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INCONVERSATION

MARIKO MORI with Jessica Holmes

SEAN KELLY GALLERY | MARCH 23 – APRIL 28, 2018



Mariko Mori, *Invisible Dimension*, installation view, Sean Kelly, New York. Photo: Jason Wyche, New York. Courtesy Sean Kelly, New York.

Mariko Mori, unafraid to shed the skins of her past, has made a career from surprising contemporary art audiences around the world through a process of constant renewal in her work. But as it turns out, these are not skins of the past but rather strata that are all part of a continuum stretching back into ancient times and forward into the most distant realms of the universe. She intuits connections where others wouldn't dream of imagining, and then undertakes the difficult process of making them manifest to the world. Amidst the whirl of installation on the occasion of her second exhibition, *Invisible Dimension*, at Sean Kelly Gallery, Mori sat down with Jessica Holmes to discuss her ambitious and wide-ranging visions and her latest rebirth.

Jessica Holmes (Rail): So, you just got back to New York, and installation is going well on *Invisible Dimension*, your upcoming show at Sean Kelly Gallery. Can you tell me a little bit about it?

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Mariko Mori: Originally, I was very inspired by a book on astrophysics theory called *Endless Universe: Beyond the Big Bang* (2006) by Princeton University Professor Paul Steinhardt. The theory is that before the Big Bang, two branes collided, causing the Big Bang. So, kind of denying that what we learned, which is that the universe began with Big Bang, but instead there was something before it. A part world, part universe—a multiverse. I think our mind is stimulated by those theories—is expanding in a way. In everyday life we only see four dimensions, but if there are extra seven dimensions that we don't see, I was very inspired by that. The exhibition is trying to visualize the dimensions that we don't see. It's not the physicality of the universe, but the energy flow of the universe that I was interested in visualizing. Not only astrophysics, but also the metaphysical ideas of invisible dimensions, such as our spirits or souls. The spiritual terms are also invisible. I wanted to produce artwork inspired by our invisible world.



Portrait of Mariko Mori, pencil on paper by Phong Bui. Based on a photo by Zack Garlitos.

Rail: I remember reading that you said at some point, “I don’t believe what we see is all there is.” Is that something that you’re trying to manifest?

Mori: Yes, I think about meeting people, too—like obviously you are drawn to certain people, but what we see—it’s not always what you’re feeling, right? You feel for intelligence, or are charmed, or very excited; all those things that actually, you feel with

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different senses, not just the visual. For every aspect in the world, even objects, we rely on what we feel, and then you see this in connection with people, too. You know when you think of somebody, and then you suddenly receive an email from them? We have invisible connections, and in fact, I believe that we are all connected. I like the Buddhist theory of the connected world of oneness. I would like to remind us of those connections not only between humans, but also with nature, and to the world, and the many evidences of those connections.



Mariko Mori, *Plasma Stone II*, 2017–2018, Dichroic coated layered acrylic in 2 parts, Corian base, 50 × 23 1/2 × 18 inches each, edition of 5 with 2 APs. © Mariko Mori. Photo: Jason Wyche, New York. Courtesy Sean Kelly, New York.

Rail: Could you tell me about your idea of oneness?

Mori: The oneness could be from the largest multi-universe to primary particles, or oneness from the past to the future. Time-wise and space-wise, we think our body from the outside is separate from the inside, but oneness means there is no separation of every living element. There is no limit to the oneness.

Rail: Do you feel that when you move through the world, even outside of your art practice?

Mori: Well, when you travel, you are always finding another culture, right? So, you're always finding things different. However, all human beings evolved from humankind,

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and humankind evolved from hominids, and hominids evolved from the animal world. So even humanity itself is very much part of nature, and we are connected to it. That means that all the people who live on earth can be one, can belong to one family tree. That's one aspect of the connection. Also, we have the individual minds that we think we have, and we think that we are in control of our own minds—but, in fact, I think we are all sharing destiny together. In a way, there is no separation.

Rail: The work being installed here today draws and expands on elements and ideas from the work you showed here a couple of years ago, doesn't it?

Mori: Yes. *Cyclicscape* was the last exhibition here, three years ago. It was also very inspired by Möbius forms, an endless kind of energy circle. This time, two elements are interconnected or nearly touched, or slightly touched. I think that when two elements—it could be a male and a female, it could be plants, or animals, or whatever—when they're merged, there is something different from the individual that could occur. The beginning of the Big Bang was two branes colliding, creating the "big bang." So, I thought, that something must be created or produced by two elements that are merging or joining in some kind of intellection together. So these works, in a way, are more about the energy flow of the universe. The one downstairs is more of a metaphysical idea, and then in the smaller first floor gallery, the works called *Plasma Stone* represent a memory. It comes from the plasma state of Big Bang, so, in a way, it's holding the memory of the Big Bang.

Rail: It reminds me of this theory that memories can be passed through your DNA, and that we carry memories of our ancestors in some way.

Mori: Yes. I think that objects left behind by ancestors—when you touch them, you can actually—not exactly the memory will come from ancestors, but you can feel something that you appreciate. Not a direct message, but you transfer something. I believe that we, the artists, try to produce something to leave something behind to share—it could be knowledge; it could be ideas—to the future generation. So, I think from hominids—who came even before Homo Sapiens a couple million years ago, and who produced the first stone tools—we inherit the process of producing something new.

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Rail: That's sort of what an artist does, right? When you feel that charge in an object, is that something that you try to put in to something that you're making?

Mori: Yes. Not this particular series, but previously I have made work that was inspired by a hand axe from 2000 BCE that I held by an archeological site. I felt some call from aesthetic decisions that they had made, which are very different from us, but I felt connection.

Rail: For these new works that are so based in the physical sciences and cosmology, do you still feel that sort of ancestral pull in them?

Mori: Our ancestors' connections with nature were much, much stronger and they sometimes laid out stones with the order of nature. The stone—it's often used as a media in pre-historical times. In a way, with *Plasma Stones* I kind of wanted to take that medium to a new kind of form. Which again, I believe pre-historical people thought stone could have memory of some kind, and we also use it that way—stone for our grave, right? This new work is made out of layered acrylic; it's a different material, but I wanted to kind of present that—the principle of that idea.

Rail: How did you become interested in the physical sciences?

Mori: Yes, I think the work I produced in 2005 called *Tom Na H'iu* is connected to a Super Kamiokande, which is a neutrino detective system in Japan, run by the Institute for Cosmic Ray Research at the University of Tokyo. This system can capture neutrinos when supernova exposure happens. They were the first to detect the neutrinos of a supernova, and they won the Nobel Prize for it. That is when I first became interested in primary particles.

Rail: How do you approach the research aspect of something so complex?

Mori: I begin just by reading books. For *Tom Na H'iu II*, I also went to see the Super Kamiokande and Professor Masatoshi Koshiba, who won the Nobel Prize. For a project like this, I often actually visit the university and then talk to professors and researchers, because while you're reading—the more you read, the more questions you have.

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Mariko Mori, *Cycloid V*, 2017-2018. Painted stainless steel, painted steel base, 144 × 192 3/4 × 122 3/4 inches, edition of 3 with 2 APs © Mariko Mori. Photo: Jason Wyche, New York. Courtesy Sean Kelly, New York.

Rail: I bet! So, do you speak with them during the process of designing and creating the work?

Mori: Usually I already have a concept and an idea, and then I try to request collaboration. I managed to collaborate with those professors on *Tom Na H'iu*.

Tom Na H'iu used a live data feed from Super Kamiokande to actually light the sculpture. At the observatory, when a neutrino passes you can see it in the data, but you don't really understand which neutrino actually passes. So my work visualizes whether it's a solar neutrino or an atmosphere neutrino or a supernova neutrino passing through the system.

Rail: Do you think that art and science have something to teach each other? Where do you find that nexus?

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Mori: In 2008 or 2009, I made a work called *White Hole*, using the formula of a black hole. I went to see the professor who wrote the formula of a black hole, and I realized that a mathematical formula explains very well for scientists, but for us it's quite invisible. As I can visualize things, I can produce the things. For *White Hole*, I wanted to visualize the star being born by using the black hole formula. So, instead of the star being fed by a black hole, the star is born again using the reverse formula. I think I can contribute by using the language of visualization to explain the scientific information that is discovered or introduced. [Laughter]



Mariko Mori, *Spirifer II*, 2017. Dichroic coated acrylic, Corian base, 53 x 22 1/8 x 11 1/2 inches, edition of 8 with 2 APs. © Mariko Mori. Photo: Jason Wyche, New York. Courtesy Sean Kelly, New York.

Rail: That idea of rebirth comes up quite a bit in your work, and there's also a Buddhist influence?

Mori: Yes, I did research on Buddhism and Shintoism, and the rebirth was obviously after death there's a reincarnation, so it's the rebirth. But I also discovered the concept of rebirth is very relevant in pre-historical time, like 1,500 to 3,000 BCE, all over the world. I think it's because of the natural cycle of rebirth, and human life very much relied on the circulation of nature. So that was very significant and marked very profoundly in many different archeological sites all over the world.

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Rail: I read about how you noticed, when you were making *Tom Na H'iu*, that there were ancient winter-solstice rituals that took place across the northern hemisphere that were similar amongst disparate tribes and peoples. That's very interesting. Once I read that it seemed so clear, because they were all experiencing this same aspect of nature no matter where they lived in the northern hemisphere. I often think about how we create rituals in our lives, beginning with the very big, like this, and how that then trickles down into daily life. So many of the things you do seem like every day things—having coffee, brushing teeth—but they're actually little rituals that get you through a day.

Mori: When I was nine years old, I was very much interested in a religious kind of life—so I went to a church every Sunday. And then I wanted to do what the priest was doing, so I made a little church in my room to simulate the rituals.

Rail: Did you know you were going to be an artist when you were a child?

Mori: I think in Japan, culturally becoming an artist was not such a popular choice when I was young. [Laughs]. I think when I was a child I wasn't really paying attention to which profession I wanted to pursue. Also when I was growing up, the woman's position wasn't so defined as now. My mother is an art historian, and I remember she used to complain about things not being equal.

Rail: Did she teach?

Mori: At a university, yes. So I remember hearing about how she was the only female professor in the university.

Rail: You went to fashion school—Bunka Fashion College in Tokyo, didn't you?

Mori: Yes, after high school.

Rail: Were you able to take art classes at fashion school?

Mori: No, I finished fashion college and then went to London and started art school there.

Rail: Did you go right from fashion school to art school? Or did you work in fashion for a little while?

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Mori: I didn't work in fashion. Well, I did work as a fashion model, but I kind of peaked in the fashion world by doing that. I found limitation in fashion because it always has to produce the clothes. Actually, it's a consumer product. So, after that I changed my direction.

Rail: And then you went to Chelsea College of Arts. What did you study there?

Mori: I entered as a painter, but by the second year I was already doing non-painting work.

Rail: Did moving abroad shift your perspective?

Mori: So really, I was quite shocked by a lot of the professional women in London who were doing something—changing the world. Powerful, confident, and very influential. I was very inspired by that, and also that in the arts in London there was so much freedom, no limitation. You had a space, and you could do whatever you wanted. I started to live in London in the late '80s to early '90s. At the time, installation artwork was being introduced. You could fully use a space, so that it felt like unlimited possibility.

Rail: That was when artists like Tracey Emin, Damien Hirst, and Yinka Shonibare were coming into prominence.

Mori: Yes, that's exactly the time.

Rail: Were you looking at some of those artists or other artists?

Mori: Some of us knew each other because we were the same age, and the younger generation was all friends. The media these artists were using was unlimited, and that was really a mind-opening experience coming from Tokyo.

Rail: Did you move back to Tokyo after London?

Mori: I lived in London for four years and then moved to New York, where I attended the Whitney [Museum of American Art] Independent Study Program.

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Rail: You kind of moved into performance around then, didn't you?

Mori: Yes, the performance works started in 1995. From time to time I still do performance, but now it is more like an extension of the other work.

Rail: It seems your interests have always been multifarious. It's amazing how you make connections, for example, between Jōmon pottery and a theory of a universe, as you did for your show *Rebirth* at the Japan Society in 2013. How do you imagine those connections and then create a visual reality from them?

Mori: So the Jōmon period in Japan—the prehistoric period [14,000–300 BCE]—that was their world. Their vocabulary was different, but fundamentally we haven't changed, even over thousands of years. The idea of life, the idea of death, the idea of family, love, nature—those are fundamental things. Actually, you can find in it a very linear, seamless evolution of the notion of the universe—a 3,000-year-old version of the perception. I mean it seems very different, and yes scientists have expanded the space of that universe, but it's inherited from the past. By going back, trying to understand where our minds are, you understand better the importance of the messages from the ancient times and vice versa. You can really feel its value for us, and the need to pass it on to the future generations.

Rail: I was wondering if you could talk a little about your foundation, the Faou Foundation, which aims to bring a permanent, long lasting, site-specific work to each habitable continent. You've done two projects already: *Primal Rhythm* (2011) in Okinawa and *Ring: One With Nature* (2016) in Brazil. Where will you go next?

Mori: I'm currently working for [a government in] Africa.

Rail: Is there anything you can talk about? Or is it preliminary?

Mori: I have an endorsement from a government that's receiving the work, but the government is unstable, so I have to kind of take it back for the moment.

Rail: How long do projects like these take to come to fruition?

Mori: Brazil took six years, and Okinawa took four years. In Africa, I just started last year; I would like to finish by 2021 or 2022.

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Rail: I read somewhere that the original idea for the ring you placed over a waterfall in Brazil came to you in a dream. Is that true?

Mori: Yes.

Rail: How important are dreams to you?



Mariko Mori, *Invisible Dimension*, installation view, Sean Kelly, New York. Photo: Jason Wyche, New York. Courtesy Sean Kelly, New York.

Mori: Very important. Luckily, my subconscious was aware that it was an important dream, and I managed to wake up and make a note to try to remember. In the past, three of my works were definitely produced by my dream.

Rail: And you also do unconscious drawings by the ocean, right?

Mori: Yes, I am conscious though! [*Laughs*]. But I try to let go of my conscience and really try to receive whatever comes and let the drawings naturally form. In a way, it's a practice of letting go and naturally receiving. Just accepting.

Rail: Do you always write your dreams down?

Mori: Only important dreams that I know I must never forget.

Rail: The ones that really leave an impact. There's so much that we don't know about the brain, and when I hear you talk about the universe and what we don't know, it

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almost sounds like one is a mirror image of the other. The brain is an inward universe; there's almost a universe within us in some way. Do you ever read about brain studies?

Mori: Well, when I made *Wave UFO* (1999–2002) I used brain waves—a kind of interactive system—and then I learned a little bit about the alpha, beta, theta brainwaves, and the coherence between the right and the left brain, and that was quite an important moment for me. I tried to control what I can do with each side of the brain.

Rail: It sort of reminds me of what you were saying at the beginning when we were talking, about the collision or impact of two different forces that you are thinking about in these present works. A few of them are very large, some of the largest works you've ever made.

Mori: I think the largest work was *Dream Temple* (1999) because of its architectural scale. But aside from that, yes.

Rail: Is architecture something you consider when you're working?

Mori: Architecture? Well, space, yes. This is my second exhibition with Sean Kelly Gallery, and I really wanted to utilize space. So I thought about how the work and the space can work with each other.

Rail: I'm really excited to see *Ekpyrotic String VI* (2018) and *Cycloid V* (2018), the two that will wrap around the columns of the gallery. I've seen the design for it, which looks incredible. I thought to myself: how is that going to come together? [*Laughter*]

Mori: True, when we do the visualization it feels very aphysical, but actually the piece is heavy and quite physical. It requires many people to lift it.

Rail: What does the process of making them—I mean the tangible process of making the sculpture, entail?

Mori: For this sculpture series I have a formula, which we transfer to a software program, and I can change the perimeter of how the form will move or the thickness of the form. So one formula could create different variations, and then I pick the one that is most successful of energy flow, and then make a 3D printing. When you make a 3D

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printed model it becomes more physical and you can see a lot of issues production-wise, so you make modifications and then after a number of times making adjustments, finally you produce and make the large one.

Rail: Do you need to work with engineers?

Mori: Yes, it depends. Each work is different. Though using the technology differently is something that we couldn't do before. 3D milling and printing really transformed what I could do. But the finishing work, it's all done by hand.

Rail: It must be exciting to use technology that even five years ago wasn't available, to do something completely new.

Mori: Not only new, but to do something I couldn't do before.

Rail: Is it something that you'd been thinking about for a long time that you're now finally able to do, or have these ideas come to you since you've witnessed the recent advances in technology?

Mori: Sometimes there's no technology for what I want to do, and I need to push them to investigate and produce it for the first time because it has never been done before.

Rail: So some of these processes were developed especially to make these sculptures.

Mori: Yes.

Rail: That's very special.

Mori: I started small and I had to build the engineer's confidence to do a bigger scale. It took us two years to engineer the technology.

Rail: I got a chance to walk around a little bit earlier. Not everything is installed yet, but I still couldn't help but notice how striking the surfaces of these works are. Some are creamy and pearlescent, and others are prismatic, or crystalline. How do you like to see them lit?

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Mori: Actually, the daylight—the sun is the best for all the work because the sunlight is obviously the most powerful, but it's natural light. So you get the full spectrum of colors come out from the work. The artificial light has a little bit of a limitation of that, but we will light it.

Rail: With natural sunlight, the light must almost become part of the work I'd imagine.

Mori: Yes, the piece I produced in Okinawa for the Faou Foundation was aligned with the winter solstice, so it's very much an outdoors installation and is always viewed in natural light.

Rail: When you're working outdoors, what is the difference being in nature?

Mori: Yes, well for the Miyako Island project, the Okinawa project, we had to carry the sculpture through the sea. We installed it the year of the tsunami, so we had to make sure that the structural engineering of the work was sustainable. And for the ring on the waterfall in Brazil, we had to change the site of the installation twice, and at final site there was five times more water than the previous one. So we needed have an additional structure of support for the work as well. So there's a challenge. It is very challenging designing for nature, designing a work for a natural environment. The environment nurtures the work, and of course weather changes it, and then it looks very different. It feels like the work has its own life to it within nature. I see local people growing fond of the work, so I really like observing that. They create a relationship with the work. It's very nice to see how the work evolves in the environment.

Rail: Before you create a site-specific work, do you also develop a relationship with the local people?

Mori: Yes, that's very important because if I don't have encouragement from the local people, it would not be possible to do. For example, the people around Miyako Island are mainly fisherman, but they seem to be quite proud of *Primal Rhythm*. I was taking a photo one day for the Faou Foundation archive, and a fisherman came up to me and said he could take me closer to see the sculpture, and he explained to me about the work. He doesn't know that I'm the artist of the sculpture, so he explained to me how different it looks during the day, at this time of year, and all the stories. He was very proud.

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Rail: I can imagine that must be a nice feeling! To have your work explained back to you.

Mori: Yes, I thought it was a really, really moving moment, that I felt that's what I'm doing it for. It's the power of art that's making people feel connected.

Rail: Did you receive similar acceptance in Brazil?

Mori: Brazil was installed two years ago, and I've gone back maybe once or twice a year since then. They had an essay competition at the local school, and the children wrote about the *Ring*. With the local students, we planted palm trees along the trail that leads to the *Ring*. So we try to really engage local people and children.

Rail: Do you have a moment you can recall when you knew you were an artist?

Mori: When I receive a vision is the time when I feel "Ah! This is the need to deliver."

Rail: Is there a feeling that you have, something that compels you?

Mori: Compels me? It's almost like receiving, so kind of in the way of a missionary. When I have a vision, at the same time I think about how to produce it. A lot of my work, like the work here now—sometimes no one has ever tried to produce anything like it before, so we don't know if it's possible. But I know I can, and I am very stubborn about it, so then we manage to produce it.

Rail: Do you have ideas that haven't been worked out yet, ideas that recur to you, which someday you hope you'll achieve? Or when you come up with an idea, do you just focus on it until comes to fruition?

Mori: There's certain work that I envisioned four or five years ago, but I know I cannot do it now, and so I'm doing a study work in order to get to the goal. I haven't given up on it, but I know that in order to eventually do it I'll need to do this exercise in order to get it produced.

Rail: That stubbornness must come in handy, I'd imagine.

Mori: Yes, the important thing is to never give up.