

exhibition review

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Commercial Spaces in the Tokyo Art World.

The Mori Art Center

Sensing Nature: Rethinking the Japanese Perception of Nature, 24th July-7th November 2010.

Tomio Koyama Gallery

Group Show: Varda Cauvano, Noriko Furunishi, David Ratcliff, Vibeke Tandberg and Dan Asher, 26th June - 31st July 2010.

Ine Izumi: *Booksisters (incomplete) - Shadows of Spring Lights*, June 26th - July 31st, 2010.

Taka Ishii Gallery

Naoya Hatakeyama: *"Tracing Lines/Yamate Dori"* 17th July - 14th August, 2010.

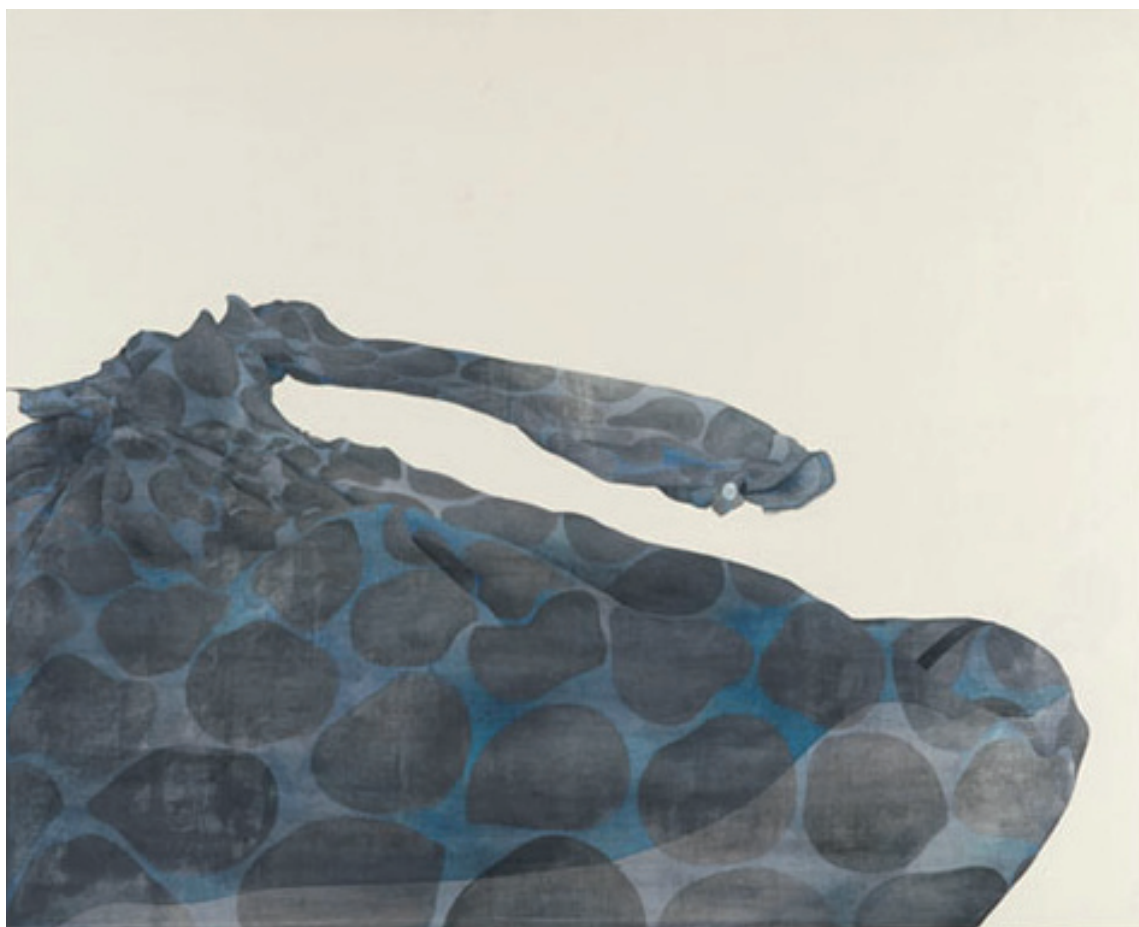
Though exhibitions dedicated exclusively to contemporary Japanese art are seemingly rare in the larger museums of Tokyo, a plethora of smaller, commercial spaces present a diverse array of current Japanese practice. A number of these galleries congregate in a former industrial space in Koto-ku (near the Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo) which houses half a dozen dealers. This is the place to visit on one of the many launches or evening openings, giving as it does an unprecedented opportunity to view the presentations of several leading Tokyo galleries in one location. The slightly unloved, post-industrial setting reminded me of the spontaneous temporary art spaces of East London, showcasing sometimes outstanding artworks against a utilitarian backdrop.

Recent exhibitions at Taka Ishii, perhaps the most internationally prominent gallery amongst this coterie, have included works by the near-legendary Nobuyoshi Araki (b.1940), while the current presentation showcases Naoya Hatakeyama's (b.1958) photographs of neglected construction spaces along the Yamate Dori, a ten-kilometer road bisecting Tokyo, revealing the impact of continuous reconstruction on the urban space by rendering it uncanny.

Tomio Koyama requisitions the largest space within the building, occupying the entirety of the top floor and one smaller gallery further down. The upstairs gallery provides an unusually large exhibition space for a Tokyo commercial gallery: currently a group show presenting large-scale paintings by five separate artists is on view. Meanwhile, the smaller gallery exhibits a project by Ine Izumi entitled



Naoya Hatakeyama, *Yamate Dori Series*. Image courtesy Taka Ishii Gallery.



Ine Izumi, *I was not a dress (fourth sister's dress as a motif)*. Image courtesy Tomio Koyama Gallery.

Booksisters; documentary photographs and related paintings recording a book club meeting between six women. While the resulting acrylic paintings have an appealingly delicate touch, the lightness of the project's premise leads it to lack substance, documenting as it does a quotidian event in the artist's life without reference to a context beyond that event.

Meanwhile, Hiromi Yoshi gallery showcases the work of international artists, including the dazzlingly delicate light sculptures of German artist Björn Dahlem (b.1974) and photographic works by Futoshi Miyagi. Amongst these, Miyagi's works are outstanding: photographs are ingeniously transformed into stunningly detailed trceries by being cut through with Riley-esque patterns.

Several of these galleries schedule shows which present a mixture of contemporary Japanese and international art. Some of it is work clearly made for art fairs (and some of the galleries proudly advertise their involvement in fairs such as Frieze): it is work which is easy to ship, easy to assemble and replace, and mercifully free of any indigenous art historical referents - or else looking just 'Japanese' enough to be deemed *kawaii* ('cutesy'), an aesthetic filtered from Japanese pop culture through to the international art market and which is in itself becoming globalised.

Like these commercial galleries, the Mori Art Center is a privately financed initiative. It is

committed to displaying domestic and international contemporary art and does not at present exhibit a permanent collection. Known for its stimulating, critical exhibitions, the current show, *Sensing Nature*, aims to “re-think” the Japanese relationship with nature through presentations made by three artists specifically for the space.

The claim that the Japanese ‘live close to nature’ has become not only clichéd but also, as anyone who has experienced the post-utopian landscape of Tokyo will know, ill-deserved. The colossal Mori complex itself - a huge skyscraper towering over the newly-developed playground of the Roppongi Hills district, with the art museum and skyline-viewing deck both positioned on the 52nd floor - is itself testament to the unashamedly ‘artificial’ innovation of Japanese design. Louise Bourgeois’s (1911-2010) steel and marble *Maman* (c.2000), which seemed so dominant in London’s post-industrial Tate Modern, is almost unnoticeable beside the skyscraper here. So the use of the word ‘rethinking’, within an exhibition series aiming to “redefin[e] Japan”, induced me to believe this show might present a long-overdue critique of the ‘harmony-with-nature’ stereotype. It was disappointing, therefore, to read in the opening statements that: “In Japan, nature has always been seen as co-existing rather than at odds with mankind.” With their determination to drive trains through mountains, make buildings resistant to the shifting of the earth, and reclaim land from the sea, it’s clear that nature in Japan is as available to control and exploitation as it is anywhere else. Perhaps the organisers recognise this in their lament that nature has been swept away by modernisation, but this statement in itself suggests that the relationship with nature which they are trying to reclaim is likely a constructed ‘tradition’ which is in itself artificial.

The opening exhibit in the show, Yoshioka Tokujin’s (b.1967) *Snow*, a 15 meter wide tank of feathers and fans which mimics snowfall, is stunning primarily by virtue of its artifice. Meanwhile, Shinoda Taro’s (b.1964) films, which seek to highlight the presence of natural phenomena within the cityscapes of Japan, fail to convince, mainly because they make newly visible the dearth of verdant space in Japan’s cities. Kuribayashi Takashi (b.1968) is alone amongst the three participating artists in offering a genuinely original perspective on nature. The *Wald as Wald* installation, comprised of reams of washi papers suspended from birch-like structures, is entered from underneath. Stooping beneath the papers, the viewer is given a sense of being some subterranean creature; burrow-like holes in the paper allow you to poke your head through, getting a ground-level view of the forest-scape above, inviting us to view nature from a position which is no longer recognisably human. His other work on show, a huge mound of earth sliced by a disc of glass, resembling islands peeping above sea-level, reminds us how much of the earth is hidden from our sight.

In spite of the limitations of some of the individual artworks in *Sensing Nature*, and the spuriousness of some of the claims made about the ‘reassessment’ of nature, the exhibit undoubtedly has an agenda to promote ecological awareness which is commendable. The exhibition concludes with a reading room, making genuine the curator’s proclaimed aim to provoke the viewer’s desire to alter their perspective on nature through re-education. This kind of provision of a space in which to allow the viewer to research the context of the exhibition in their own time and on their own terms is not something I have encountered before, and is in my opinion a far superior option to writing

over-long and condescending wall-cards. The exhibition clearly has a 'public-service' agenda and, since Mori is an exciting and enjoyable place to visit, it has arguably succeeded in its mission of public engagement. The Mori Art Museum is privately owned by the Mori family of industrialists, perhaps making it ironic that they achieve 'education' and 'accessibility' goals much more effectively than many comparable state-run institutions, proving that public-spiritedness and private finance can be compatible - an encouraging model for an uncertain economic future in which state funding for the arts is no longer guaranteed.

While these galleries and private institutions present contemporary practice, the larger public museums in Tokyo seem to concentrate on presenting either international contemporary art or Japanese works emerging from the neo-avant-gardes of the 1960s. Emerging artists and pre-war modernisms are both equally neglected. These commercial spaces therefore make a vital contribution to the presentation of Japanese art.



Yoshioka Tokujin, *Snow*. Image courtesy Mori Art Center.