, homespun kimono, he circles Eiko slowly, crouches and stares, leaves. Our vision of this woman keeps changing. As she revolves by increments, her legs spreading slightly, her head lolling to one side, she briefly resembles a courtesan in an old Japanese woodcut. Then the bulky loincloth she wears under her loose cream-colored garment begins to look darker in places. It's actually mostly lavender, but so strange is its appearance in J. Ryan Graves's soft lighting that you think, with sudden horror, "What happened to this woman?" And just as you're about to dismiss the thought, she struggles to sit up, staring between her legs.

The net flies and is whisked away. This woman is *dead*? Every bit of her seems primordially alive. Her right hand, groping across her breast, looks like a spider. Her opening mouth is a black hole. By the end of 50 minutes, she has managed to roll off the bier and up the steps to the altar, where she lies motionless. A huge canvas by the Reyum painting collective of Cambodia, suspended from the balcony's two sides almost behind us, is pulled toward the altar. In the moments before it is lowered onto the steps, we can see that the painted profile of a woman on her back, mouth slightly open, looks just like Eiko. As the lights fade, Koma's at the foot of the steps reaching up, and Eiko is sliding one pale foot, then another, down toward him.

Maybe *Death Poem* is a time-lapse vision in reverse, or maybe what we're seeing speeds up a process so slow that the human eye can't detect it. Like life.

Eiko
& Koma