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PERFORMANCE ART REVIEW

# PERFORMANCE ART REVIEW; A Landscape's Darkness Illuminated by a Nude

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It is a Thursday afternoon at the Whitney Museum of American Art. Walk up to the second floor, past sculptures by Louise Nevelson that rear like cathedral facades, past a carefully messy re-creation of the studio where the painter Richard Pousette-Dart worked.

Walk to the door marked Video and Film Room. Pick up a brochure for Eiko and Koma's "Breath," a live installation that will run through June 21 at the museum. Enter the room.

It is airless and dark inside. A golden vision gradually emerges. A small hill of grass, dirt and leaves dwindles into a minuscule meadow surrounded by black nothingness. Above hang branches heavy with clotted, shivering leaves.

A blur of livid light is slowly revealed as a reclining, unclothed body. A long furrow of shadow marks the spine that joins a jagged shoulder with softly rounded male buttocks. A tousled head of black leafy hair becomes visible, growing up, it seems, out of the earth. There is a faint autumnal smell of dry leaves. There are no sounds, in a silence undisturbed by the chatter of passers-by on their way to other galleries.

The line of shadow along Koma's body -- alone onstage, without Eiko, for the moment -- grows to a pool of gentle darkness. Almost imperceptibly, he has tilted back. A few leaves drift down. There is a dry, slight ping as each meets the ground. Light shifts very gradually over this contained landscape, washing three leaves with a brilliant green for a few seconds.

Time is passing. A drift of clouds emerges from the darkness. It grows and wanes, changing shape until it looks itself like an alert nude body at rest, then disappears.

A faint mist of rain falls briefly in the distance. A curled hand rises very slowly into the air then subsides back into that curve of back. A gong sounds faintly, for a moment. A few leaves fall. Mist sweeps across the hill. The dark head shifts slowly. A sharp chin and cheekbone, now warm alabaster, now carved bone, catch the soft light then disappear. All is still, or so it seems, once more.

Photo: Eiko, top, and Koma perform "Breath" at the Whitney Museum of American Art through June 21. (Tom Brazil)

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