

SEANKELLY

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MAY 2011 | ARTINFO.COM

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# CRYSTAL FLAG

MARIKO MORI WANTS TO BRING HER NATURE-LOVING ART TO SIX CONTINENTS.

**By Scott Indrisek**

PHOTOGRAPH BY CHRISTOPHE KUTNER



Mariko Mori in her New York studio, 2011.





PERHAPS I CAN BE FORGIVEN for expecting a space alien when I visit Mariko Mori at her studio in Manhattan. The Japanese-born artist's 1994 photographic series "Play with Me" includes a self-portrait of her wearing a short plaid skirt, headphones, and unnervingly blue contact lenses, and in her 1997 video *Nirvana* she floats like a goddess through a computer-generated landscape. But although Mori greets me dressed in her signature all-white *Jetsons* disco garb, she's far from the hypersexual New Age prophetess of those works. Now 44, she comes across as clear-eyed and rational, despite her out-sized ambitions. Those ambitions nowadays are channeled through the nonprofit Faou Foundation that Mori established in 2010.

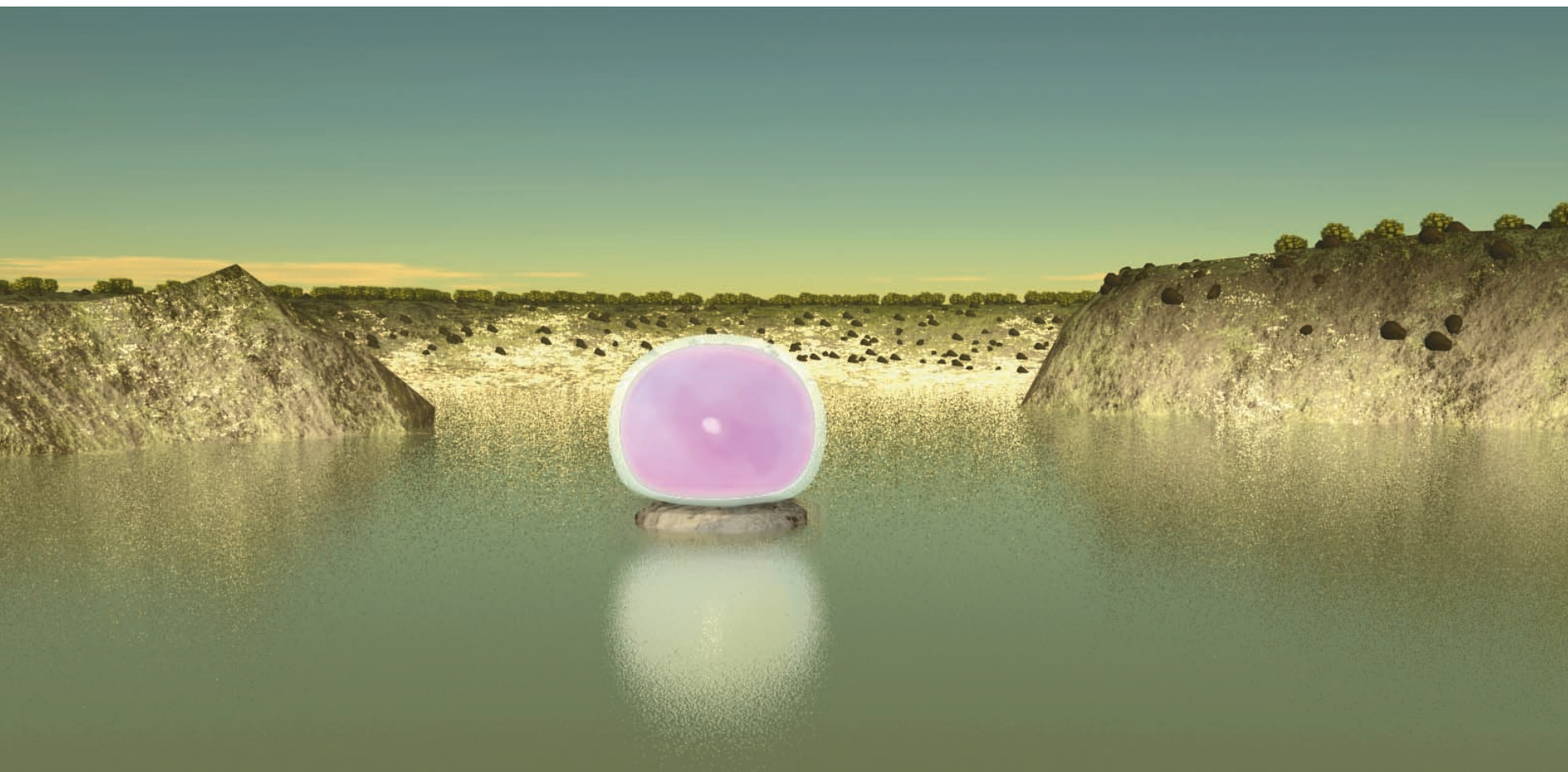
The foundation's mission is to explore nature and promote ecology through art. Its first project, *Primal Rhythms*, involves a bevy of engineers, one quite phallic Plexiglas column, and the intimate engagement of a secluded community on the Japanese

island of Miyako, part of the Okinawa Prefecture. The end product will consist of the three-meter-high Sun Pillar and the Moon Stone, a floating LED-equipped sphere, three meters in diameter. The pillar will jut up from a rock cluster in the island's Seven Light Bay from which it will cast a shadow over the water toward the shore that at the winter solstice will intersect with the Moon Stone, anchored in the bay and changing color according to the phase of the moon and the tide. Once this Asian project is completed, Mori plans to bring site-specific works tailored to local cultures to five additional continents, beginning with South America.

Before officially beginning her work on *Primal Rhythms*, in 2007, Mori visited a number of sacred sites around the world and was especially intrigued by dwellings from the Jomon period in Japan—roughly 14,000 B.C. to 300 B.C.—which were associated with sculptural forms that later influenced her designs. "Two objects were always found in

a particular area," she says, "a round stone and a kind of small standing stone. The pair seems to me to be a symbol of regeneration, or a wish for help in harvest, or related to worship of the nature god. It's probably a primitive stage of Shintoism."

Mori has always been attracted to ancient religious forms, which she reinterprets through the prism of modern thought and technology. Her 2004 installation *Transcircle*, for instance, echoes a Jomon sundial, updating it with colored LED lights. For the first foundation project, she decided to do a site-specific installation related to the winter solstice, "a key," she explains, "of all of the prehistoric sites." Using Google Earth, Mori found Miyako, which is relatively untouched except for some tourist spots on its southern edge. Most of the area around Seven Light Bay consists of sugar-cane farms and small villages, some of whose inhabitants, according to Mori, engage in a special rite that even local people are forbidden to







witness. “It’s quite hidden,” she says. “If you see it, you will die. They’re really secretly done, these ceremonies. The island is very well-preserved. There’s a rich indigenous culture that still exists. Modern things are not there so much, but there’s a lot to learn from them in terms of the relationship of human society to nature.”

*Primal Rhythms*, in its emphasis on community and cooperation, is a departure for Mori. “When she began, it was very clear that her photographs and her sculpture and installations were more focused on her,” says Melissa Chiu, director of the Asia Society and a member of the Faou Foundation’s board of directors. “They certainly featured her as the subject.” Chiu, who first saw Mori’s work in the 1999 exhibition “Voiceovers,” at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, in Sydney, points to pivotal early pieces in which the artist photographed herself serving tea on a city street or dressed as an erotic cyborg. “As her work has evolved over the

years,” Chiu continues, “it has become less about her and more about exploring phenomenological elements. The Miyako Island project makes an argument toward her work becoming more about universal values than any kind of self-portraiture.” Indeed, Mori’s role is primarily organizational, and once *Primal Rhythms* is installed, the villagers will be its “caretakers.” Mori doesn’t want to be an artistic colonizer and is critical of anthropologists who were less delicate in exploring and researching local customs in Miyako and other locales. “I like to be careful, sensitive in how we interact and contact,” she says. “Not like, OK, I want to put this work in this place—boom! It should be a collaborative effort, together. Otherwise it doesn’t have a full meaning.”

Mori compares the project to a pearl in an oyster: Time is required to let the piece develop, to allow the villagers to accommodate themselves to her public art intervention. She has met extensively with locals,

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:  
*Beginning of the End, Giza (Egypt)*, one panel of triptych, 2000. C-print, 12 x 10 ft.  
*Beginning of the End, Brasília (Brazil)*, 2006. C-print, 3¼ x 13 ft.  
 Two renderings of *Primal Rhythm: Seven Light Bay* project, 2009.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT, TWO IMAGES: GALERIE PERROTIN, PARIS AND COLLECTION OF MR. AND MRS. MICHAEL HUE, WILLIAMS, LONDON; TWO IMAGES: FAOU FOUNDATION, NEW YORK. ALL IMAGES: © MARIKO MORI





including the village shaman. “They immediately understood what I am trying to do because they have such a rich relationship to nature,” she says. “When I introduced the idea, a lot of people thought it was a wonderful idea but just a really nice dream. No one thought that I could realize it.” It’s hard to say how the villagers will react to the 21st-century technology Mori is using to achieve her vision. The Sun Pillar, for instance, was fabricated by Nippura, which makes strong acrylic for aquariums around the world. The Jomon statuettes are echoed in the pillar’s

shape but tweaked—“the form is more an aesthetic decision I made”—to resemble nothing so much as a space-age vibrator. The completed installation will be secular yet infused with religious feeling. Mori hopes the villagers around Seven Light Bay will incorporate the Sun Pillar and Moon Stone into their own cosmology. “Invisible, interwoven connections seem to exist, as if it’s meant to be there, meant to happen,” Mori says, describing how the Faou Foundation’s work has unfolded so far. “I just follow how it comes and try not to be so aggressive,

not to push. It should naturally happen. I mean, you can invite yourself, but it’s better if this invitation comes from somewhere, and then you’ll enter into the culture.”

The pillar will be erected this month atop two pyramidal rocks in the bay. Originally, the plan was to carry it there in a large boat, but it was feared that the area’s precious coral would be harmed. So Mori settled instead on “a really primitive” method of transport, having around 10 villagers float the structure to the site and then lever it into place. In 2012 a container will be con-





CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:  
*Esoteric Cosmos: Pure Land*, 1996–1998. Glass with photo interlayer, 10 x 20 x 1 ft.  
*Play with Me*, 1994. Fuji supergloss print, 10 x 12 ft.  
*Beginning of the End, Times Square (New York)*, 1996. C-print, 3¼ x 16¼ ft.



structed for the Moon Stone to protect it from the elements, after which it will be anchored in the bay, most likely on 2013's winter solstice. Mori is considering creating an eco-lodge to welcome international art and eco-tourists who may flock here during the winter solstices, just as travelers make a pilgrimage to Iceland for the northern lights. "Instead of placing this work in the city, I wanted to place it in the most rich nature, so that people have to travel to actually get in touch with nature and to understand that you are also the nature as well," says Mori,

who spends most of her time in New York. "I like these very ambitious projects—it's my soul work—but my life work is to interact with the people in the city."

The same attention to cultural context will inform the foundation's next installation. This will most likely be in Brazil—which Mori toured in connection with a retrospective of her work that traveled from Brasília to Rio de Janeiro to São Paulo—perhaps coinciding with the 2016 Olympics in Rio. The actual artwork will be completely different from that on Miyako Island,

derived instead from aspects of indigenous Brazilian culture. And the setting is still to be selected. "It could be a mountain, it could be a waterfall, but the place is always carefully chosen by point of view of nature, the earth point of view," Mori explains. "Of course the Amazon would be the obvious place. It's almost like putting a flag—but not a red flag, a crystal flag." She is keen to find another location in which there's a true harmony between nature and mankind. "That's kind of the place that I'm looking for. Well done, crystal flag!" MP

