

ARTFORUM

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By Jeffrey Kastner



Mariko Mori, *Plasma Stone I*, 2017–18, dichroic coated layered acrylic, Corian, 76 3/8 x 31 1/2 x 44 1/8".

Mariko Mori

SEAN KELLY GALLERY

The indelible avatars for which Mariko Mori gained fame in the early years of her shape-shifting practice—cyborg teenybopper, anime ingenue, extraterrestrial geisha, digital mermaid, 3-D empress—were, despite the outsize way they figure into most accountings of her career, actually a fairly short-lived aspect of her conceptual program. Mori’s celebrated masquerades gave way after only a half decade or so, following which she withdrew as a subject of her own work and redirected her pursuit of extravagant otherworldly hybridities into seamlessly finished structures and sculptures. The artist’s most recent show at Sean Kelly Gallery testified to her ongoing interest in techno-spiritual materials and forms, and in employing them as a means to translate into highly polished objecthood a mind-boggling range of abstract philosophical, scientific, and transcendental concepts.

The show, “Invisible Dimension,” aimed to do nothing less than give form to “the energy flow of the universe,” the artist said in a recent interview. “Not only astrophysics, but also the metaphysical ideas of invisible dimensions, such as our spirits or souls.” Like much of Mori’s rhetoric around her work, the ambition is one that’s both admirably contemplative and airily vague, an expression of wonder at the mysteries of existence lubricated with a good deal of amiable positivity about the encompassing nature of all being. Her descriptions invoke not just the possibilities of deep correspondences between the natural and the spiritual, but also those realms’ links with insanely complex scientific ideas, including the so-

called ekpyrotic universe theory, which asserts that the cosmos exists as a product of an endless procession of creation, destruction, and re-creation, which Mori employs as an astrophysical analogy for the belief in the cyclical nature of death and rebirth found in Buddhism and other spiritual practices.

Depending on your susceptibility to claims of transcendent oneness, the show's lavish backstory read either as stirringly ambitious and idealistic, or as a form of conceptual TMI that set an almost impossible standard for the art (any art) to meet. Regardless, the seven sculptures were, for the most part, more than compelling enough without it. With one exception, they were displayed in pairs to emphasize, according to the artist, the generative possibilities of interactions between two bodies, be they organisms or universes. In one of the three galleries, for example, *Plasma Stone I* and *II*, both 2017–18, were set together: The former is a gracefully torquing six-foot-high wedge of layered acrylic coated with a dichroic film designed to accentuate particular wavelengths of light; the latter work comprises a pair of smaller, similarly kaleidoscopic shapes that lean into each other in a posture of affectionate acknowledgment. Both sculptures were deeply satisfying Minimalist objects in the manner of California Light and Space work, even if one wasn't aware that they were meant to represent "the beginning of the universe." Meanwhile, a duo of smaller, plinth-based acrylic works—*Spirifer I*, 2017, and *Spirifer II*, 2017–18—took the form of flowing chromatic arabesques, but finally suggested a weirdly mawkish species of hotel lobby art more than they did the vibrant embodiments of the "invisible fire of the spirit" toward which they strived.

The real showstoppers were twinned in the large main gallery, at the entrance of which stood *Orbicle I*, 2017–18, a squat, open-bodied sphere of white-painted aluminum. A smaller cousin of the works in the "Cyclic" series, 2014–, that Mori showed in her last exhibition with Kelly, *Orbicle I* is similarly based on a kind of energetic Möbius-strip design, performing an involution of substance and space that suggests an eggshell being disassembled and reorganized by peculiar dynamic forces. It also provided a kind of microscale preview of *Cycloid V*, 2017–18, and *Ekpyrotic String VI*, 2016–17, a pair of enormous looping forms that wrapped themselves like wild amusement-park slides around two of the gallery's pillars. Dazzlingly elegant, the shapes—made from steel and, in the latter's case, glass-fiber-reinforced polymer—were coated in a creamy opalescent mother-of-pearl finish, as though excreted by some colossal alien mollusk. Nothing less than technological marvels, in the strictest sense of the word, these works came closest to embodying the artist's goal: instantiations of something like the miraculous, given form through imaginative mechanico-human industry.

—*Jeffrey Kastner*