

the island over there: how culture travels in japanese contemporary art¹

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It is impossible not to write about Japan in 2013 without referring to the events that befell the eastern coast in March in 2011. The effect of the earthquake and tsunami on the towns and villages along Japan's Tohoku region is probably best described clearly and simply as devastating. The ongoing nuclear crisis at Fukushima Daiichi however is more complicated. A wavering of government and corporate responsibility has meant the crisis continues with no real sense of what the effect will be on the local landscape, on the exclusion zone surrounding the power plant, on Tokyo and beyond. This invisible presence of radiation has in itself created a space of doubt, which while traumatising has empowered and, in some cases, radicalised awareness, stimulated debate and conversation on the form of present society. As well as this, a more conceptual metaphysical space of nature has grown from these issues, where the temporal and momentary, the political, the communal and the performance now reside.

Roppongi Crossing 2013: Out of Doubt is the latest exhibition of Tokyo's Mori Art Museum's triennial event offering a survey of Japanese contemporary art. In light of the continuing events of 2011, this survey has become more worldly and speculative, offering more ambitious examples of what art means when confronting "the complexities, contradictions and ambiguities that have accumulated in the society and culture of this country 'now'".² To understand this current social and cultural landscape and how it is viewed both at home and abroad you need only look back through what has been a series of critical moments heralding fundamental change along the way. The Meiji Restoration in 1868 saw Japan open its borders and begin one hundred and forty-five years of modernisation. The Great Kanto Earthquake in 1923 would later inspire a desire for more meaningless distractions both recreational and artistic in the face of tragedy. The 2011 earthquake, tsunami and nuclear crisis triggered memories of the Second World War and for some that wished to forget, a younger generation born between both events have become aware and begun to question events they had only heard about indirectly.

*The post-earthquake community brought back ideas of how we were, what we were like. The younger generation, central to this exhibition, started to look at things like the war which the previous generations never really touched upon, except for people like Makoto Aida and so on. There has been enough distance somehow since 1940 and they are now interested in why did this happen and what did our grandparents do?*³

In the exhibition, parallels become clear from the very first room, between the past and present. Nakamura Hiroshi's 1964 painting *The Sacred Fire Relay* (1964) may illustrate atrocities of war and peacetime leadership, but it also points towards the way past events have been viewed both from outside the country and within. He is interested in a type of "tourism" art, where the idea of sightseeing would engage views from outsiders visiting Japan and facilitate a critical view of the 'self'. Meanwhile, Sachiko Kazama's *Prison NUKE FISSION 235* (2012) depicts the nucleus of President Eisenhower, an early supporter of Japan's post-war nuclear power policy surrounded by Japanese politician-electrons.



Curators Mami Kataoka (Chief Curator, Mori Art Museum), Reuban Keehan (Curator of Asian Contemporary Art, Queensland Art Gallery/Gallery of Modern Art, Brisbane) and Gabriel Ritter (Assistant Curator, Dallas Museum of Art) looked to Japanese artists who worked not simply in one particular field, but that stretched their ideas across various methods of representation to explore themes pertinent to their own cultural identity. The prospect of including Japanese artists, international by birth with close or distant family in Japan, meant that the idea of viewing the country and culture from abroad would present the show with a critical view of present day Japanese society akin to an out-of-body experience. Different systems of education and being part of other art communities would also give a Japanese audience the opportunity to witness how Japanese sensibilities are received abroad when



they are integrated into foreign cultures, what is different and what is not. In all, eight of the artists in *Out of Doubt* live and work abroad with Akira Akira, Koji Ryui and Masato Takasaka all based in Australia. The urge to be contextual, specific to place and circumstance has proved a vital and necessary ingredient when gathering artist proposals. Much of what is shown uses artwork as something mobile, in some cases physically carried and documented as either performance or film and at times both.

*Akira, Ryui and Takasaka have come through the Australian system, which places a far greater emphasis on historical knowledge, theoretical reflection and awareness of other practices.*⁴

OBJECTS OF DESIRE

Melbourne's Akira Akira (originally from Kobe, and then Adelaide), is someone fascinated by detail, finish and presentation. His fascination with the materiality of alien surroundings is afforded a corner in the show almost uncanny in being. His choice of material delicately composed on plinths, as varied in what they're made from as what they hold, results in an environment not dissimilar to a catalogue-moment in a photographic studio of products and commodities. In this way Akira's staged setting and epistemology of materiality could see casual observers walk past and overlook one of the exhibition's more unusually provocative pieces.

*When we think of Japan we instantly think of the shape of the island but actually that's national boundaries, a political boundary but it doesn't mean culture is cut off in that shape so I'm interested in how culture travels. Going to Australia and then seeing Japan from outside still carrying something about it with him, the way he (Akira) chooses material and arranges the space, making an extra ceiling with visible cabling and ceiling panels, in three different shades of white, probably not noticed by everyone. Those subtle differences are very important for him.*⁵

His ambiguous productions give a sense of how the cultural heritage and ethnicity of other countries provide less cut-and-dried environments for this kind of experimentation. Other notable contemporaries like sculptor Ricky Swallow from Victoria, now based in the USA, and American Takeshi Murata express similar concerns. Swallow is an artist working with everyday images distorted through their manipulation, while Murata uses image technology, image degradation and photorealism to juxtapose ideas of handmade things with concepts of mass-production.

Fellow *Roppongi Crossing* exhibitor Mika Tajima, born in the USA and based in Los Angeles, is placed next to Akira's *Spillberg* (2009). His material indirectly reflects the language Tajima explores – time and duration through reference to film and the vacuum-formed acrylic she obscures with generous colour. The arrangement of Tajima's wall hung pieces against wallpaper suggests the possibility of change, while her pallet-crate of previous work stands obliquely to the wall like actors and actresses waiting side of stage, hinting at their possible mobility, as events around them unfold. Making use of Le Corbusier paintings from Mori Art Museum's permanent collection, the conceptual conversation between Tajima and Akira hints at the character of each piece, characters that appear part of some delicately drawn novel that depends on their changing identity and unfolding time.

*Conceptually, Spillberg was conceived as a kind of painting. Or for me, it constituted an attempt to make 'paint that never dries'. Since 'painting' as a medium has been killed and resuscitated so many times, I feel it ought to be treated like a troubled identity. As with any identity in the globalised, trans-cultural and trans-historical context, there can be no single element underpinning its overall makeup. So I see Spillberg as a spill of paint that continues to morph into its future self even at a pace as slow as an iceberg.*⁶

Roppongi Crossing: Out of Doubt registers itself in the work by the very nature of the material, on whether it's dry and how it sits within the space, getting in the way. Tajima's flat-packed studio of readily assembled screens is structural. Doubt here serves to suggest an uncertainty but one that expresses that uncertainty through the works' ensuing performance, with itself, with each other and with visitors who pass by. Tajima's flat-packed studio of readily assembled screens is structural. Belgium-based Yukio Okumura reinterprets other artists and their work to create a history that runs parallel to their own. Okumura discovered artist Hisachika Takahashi while flicking through an old exhibition catalogue and became obsessed with his 1967 exhibition tour while investigating this long forgotten artist. Okumura's intention is to explore the (mis)interpretation of language and build on communication less dependent on the self but on others by 'involving' the figure of Takahashi, once an assistant to both Argentine painter Lucio Fontana and Robert Rauschenberg, pop-artist and originator of the "combine". Takahashi's enigmatic figure serves to involve people watching, listening and reading about him. Facing Tajima's work Okumura's video of Takahashi draws one in. The film's attending crowd watching Takahashi speak could also be Tajima's audience watching her work reorganised on both wall and floor, a timeline shared by Akira and prepared in the shape of constant material research and redevelopment.

FREEDOM IS ON THE SIDE OF 'THINGS'⁷

For sculptor Koji Ryui, his material performs. Born in Kyoto and currently living in Sydney, the liminal space between pieces is important. Potential relationships are found and nurtured through performance and the odd re-appropriation of everyday furniture. Objects and images leave you wondering where you place yourself in amongst all of this. It's the performances he undertakes between objects that begin to hint at the nature and identity of the figures and characters he presents, though never directly. For the exhibition his 'performance' is simply the sculptural arrangement of crumpled faces (*Soul Collector*, 2010), amorphous characters (*HAVE A NICE DAY*, 2013) and scientific models (*Special Arrangement #2*, 2010) that together suggest structures embedded within all living things. Their loose arrangement creates a field of uncertain property; spaces, proximities and loose narratives stacked on misassembled shelving. "Moving through Ryui's world we are encouraged to re-code our relation to the familiar."⁸

The space afforded Ryui is generous and visually overlaps his neighbouring photography. Ryui's networked creatures that are more anthropological than animal and Takuma Nakahira's political space of photographic vignettes all create a diversity regardless of agenda and intention, with each piece supporting the next and a critical understanding

of place and position in the uncertain territory of images against objects. The identity of these pieces doesn't desperately seek meaning, but rather they identify themselves amidst a backdrop far more universal than you might expect. Japan in this case serves only as a starting point. As Kataoka points out; "It's not only about Japan. The same format could be applied anywhere."⁹

I started to recognise that that is very Japanese to be able to accommodate and accept two different things together. That's a more polytheistic way of thinking. You start seeing a conflicting structure, but it's not really. The modern and traditional are somehow loosely accepted in this society and that's the beauty of this place. That way of looking at the structure of the world could be applied to a lot of indigenous culture and other non-Western places that are doing the same thing and having different things together.¹⁰

Ryui's sculpture field sits alongside USA-based Aki Sasamoto whose work performs as much as the visitor who navigates her forest of familiar objects spliced together and intersected by small pieces of video. With the glove paintings of Chiba Masaya, the large paintings that accompany them embody subliminal reactions to identity and crisis, the nature of the world and how that nature is occupied. The glove paintings are treated as deities – *Wandering Jizo*—that show the way presented as pieces to wander through, to encounter and ultimately come to terms with turbulence and tragedy. The freedom these pieces express comes from their intelligent scattering as much as the message they emit, the subliminal reading of events and the nature and reality of their identity.

COLLECTION AND COLLABORATION

Japanese artists are increasingly mobile, however, so most of the artists included in this show have done their postgraduate research abroad, or have at least undertaken an exchange project, and they're more than capable of engaging on the same level as the overseas-based artists.¹¹

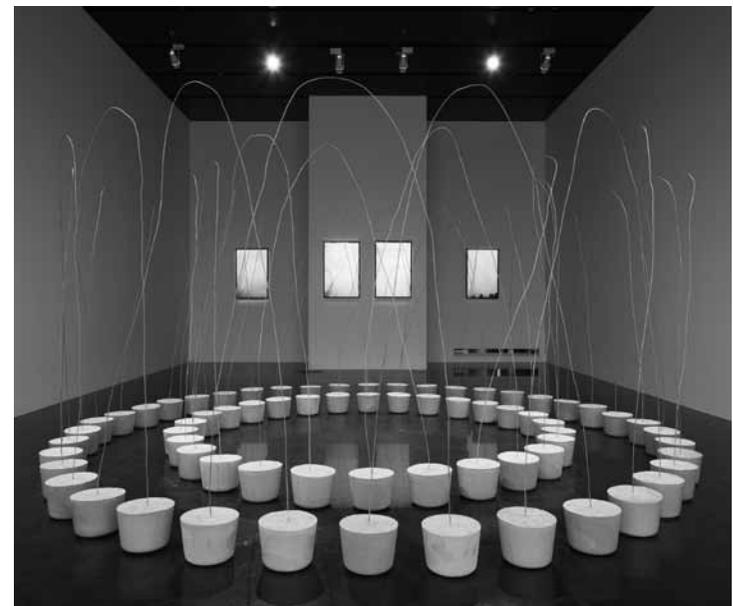
Masato Takasaka's family-run Japanese grocery store in Melbourne has supplied him with more than a steady flow of raw material. The accumulation of everyday stuff has become a substance he can edit and re-edit as if writing his own autobiography or processing his relationship with both Melbourne, the place of his birth, and Japan, the home of his parents. His previous attempt to be an architect came with the realisation that the final outcome of an assembling process need not be fixed and regimented, but sporadic, whimsical or even nonsensical. He pulls together old magazines, records, books, and posters; the flotsam and jetsam of his adolescence, and composes it in the guise of a musical riff, guitar solo or lyrical improvisation (*Post-structural Jam [Shut Up! We know you can play!]*, 2009). For *Roppongi Crossing* his parents would send him boxes of material and old Japanese packaging that he would later combine to establish a new order of things. All the while the goods shipped to the museum, ostensibly goods being returned as they had originally been sent from Japan to his parents' store in Melbourne, would form a density worthy of Kurt Schwitters' own *Merzbau*. Here he stages and reclaims a familiar but distant ancestry, oscillating between these two places with a sense of possibility, the possibility that things won't work out (*Another Propositional Model for the Everything Always Already-made Watanabe Studio Masatotelectures Museum of Found Refractions 1994-2013*, 2013).

I studied architecture for a while, thinking I could turn my artworks into buildings. In the end I realised that the great thing about art is that it didn't have to work. It's more like whatever works—or more accurately whatever doesn't work for me—works for me.¹²

Takasaka's installation of accumulated daily fragments matches the visual frenzy of Teppei Kaneuji's lenticular diagrams and larger freestanding sculpture. For Kaneuji, collage is a conversation between what's on the wall and how it might be encountered and consumed. The accidental and chance relationships expressed by Ei Arakawa and Shimon Minamikawa sees painting as mobile, sculptural and performance. People come together and move away with Arakawa covertly dancing in a gallery performing his own visual edit of a painting by attempting to dangle his cape over one painting in front of bemused onlookers with the spectre of security just out-of-sight.

I was starting to become aware of those people who were originally from Japan but now living as a part of the Western art community, not as somebody just living there but instead quite visible. Sasamoto was in the Whitney Biennale (2010) and Arakawa was invited by MoMA to do a performance (Paris & Wizard: The Musical, 2013). So it's a different way of Japanese artists living in New York (for example) from 1950s and 1960s. They are completely part of the network and platform.¹³

Roppongi Crossing: Out of Doubt is conscious of the flow of creative talent leaving and then returning to Japan. This is not always the case though as some of the artist's here demonstrate. The definition of foreign-ness in Japan may seem fairly cut-and-dried, but in fact is far from simple. Japan's preference for a single-ethnicity is perhaps partly to blame for this, but central to the issue is the type of critical awareness of ethnicity absent from Japanese schools and universities in the first place. In the cases of Akira, Ryui and Takasaka their education in Australia has brought out an appreciation of diversity that is rarely experienced in Japanese art schools. The concept of multiculturalism in Japan is still embryonic and will grow. The explicit introduction of outside curators to *Roppongi Crossing* is the clearest indication that artists travelling abroad benefit and enrich the art community back home too. A renewed interest abroad almost certainly filters back to its source. Recent cultural interest in Asia-Pacific art cultures, art fairs and the onset of fledgling collector markets will see this interest increase. The perception of the role of contemporary art in Japanese daily life is a question as much for an audience accepting of craft, but not conceptual art approaches. A clearly energetic generation born around the late 1970s and early 1980s is proof that the spirit of protest continues to flourish with frustration and anger rooted in genuine passion and speculative thinking and not something sporadic, fleeting and momentary.



Page 271: Iwata Sohei x Prominority, *Pavilion for Unexpected Guests*, 2013; installation view, *Roppongi Crossing*
Page 272: Iwata Sohei x Prominority, *Pavilion for Unexpected Guests* (detail), 2013

Page 273: Suga Kishio, installation view, *Roppongi Crossing*
Photos courtesy the artists

The legacy of multiculturalism has left Australia with a particular fascination for cultural backgrounds, so the 'Japanese-ness' of all three artists has to varying degrees been over-fetishised in some Australian receptions of their work. In Australia they are regarded not so much as foreign as ethnically and cultural specific. I don't think any of this is an issue for the artists themselves, however – more their audiences.¹⁴

THE EXISTENCE OF RAW POTENTIAL

"What is a samurai? What is a samurai, not in general, but at this time?" is hugely significant because I feel like I am, as I believe many artists are, haunted by the very troubling and perhaps unanswerable question: "What is it to make something."¹⁵

Akira always finds himself returning to Deleuze's description of Akira Kurosawa's 1954 film *Seven Samurai* where, at the story's end, the head Samurai and his men are left wondering who they are and their purpose as 'hired swords'. As Deleuze notes, the Samurai drenched in mud, caught up in battle to free a village from marauding bandits, gallop desperately from one end of the village to the other seemingly battling and avoiding their aggressors at the same time and are left to lament their role in this unfolding drama. The villagers' initial hostility only compounds the unavoidable truth; that the village will learn to defend itself and render these hired mercenaries obsolete.

For me, doubts signal the existence of raw potentiality. Since they can diminish me completely and prevent me from acting on something, if something does survive this overwhelming criticality, then I think it is rather remarkable. I'm not saying that the quality of the resulting work should be of significance but it in itself marks a very clear difference between something coming to existence and not coming into existence at all.¹⁶



By his own admission, Akira's work is received with a perceived sense of Japanese-ness though this heritage and his ethnicity is not a major concern having lived in Australia for so long. With this being his first exhibition in Japan he wonders how this perceived sense resonates with his 'homeland'.¹⁷ *Roppongi Crossing: Out of Doubt* plots people and relationships with cultural boundaries that both limit and extend the perception of what constitutes a country and culture and what difference can be made in light of dramatic change. In Australia, with its own rich history of mixed-ethnicity and cultural heritage shared with Europe and America, the measurement of cultural wellbeing by artistic critical engagement shows a willingness to explore both past and present. The next seven years before the Olympics return to Tokyo in 2020 will be of utmost importance, rethinking the boundaries and limits media, government and in some cases its own culture places upon itself. For Mori Art Museum, this year marking its tenth anniversary, the next ten years will see *Roppongi Crossing* focus even further on the challenges that lie ahead in the intervening period. Hopefully this show will find itself travelling too.

"*Out of Doubt*, or having this view of re-thinking about what you have or the existing system was very important for the show. A lot of people, not only the art community, are talking about the traditional perception of nature and having a critical view of society and politics. The earthquake just became a trigger to people's perception and awareness of the situation. There was already a critical state of urgency that people needed to think like that. *Roppongi Crossing* was simply a trigger to think or collect these opinions."¹⁸

Notes

¹ Fumiko Kobayashi, *The Island Over There* (2008). This essay refers to Kobayashi's piece recreated for and which opens this exhibition

² Mami Kataoka, 'In Search of Something Fundamental—Beyond Complexity, Contradiction and Ambiguity', *Out of Doubt* (exhibition catalogue), Mori Art Museum, 2013: 233

³ Interview with Kataoka, chief curator, Mori Art Museum, 9 October, 2013

⁴ Email conversation with the co-curator Reuban Keehan, 11 October, 2013

⁵ Interview with Kataoka, op cit.

⁶ Email conversation with Akira Akira, 21 October, 2013

⁷ Taken from Takuma Nakahira, 'Preemptive Strike—Seeing and Reading', *Out of Doubt* (exhibition catalogue), op cit: 193

⁸ Geraldine Barlow, *Networks (Cells and Silos)*, Monash University Museum of Art, 2011: 12

⁹ Interview with Kataoka, op cit.

¹⁰ ibid.

¹¹ Email conversation with Reuban Keehan, op cit.

¹² Interview with Masato Takasaka, *Out of Doubt*, op cit:139

¹³ Interview with Kataoka, op cit.

¹⁴ Email conversation with Reuban Keehan, op cit.

¹⁵ 'What is the Creative Act?', in *Two Regimes of Madness, Texts and Interviews 1975-1995*, Gilles Deleuze (1925-1995), David Lapoujade (ed.), Ames Hodges and Mike Taormina trans., *Semiotext(e)*, 2007: 312-324

¹⁶ Email conversation with Akira Akira, op cit.

¹⁷ ibid.

¹⁸ Interview with Kataoka, op cit.