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A Traveller in Time, from Standing Stones to the Distant Stars: an interview with Mariko Mori



In the 1990s, Japanese multimedia artist Mariko Mori became known for her performance-based photographs and videos exploring conflicts between Japanese traditions, mass-consumerism and popular culture.

In these works, Mori inserted herself into her scenes in a variety of provocative guises; for instance, as a platinum-blond shaman wearing a spacesuit and holding a "capsule", an object with magical potential, weaving through Osaka's Kansai International Airport in a moving meditation (*Link of the Moon*, 1996), and as an alien-type creature in the streets of Tokyo's business district serving cups of tea to office workers who are oblivious to her presence although she seems to be offering herself along with the beverage (*Tea Ceremony III*, 1995). Even then, Mori was attempting to create harmony, or at least awareness, by allowing a dialogue to take place between clashing mores through art.

Whereas her earlier works dealt with coming-of-age issues of conformity, independence and media refuges of the young (science fiction, *manga*, graphic novels and comics), at the end of the 90s Mori's focus shifted to concerns for humanity and the planet and an expansive notion of time, with past, present and future occurring simultaneously. But Mori, who was born in 1967 in Tokyo and now resides there and in London and New York, has not completely thrown off her past. She studied fashion and worked as a model, and her talents and skills in these areas are evident in the sets and costumes she designed for a current production of Puccini's *Madama Butterfly* at Teatro La Fenice in Venice, a collaboration with the Venice Biennale.

One of the most compelling and unusual exhibitions to open in New York this autumn, *Rebirth: Recent Work* by Mariko Mori, features 33





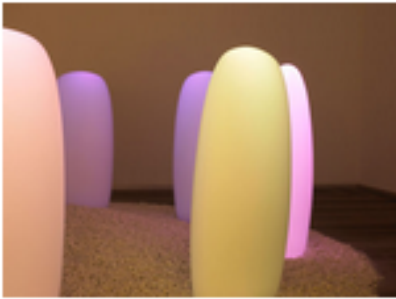
installations, sculptures, photographs, drawings and videos made by the artist during the past 13 years. Japan Society's serene gallery space near the United Nations provides a perfect setting to reflect and reveal the nuances of Mori's concepts. The gallery is hosting a variety of programmes and activities to involve people of all ages in Mori's brave old/new world, from an ancient Japanese studies book club and tea ceremony workshop to a "Space Pop" party and performance by Mori of *Oneness*, a choreographed, ritualistic piece encouraging stillness and quiet.¹

Developed by Mori with Miwako Tezuka, director of the Japan Society Gallery, *Rebirth* premiered in a different configuration at The Royal Academy of Arts in London for the winter solstice in December 2012. Mori and Tezuka first worked together on a 2010 exhibit at Asia Society in New York, *Kumano*, which is a video documenting Mori's experiences travelling along the Kumano pilgrimage route to one of the most sacred sites in western Japan. Mori is deeply interested in Buddhism and the indigenous Shinto religion, a nature-based spiritual belief system.

Other critical influences on her change in direction include the prehistoric Japanese Jōmon period (14,000-300 BCE) and ancient Celtic civilisations honouring the Earth's rhythms and life cycles. At Japan Society, visitors will witness birth, death and regeneration – or "rebirth" – referenced in modern versions of standing stone circles (*Transcircle 1.1*, 2004), a Jōmon shrine (*Flatstone*, 2006); the Buddhist state of *ālaya* consciousness (*Miracle*, 2001); and the birth of a star (*White Hole*, 2008-11).

Mori's creations are highly conceptual and incorporate new technologies, yet they are also very simple. She is attempting to bring awareness to the life force inherent in human beings and nature, often symbolised in the works by light. This force surrounds us and moves beyond us, is born and dies and then regenerates in a never-ending cycle.

A group of drawings that Mori made with metallic pastels during summers spent beside the ocean in Okinawa exemplify her process: watching the waves come and go, recording her impressions without plan or conscious



purpose, and accessing a power that is out of reach for those consumed by the bustle and drama of daily life. The result: polished, minimalist and decorative, and suggestive of the cosmic realm.²

To get a sense of the scope of Mori's vision, consider an ambitious project on which she has embarked, forming her Faou Foundation to see it through: six large earthworks in virtually untouched natural environments on the six habitable continents. She has already achieved *Sun Pillar*, erected in 2011, the first part of a two-work installation she calls *Primal Rhythm* on Seven Light Bay, Miyako Island, in Okinawa. When *Primal Rhythm* is complete, it will consist of this translucent layered acrylic Sun Pillar set on a rock, and *Moonstone* set floating in the bay. The pillar will reflect the colours of the sky and sea, while the moonstone changes colour according to the phases of the moon and the tide. At the winter solstice, which in the northern hemisphere occurs in December, the pillar's shadow will fall on the moonstone. Aside from the technical feat involved in realising *Primal Rhythm*, the symbolism is quite powerful; sun and moon, male and female, celestial and terrestrial uniting to heal the Earth.

The next earthwork will be located above a waterfall in Resende, Brazil. Visitors to the show will get a glimpse of the future in a smaller version, *Ring*, made by Mori in 2012. An incandescent halo suspended above a pond in Japan Society's lobby, *Ring* is joined in this elegant space by *Birds I* (2013), another glowing sculpture that, like all of the exhibited works, is high-tech but looks "natural" in its setting.

At an opening-night event, Mori and Tezuka discussed the genesis of the artist's recent works. Dressed in a demure white dress, with hair neatly styled off her face, Mori was casual, friendly and polite. As the talk proceeded, a strong woman capable of galvanising teams of scientists, engineers, technicians and local communities to support her plans emerged, gently steering the conversation back to the story behind each project because, it became obvious, each one

has a particular history, with critical steps along the way, documented in photographs and videos.

Studio International interviewed Mori between her travels to and from New York and London just after Rebirth opened at Japan Society.

Cindi Di Marzo: Thank you for speaking with Studio International at such a busy time for you, Mariko. Your exhibit, Rebirth, has just opened in New York, and Infinite Renew opened a few weeks ago at Espace Louis Vuitton in Tokyo.³ The new video work, *Ālaya*, will be screened in both locations. What is the significance of the Buddhist experience of *ālaya* consciousness for the works in these shows?

Mariko Mori: The *ālaya* consciousness is a deep consciousness that connects remote past life to future life, and in Buddhist theory it has been believed to be a key to liberate us from the chain of life. The concept inspired me to create this work, and this visualisation is my imagining of the connected consciousness.

CDM: People familiar with your photographs and videos exploring popular culture in Japan and tension between consumer society and traditional Japanese values will be surprised by Rebirth. How did your travels along the Kumano pilgrimage route in Japan, visiting sacred spaces at the end of the 90s, shift your focus towards a sacred, timeless view of art's power to reconnect human beings with nature?

MM: Visiting sacred places such as shrines, as well as Jōmon archaeological sites, inspired me to learn the history of the human relationship with nature. I was also moved by a ritual performed by an Okinawan priestess. It seemed deeply rooted in nature, unchanged from our remote ancestors of prehistoric time. I felt the importance of this heritage and wished to pass this along to future generations by installing site-specific installations to honour nature.

CDM: Often, technology – or, rather, technologically driven industry – is viewed as an enemy of nature and a destroyer of delicately balanced ecosystems, a problem to be dealt with rather than an aid to healing. You turned this notion around and use technology as an ally. When did you realise that technology might be a healing force?

MM: Technology is only a tool. The reality is a reflection of our mind. Our mind has the power to visualise the future, so if we wish to imagine the world using technology as a healing force, it is possible.

CDM: You have said that the solution to a current problem may not exist in the present and that one might have to look to the past or the future for an answer, and you have spent time in ancient sacred spaces, such as Jōmon shrines in Japan and standing stones in Scotland. How did these cultures' views of life, death and rebirth affect you?

MM: Our remote ancestors had a great sense of the landscape and the knowledge of the natural cycle of life, death and rebirth. It confirms not only the universal rule of a cyclic model for our life and nature, but also the common faith of existence from the primal particles to the multiverse, the never-ending circulation of life and death; there is no beginning or end.

CDM: I attended the opening night event at Japan Society and was struck by your description of a visit to Nasa and the generosity with which physicists, engineers and technicians shared their knowledge. You said that they are very different from artists in this way. Why do you think that scientists are more eager than artists to share their discoveries?

MM: Scientists share their new discoveries in order to support a revolution of science. For contemporary artists, it is challenging, as originality is an essence. Both scientists and artists work and develop new ideas, but for the artist, the individuality is vital and it has to come from the individual mind freed from preconception.

CDM: At the event, you said that as a child your relationship to nature was typical for any girl who likes to play in the mud. Today, you live in large cities. How do you connect with nature while you are in Tokyo, London and New York?

MM: Humanity is also part of nature. In large cities, I am able to connect to various human beings to learn more about them. At the moment, it is significant for me to experience both urban and remote places in order to remind myself that we are part of nature.

CDM: You studied fashion in Tokyo and worked as a model before studying art. What was your experience of science before you began working on your installations? Are there scientists or engineers in your family?

MM: My father was an inventor and an incubator of new ideas. He was a professor of industrial engineering at Keio University who utilised computer science from the 1970s.⁴

CDM: You practice *chadō*, the way of tea. Which other traditional Japanese arts inform your work?

MM: Tea Ceremony [*chanoyu*] is a way for the purification of mind. It is also a method to learn Zen Buddhism through the ritual of tea. The world of tea extends to many other traditional forms of art, such as calligraphy, poetry, pottery, architecture, *ikebana*[flower arrangement], *kōdō* [the way of incense] and *shōjin ryōri*[Buddhist vegetarian cuisine].

CDM: When working with photography and film, the results can be immediate. Your current project of building six site-specific installations on the six habitable continents is a long-term investment of time, resources and personal energy. The first site you chose, Seven Light Bay, Miyako Island, in Okinawa is well underway, with one element of the installation, *Sun Pillar*, completed in 2011. When did work on *Sun Pillar* begin, and can you describe a bit of the process toward realising this earthwork?

MM: I conceived of the idea in April 2007 and presented the plan to the previous mayor. We were able to realise the installation of *Sun Pillar* thanks to support from the local people and also from the members and friends of the Faou Foundation. The project connects people from all around the world and spreads the idea to honour nature across the world. It is a project to share Earth consciousness, as we are residents of the planet Earth.

CDM: In *Tom Na H'iu II* (2006), named after a Celtic word for a standing stone circle, lights flicker as a result of impulses that are beamed from the Institute for Cosmic Ray Research in Tokyo, marking the death of a star. In *Transcircle 1.1* (2004), an arrangement of nine rock-like objects illuminated by LED lights, the colours pulse at different speeds based on the changing positions of the eight planets and Pluto as they rotate around the sun. In these works, you are bringing awareness to movements and processes that have been occurring from the beginning of life on Earth and likely for a much greater time. Is this a main intention of your work?

MM: Yes. I also would like to share the idea that we are all connected and we are one.

CDM: Thank you again for speaking with Studio International, Mariko. We wish you the best for accomplishing your earthworks, which clearly require great courage, patience and determination.

Notes

1. Rebirth: Recent Work by Mariko Mori. Japan Society Gallery, New York City (11 October 2013 – 12 January 2014).
2. In the 144-page hardcover exhibition catalogue, distributed by Yale University Press (US\$60/UK£40), Brett Littman, executive director of the Drawing Centre in New York, writes about Mori's ethereal drawings.
3. *Ālaya* is on view on the ground floor of the Louis Vuitton store in the Omotesando shopping area. The

video was also screened on the facade of Japan Society on East 47th Street in New York City, from sundown until 9pm on 7 to 13 October 2013. Infinite Renew runs until 5 January 2014 at Espace Louis Vuitton, Tokyo.

4. Mariko Mori's father, the late Dr Kei Mori, was a professor in the department of science and engineering at Keio University, Tokyo. He invented a solar lighting system named "Himawari" (sunflower).

Images

1. Portrait of Mariko Mori. Photograph David Sims.
2. Mariko Mori. *Alaya*, 2013. Video, 2 minutes, 30 seconds. Courtesy of SCAI THE BATHHOUSE, Tokyo and Sean Kelly, New York.
3. Mariko Mori. *Higher Being* no. 42, 2009. Mixed media on paper, 22 x 30 inches. Courtesy of SCAI THE BATHHOUSE, Tokyo and Sean Kelly, New York.
4. Mariko Mori. *Journey to Seven Light Bay*, *Primal Rhythm*, 2011. Video with sound, 5 minutes, 14 seconds. Sound by Ken Ikeda. © Faou Foundation, New York. Courtesy of Adobe Museum of Digital Media.
5. Mariko Mori. *Kudaka Island Site Installation III*, 2004. Piezo dye print, 50 ½ x 43 7/8 inches. Courtesy of SCAI THE BATHHOUSE, Tokyo and Sean Kelly, New York.
6. Mariko Mori. *Ring*, 2012. Lucite; 48 inches diam., 2 2/5 inches thick. © Faou Foundation, New York. Courtesy of SCAI THE BATHHOUSE, Tokyo and Sean Kelly, New York. Photo © Royal Academy of Arts, London/M. Leith.
7. Mariko Mori. *Stone Circle*, *Ōyu*, 2004. Piezo dye print, 21 ¾ x 26 7/8 inches. Courtesy of SCAI THE BATHHOUSE, Tokyo and Sean Kelly, New York.
8. Mariko Mori. *Sun Pillar*, *Primal Rhythm*, 2011 (photo documentation). C-print, 55 x 40 inches. © Faou Foundation, New York. Photograph: Richard Learoyd.
9. Mariko Mori. *Transcircle 1.1*, 2004. Stone, Corian, LED, Real-time control system; 132 3/8 inches diam., each stone 43 3/8 x 22 ¼ x 13 ½ inches. Courtesy of The Mori Art Museum, Tokyo.
10. Mariko Mori. *Transcircle 1.1 (detail)*, 2004. Stone, Corian, LED, Real-time control system; 132 3/8 inches diam., each stone 43 3/8 x 22 ¼ x 13 ½ inches. Courtesy of The Mori Art Museum, Tokyo.
11. Mariko Mori. *FOREGROUND: Flatstone*, 2006. Ceramic stones and acrylic vase; 192 x 124 x 3 1/2 inches. Courtesy of SCAI THE BATHHOUSE, Tokyo and Sean Kelly, New York. *BACKGROUND: Transcircle 1.1*, 2004. Stone, Corian, LED, real-time control system; 132 3/8 inches diam., each stone 43 3/8 x 22 1/4 x 13 1/2 inches. Courtesy of The Mori Art Museum, Tokyo. Installation photograph: Richard Goodbody.
12. Mariko Mori. *Miracle (detail)*, 2001. Eight Cibachrome prints, diachronic glass, salt, and crystals; each element 27 1/4 inches. Collection of Mr. Chen Rong-Chuan. Installation photograph: Richard Goodbody.
13. Mariko Mori. *FOREGROUND: Tama I*, 2011. Epoxy with pearlescent finish; 13 inches diam. *BACKGROUND (LEFT TO RIGHT): White Hole VII*, 2009. Mixed media on plexiglass panel; 50 x 55 inches. *Higher Being* no. 35, 2009. Mixed media on paper; 20 x 30 inches. Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Wilbur L. Ross. *White Hole* no. 47, 2008. Mixed media on paper; 22 x 30 inches. *Faou* no. 9, 2010. Mixed media on paper; 22 x 30 inches. *Faou* no. 21, 2010. Mixed media on paper; 22 x 30 inches. *Higher Being* no. 12, 2009. Mixed media on paper; 22 x 30 inches. *Faou* no. 43, 2010. Mixed media on paper; 22 x 30 inches. Courtesy of SCAI THE BATHHOUSE, Tokyo and Sean Kelly, New York. Installation photograph by Richard Goodbody.
14. Mariko Mori. *Flatstone*, 2006. Ceramic stones and acrylic vase, 192 x 124 x 3 ½ inches. Courtesy of SCAI THE BATHHOUSE, Tokyo and Sean Kelly, New York.