

WIDEWALLS

"The Shapeshifting with Artist Masako Miki"

In conversation with Balasz Takac

January 14, 2022



Masako Miki. Photo by Andrew Payter. Courtesy of Masako Miki and CULT Aimee Friberg Exhibitions



Masako Miki - Plant Ghost (cream dots), 2020; Plant Ghost (green stripes), 2020 and Plant Ghost (mint green dots), 2020
Uber Public Art Installation: Holographic Entities Reminding of the Universe Photo by Henrik Kam. Courtesy of the Masako Miki and CULT Aimee Friberg Exhibitions.

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Throughout art history, numerous artists have been exploring the spiritual doctrines that they found the most appealing to their own persuasions and beliefs. Although times have changed, the exploration of spirituality seems to be of particular interest nowadays. An interesting example is the practice of Japanese-born American artist Masako Miki, centered on the Tsukumogami yōkai - shapeshifters that take the form of commonplace objects and undefinable forms according to the Shinto religion.

By closely examining these ancient mythologies, she addresses contemporary narratives around human identity and transformation. Miki's shapeshifter characters embodied in paintings and sculptures are ambiguous - they are simultaneously animate and inanimate, sacred and secular, and thus reflect the nonbinary gender and biracial identities.

Her practice and the recurrent Shapeshifters series were explored in a recently released short documentary centered on Miki's first permanent public art commission installed in San Francisco titled *Holographic Entities Reminding of the Universe*. This month the artist's work will be featured in a group show, *Physics and Fiction* at CULT Aimee Friberg Exhibitions in San Francisco, as well as at the FOG Fair in San Francisco in booths for CULT Aimee Friberg Exhibitions and Ryan Lee Gallery. As part of the fair programming, she will participate in a conversation with Natasha Boas and artist Woody de Othello on Sunday, Jan. 23.

We had a conversation with Miki to find out more about what motivates her, the way her practice reflects the contemporary moment, and what are her future plans.

Masako Miki Documentary

https://youtu.be/Ng_KaPULoU8?si=uzDNp6772CiQTIC4

Inspired by The Spirits

Widewalls: Through your art practice, you have been exploring the Shinto concept of the Tsukumogami yōkai. Could you tell us more about the concept of shapeshifters and how you became interested in it in the first place?

Masako Miki: The Shapeshifter series started because I wanted to share my process of dealing with dilemmas and questions concerning my bicultural identity between Japan and the United States. I began to explore these questions by referencing Japanese traditions based on Shinto's animism. Yōkai (shapeshifters) appear in the mythologies and folklore of my ancestors. The simple translation of yōkai would be something like ghosts, deities, or preternatural creatures. Yōkai appears in different forms like humans, animals, natural objects, or man-made objects. Yōkai are not personifications of the spirit or ideas, the spirit is usually experienced through the unique physical entity. It's a bit difficult to define who/what they are because they possess dual characteristics of being sacred and secular and animate and inanimate.

These characteristics resonated with me because they manifest this synthesis of dualities by accepting contrary characteristics. Shapeshifters are inherently boundless in their nature as they continue shapeshifting throughout their existence. They do not conform to accepted identities, instead, they generate new identities. I felt these ancient yōkai characters offer interesting narratives that are relative to our current society. In our non-binary society where multiculturalism,

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gender fluidity, and biracial identity seem to be more the norm, our identities have become more complex than in the past.

Widewalls: How do you translate this concept into your work and how do you think it relates to the current moment we live in?

MM: I translate this concept into my work by reinventing/inventing shapeshifters. My felt and bronze sculptures tend to become figurative, and they often become abstract and amorphous to conjure the process of transformation or ever-shifting shapes. I use bright colors of wool and automobile paint with bronze to imbue liveliness and playfulness. I also want to offer different interpretations of shapeshifters which are traditionally rendered with achromatic or desaturated colors. I use saturated colors and patterns which have a contrasting appearance compared to the ones you see in traditional wood prints and scrolls.

I am inspired by the traditional painting called *Hyakki Yagyō* (A night parade of one hundred demons). This is a pandemoniac scene in a night parade consisting of crowds of Tsukumogamishapeshifters who are discarded by humans. It's a depiction of an uproar by marginal characters in the Muromachi to Edo Period (around 1336 to late 1868) in Japan. I relate with the subject matter and the context of these traditional paintings. The contexts are reflections of the cultural background of the era. I think we are still dealing with similar issues of social injustice and rooted prejudice in our current society.



Masako Miki - The Pink Cat that Lived a Million Times (after Yoko Sano's book), 2021 Ink and Watercolor on Paper 14 x 10 in.
Photo by Masako Miki. Courtesy of Masako Miki and CULT Aimee Friberg Exhibitions.

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The Process

Widewalls: *The abstract forms you create seem humorous and friendly. Have you considered employing some sort of storytelling to explore the behavior, interaction, or relationships of the shapeshifters?*

MM: Thank you for the question. The humorous characteristic is an important aspect of my work, and it is my intention to express this playfulness. A sense of humor invites viewers and opens the possibility for exploration. I also create sculpture pieces in groupings as well. The relationships among them create interesting dialogues and emphasize the idiosyncrasies of each character by existing together. In the future, I would like to explore working with animation or digital modeling or potentially in performance or theatrical context. I have been contemplating these ideas.

Widewalls: *Could you tell us something about your working process? Are you in any way conditioned by the material and size?*

MM: I am open and flexible when it comes to the creative process. I am not conditioned by the materials or sizes. In recent years, I have been focusing on creating sculptures, drawings, and installations in my work. I have been intrigued by these media for a while. My sculptures range from miniature to monumental, and I work with both felted wool and bronze materials.

For drawings, I work on murals, large-scale drawings, and works on paper. I feel drawing offers great freedom since I don't have to be concerned about gravity and structural aspects in the process. On paper, I use watercolor and ink and enjoy the fluidity of the medium. I manipulate both accidental and controlled mark-making processes. I embrace the process of exploration in drawings.

My installations are often site-specific, so I always enjoy these unique opportunities. I think my practice is usually open-ended, and I would like to keep it that way. The public art projects I've worked on also introduced me to new and different materials like GFRC, stainless steel, fiberglass, and so on.



Masako Miki - Ichiren-Bozu, 2020 [background]; Continuous Eyes, 2020 [midground] and Animated Back Scratcher, 2020 [foreground]. Uber Public Art Installation: Holographic Entities Reminding of the Universe. Photo by Henrik Kam. Courtesy of the Masako Miki and CULT Aimee Friberg Exhibitions

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The Present and The Future

Widewalls: You have been increasingly working within the realm of public art. What kind of dimension do you think this adds to your practice?

MM: One important aspect of working in the realm of public art is the concept of accessibility. Now that I have completed a few public art projects, I started to think about how we can experience more art every day. When art lives openly in public, people can pass by on the way to their work or take a walk with friends and family — artwork becomes part of their everyday life experience. The context makes art more inclusive and accessible. I think this is an important idea in our communities. Art installations can be a reminder of current issues and create dialogues for new perspectives that are relevant to our lives.

I am also interested in creating monumental outdoor sculptures that do not depict historical heroic figures. Many of my sculptures are shapeshifters of discarded aged tools. It is ironic that the scale here emphasizes the importance of mundane and replaceable objects. They are ordinary characters in ancient mythologies, like the ordinary people in our society. This mirrors the importance of collective efforts by the ordinary who bring extraordinary deeds to our society. Perhaps these sculptures can make ordinary people more visible in our world.

Widewalls: Could you tell us something about your recent art commission in San Francisco?

MM: I was beyond excited for this outdoor public art commission at Uber's headquarters in San Francisco. It was quite an involved project due to the scale. I created nine bronze sculptures from three to 20 feet high. I am extremely happy with how everything came out, and I appreciate everyone's enthusiasm to create something meaningful together for the community.

Collaboration with many talented professionals was one of the highlights of the project. I am grateful to everyone who made this installation possible. I also learned so much about working on large-scale installations. It is quite a process to complete this level of the project. It takes a long time to plan, produce and install. Every step requires great attention, communication, and collaborative efforts. This project expanded my visual language and opened more opportunities for outdoor installations.

I would also like to add how exciting it is to work in different scales and materials. Being able to change in both materials and scale echoes the idea of fluidity in my work. My art emphasizes the idea of accepting dualities and continues to expand the definition of unique identity. I enjoy seeing my work expand from miniature size to life-size and monumental scale. It shows the process of growth and evolution. It is a different way of expressing ideas. Intimacy can be experienced on a smaller scale, whereas a viewer becomes a part of the installation in a monumental work. In the outdoor installation, works become more interactive, which offers a different experience than visiting galleries and museums. I will continue to work on both scales in the future.

Widewalls: What would be your next step in the exploration of Japanese mythology or perhaps some other form of spirituality?

While referencing Japanese mythologies, my interest is to craft new mythologies for our time by projecting new identities onto these ancient characters. Every mythology reflects the time when

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it was created. As an artist, I wonder what kind of new mythologies need to be crafted now. Semiology infers that our society asserts its values through specific cultural materials; we express collective cultural values through them.

I think this cultural material can be works of art and the cultural values are what people project onto the artwork. I think an artist's subject matter is a vehicle to explore and express a larger context of their ideas. I am intrigued by the idiosyncrasy of Japanese animistic traditions but also made me realize the strange universality of idiosyncrasies in other cultural mythologies. As I continue to research mythologies in my own culture and others, I have become more interested in the question of why we have created mythologies for centuries. I think mythologies are cultural signifiers and always reflect on the political and social context of the time. These seemingly entertaining narratives can offer deep and insightful knowledge about ourselves. And this truly has become my passion to explore the significance that sharing narratives has for our survival.

What I would like to accomplish as an artist is to offer creative narratives about our new identities and to create a context where meaningful dialogues about our social values can be generated. I believe our unresolved social injustice and deeply rooted racial inequalities are based on old mythologies and fictions that do not reflect the truth of ourselves. Yuval Noah Harari, the author of "*Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*" shares insight into the significance of creating and sharing stories. The author proposes that sapiens (us) out-ruled other species because of our unique ability to create and believe fictions—collective mythologies, which we call ideologies in modern times. Believing the same stories allowed sapiens to relate to each other to form large-scale human corporations, establish a capitalist society, religions, and nations. However, many fear-driven mythologies created in our history only serve a handful of the population and divide us deeply. I hope my new mythologies offer an alternative context where we can reexamine our social values and share inclusive narratives that reflect our empathy and resiliency.



Masako Miki - Left: Ichiren-Bozu (Animated prayer beads), 2021. Painted Bronze. H 11 in. x W 3 in. x D 3 in.; Center: Kuchisake - Onna (Mouth tear woman), 2021. Painted Bronze. H 8.25 in. x W 7 in. x D 2.5 in.; Right: Nyoijizai (Animated back-scratcher), 2021. Painted Bronze. H 8.5 in. x W 6 in. x D 6 in. Photo courtesy of the Masako Miki and CULT Aimee Friberg Exhibitions

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Masako Miki - Left: Connecting Shapeshifter, 2021. H 27.5 in. x W 17 in. x D 4.75 in. Cast bronze with automobile paint and urethane; Right: Contemplating Chestnut Shapeshifter, 2021 13.5 (H) x 14 (D) inches. Cast bronze with automobile paint and urethane. Photo by John Wilson White. Courtesy of the Masako Miki and CULT Aimee Friberg Exhibitions

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