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"Review: 'Masako Miki: Shapeshifters, Sprites, and Spirits,' at the Moody Center for the Arts, Houston"

By Courtney Thomas

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An installation view of "Masako Miki: Shapeshifters, Sprites, and Spirits" at the Moody Center for the Arts. Photo: Courtney Thomas

In Masako Miki's site-specific installation at the Moody Center for the Arts on the Rice University campus, Japanese mythology takes on a playful guise. Full of sculptures with wooden legs and organic, colorful wool forms, the exhibition feels like the world's happiest, least practical nursery furniture showroom. These sculptures are between 32 and 78 inches tall, with curvy cloudlike, treetop, or dome shapes in bright colors and patterns. Above them, adding to the nursery feel, a purple and blue wool crescent moon, titled *Contemplating Crescent Moon* (2026), hangs from the ceiling. Large vinyl shapes speckle the wood floor. Blue, purple, green, and yellow doodles are on the walls: stars, rain drops, and reaching handprints emerge from spiked abstract shapes.

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Many of Miki's sculptures are titled after yokai or spirits that appear in the Japanese legend Night Parade of One Hundred Demons (Hyakki Yagyo), a tale of household items coming to life and processing through the streets, that dates back to the medieval period. Yet, while the sculptures are named for recognizable objects with a special quality, Miki's works are not literal representations. *Patient Stirrup Sprite* (2021), for instance, doesn't look anything like a stirrup. This sculpture is a bright yellow plush wool cloud with inky dots, atop three angled legs. *Blissful One-Eyed Spirit* (2018), however, resembles a cross between a gray Scandi-style armchair and an eye. A gray wool circle sits pupil-like within a semicircle wool shape, atop three angled mahogany wood legs that support it like a tripod.

Miki's sculpture *Karakasa Obake (Straw Umbrella Shapeshifter)* (2022) has three angled, walnut wood legs topped by a smooth conical wool canopy dotted with multicolored oval patches. It's not a literal rendering of the legendary Karakasa Obake spirit, which is typically depicted as a straw umbrella with one large eye, a long tongue, and a single leg it uses to hop about. Still, this allusion to mythology gives the sculpture additional whimsy. It suggests a night-at-the-museum effect may be possible, in which the art could come to life with a spirit of its own. The softness, title, and colors prompt playful ideas about the abstract form coming to life, and neutralize the fear-inducing quality of the titular demon. Invoking her source material, the exhibition's wall text says, Miki addresses the unseen forces active in the world, and creates space for new myths to arise.



An installation view of Masako Miki, "*Karakasa Obake (Straw Umbrella Shapeshifter)*," 2022

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Indeed, while the sculptures on view are named for spirits, sprites, shapeshifters, and anthropomorphized items, only a select few have recognizable human characteristics. Two such pieces are *Enchanted Pine Tree Reaching Clouds* (2024) and *Pine Tree from Ancient Times* (2023). These sculptures have straight wooden dowel legs (like tree trunks), and eye shapes are included in the patterns of their rounded wool tops. Perhaps a spirit looks out from these trees, or the trees themselves have a gaze. Or are they eyespots, serving to intimidate, like butterfly wings driving away predators?



An installation view of Masako Miki, "Waiting Cloud," 2025 (left) and "Pine Tree from Ancient Times," 2023 (right). Photo: Courtney Thomas

Echoing the opening Miki creates for new mythology, a multimedia gallery near the installation plays episodes from the most recent anime adaptation of *GeGeGe no Kitaro*. Following a half-yokai, half-human boy, the anime connects the Japanese spirit world mythology to pop culture, with its own visual language. An earlier version of this series "served as an important influence to Masako Miki during her formative years in the 1980s," a handout notes.

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Other works included in the exhibition with a subtly human quality are those with sculpted girlish legs, also of walnut wood, supporting soft wool forms. In *Waiting Cloud* (2025), a patchwork of various shades of blue wool shaped like a cloud rests on this humanistic style of thin legs with elongated tip-toe feet positioned as if they are stepping on to the sculpture's base of walnut wood. *Optimistic Camellia Umbrella* (2026) also stands on tiptoe with girlish legs, while *Listening Mushroom* (2026), has just one leg of this style, and an orange wool mushroom top with purple accents. These sculptures suggest a process of transformation, nymphlike creatures emerging from clouds and mushrooms. Miki's sculptures suggest an enchanted fairy world.

Deviating from all the woolen softness, a 7-foot tall bronze with blue patina stands by the entrance/exit to the show. Titled *Animated Lacquered Vase* (2026), it's in the shape of a water droplet, with the tip stretched into a tall thin line, ending in a sharp point, contrasting the wide, heavy, curved base. Raindrops also appear in the doodlelike wall vinyls but those droplets are more rounded and smaller than this bronze. About one foot high, a small eye shape is stamped into one side of the bronze, and a fringed doodle shape that recurs in Miki's visual language is stamped on the other. These symbols, with their hand-drawn quality, link the bronze to Miki's oeuvre.

Miki's spirit world is huggable, with yokai that rise (the effervescent pink bubbly *Rising Prayer Beads* (2024), persevere (*Persevering Daruma Doll* (2024)), listen (*Listening Mushroom* (2026)), and contemplate (*Contemplating Moon* (2026)). Nothing lurks or connives — these spirits are positive, encouraging us to connect with a world full of possibilities for peace and joy.

Masako Miki: Shapeshifters, Sprites, and Spirits is on view through August 15, 2026, at the Moody Center for the Arts in Houston.

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