

THE UNIBROW

"The Unibrow Interview: Masako Miki on the Shapeshifting Power of the Japanese Garden"

By Evan Pricco

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I don't think I had ever considered the amount of Japanese gardens in the United States until Masako Miki and I were walking through her new museum exhibition, at SCAD MOA *The Garden of Wandering Spirits*, that is, in effect, a conceptual garden in a museum. She wasn't so

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much telling me but asking me to think about it, to wonder why, to consider the war and post-war time and how this exchange occurred. This is what she is thinking about right now, what she is beginning to turn into more structured form: how do you take a feeling and an essence and give it character. The garden is her vessel.

Japanese gardens came to America by way of the world's fairs. At the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago, Japan built a temple-style pavilion, the Ho-o-den, it's first national pavilion created abroad. There, they created a garden on the Wooded Island, and millions of Americans walked through a Japanese landscape for the first time. A year later, the "Japanese village" at San Francisco's Midwinter Exposition proved so popular that it stayed in Golden Gate Park after the fair came down. Under the care of Makoto Hagiwara, it grew into the Japanese Tea Garden. A garden still sits on the Chicago site in Jackson Park today.

The war nearly erased that history. In 1942, the Hagiwara family was evicted from the garden they had tended for nearly half a century and were incarcerated at Tanforan internment camp in the Bay Area. The Tea Garden was stripped of its Japanese elements and renamed the "Oriental Tea Garden." Across the West Coast, the Japanese American gardeners and designers who had built the pre-war gardens were sent to the camps as well, some leaving their work unfinished.

What happened next is the part Miki finds so striking. Within two decades of the war's end, American cities were building Japanese gardens on purpose, as "friendship" and sister-city projects meant to repair the relationship between the two countries. Portland is the clearest example (I went this summer and it was by far one of the most incredible parks I have been to in America). Its garden was conceived in the late 1950s, designed by Professor Takuma Tono of Tokyo Agricultural University, and opened to the public in 1967. The garden's own history describes the aim as "forging a healing connection to Japan on the heels of World War II." And today, as Miki mentioned in her lecture at the museum, there are hundreds of Japanese gardens across the United States, many of them maintained by city parks departments and kept alive by the people who visit.

This is a context for what the work that Masako Miki is making today. It took her awhile to get there, but her sculptural work, now from human-sized to 8'-feet plus, in felted wool or even bronze, is an extension of her love of spiritual forms and the construction of the Japanese garden. Born in Osaka but raised and living in the Bay Area for three decades now, I kept thinking that this work is not only her trying to understand the dichotomy of who she is as a multi-cultural woman, but that she sees herself as a caretaker of the stories of the impact that Japan has had in this country for nearly 150 years. She wants to understand it and give a new face and aesthetic to the story. What is important to consider is that though this is Miki thinking about her past; it is her thinking about how do we survive a future.

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Entry into the installation, *The Garden of Wandering Spirits*, SCAD MOA

Evan Pricco: I grew up in Oakland and Berkeley, so I have to ask: do you consider yourself a Bay Area artist now?

Masako Miki: I do, because I've been living there for a long time. I'm a native of Japan, but I've been there long enough that I definitely feel like Bay Area culture is part of me, without my even thinking about it.

EP: The Bay Area has such a rich art history and such a rich scene, but people don't talk about it enough. I ran Juxtapoz for 19 years, and that was a San Francisco magazine, and people still get surprised when they hear about that history.

MM: It's always overshadowed by the tech culture there, especially now. But I moved to San Francisco in 1992, and at the time there was still an underground culture. I felt it. I went to Haight Street to get secondhand jeans, then to a cheap taqueria, then out at 10 or 11 at night, and it was just crazy. I was a young person, and there was a spirit of rebels and subcultures. But then it definitely shifted.

The Bay Area is so small, and that's good and bad. The tightness of the community is incredible. Everybody knows everybody and we support each other. But it becomes very local. We have just

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enough of a market to survive, but it's not big enough, not like LA or New York. So I've got to travel as an artist, and it's really important for me to exhibit in places besides the Bay Area. It's very progressive, but it's also very conservative at the same time. There are polar opposites in that town, and there's a conflict. A good conflict.

EP: There's a lot of old money.

MM: There's a lot of old money. Old money and new money. We should be able to really sustain our art community, because there's so much wealth. I mean, so much wealth. But we have to educate these people, and it's a conundrum, because they're the ones who come to the city for the culture they're looking for, and then they drive culture away once they arrive. They're not educated enough to have a reciprocity with the city they're in.

EP: We're talking about people who grew up thinking about programming and engineering rather than a creative output. So what was your earliest artistic moment? When did the light bulb switch on, or were you just always an artist?

MM: It sounds a little bad, but I think I was always an artist.

EP: Why does that sound bad? That sounds great.

MM: Right! But I have to say, the first thing was a manga exchange I did with my girlfriends when I was in fourth and fifth grade. That was the thing. I had a deadline to finish my comic story because I had to give it to my friend, and all of us did it. It was like, "Okay, here's the new story."

EP: So you were making your own manga?

MM: Yeah, comics. I mean, they were bad.

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View of the installation at the opening, photo by Evan Pricco

EP: It doesn't matter if they were bad. It's amazing that you did it.

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MM: I grew up in a time when comics were really popular. Tomorrow I'm going to give a talk about the comics and animation I grew up with. And it was a time when we didn't have this [phones]. You had to make stuff. I read the comics, and then in sixth grade I asked my mom, "I want an oil painting tutor."

EP: You wanted to take it up a level. What did your mom say?

MM: She said, "No, we can't. What are you talking about?" Because it's expensive. So I brought all my girlfriends together: "Okay, we're all going to pay together, so can we have one tutor for this group of six!"

I always liked making and drawing, so I feel like it was part of me. But I never really felt that it could become a profession.

But I think my family was pretty open in that sense. I really had to prove to my dad that I was serious, though. And I really appreciate that he put up boundaries, because I had to take what I wanted to do seriously. In grad school I did office work just to make money, and I couldn't stand it. I just couldn't be in a cubicle.

EP: I feel like boundaries are helpful for an artist. It's not that you can't have the freedom to dream whatever you want, but it's helpful to have a discipline of time.

MM: I 100% agree. My life is very scheduled. As a growing artist, I really feel like a deadline gives me good focus. In an ideal world, I want to be contemplating new work and have designated time where I don't have to do anything but explore. That's always happening anyway, without planning.

EP: Let's talk about this space, because it's so unique, and you are really, really good at installation. You do such a great job with space and light. With a room like this, how do you even start?

MM: I know. I think this is a space not a lot of artists could utilize, because it's so odd and unique at the same time.

EP: And historic.

MM: Historic. When the curator approached me, I thought, okay. Every time I do something, I find and discover something new. So unless I have a gut feeling that it's not going to work, it's, "Let me sit with it." And when I thought about it, I really liked the fact that this building has so much history, especially being in the South. Because this was a train station.

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EP: Which carries the history of moving people and goods, of people who were enslaved in this country for so long.

MM: A really dark history of the United States is here. And I thought that was interesting, because my work is really about deconstructing all the myths and narratives that aren't even true, that aren't even relevant. It's a convenient narrative that we made, but somehow we believed it, and then it became the reality. That's why we had slavery. And we have it too, in Japan. I'm obsessed with the history of Japan around World War I and World War II, maybe more World War II. I'm obsessed with how the nation became so blinded, to the point where we couldn't stop what was happening. And at the same time, people wanted it.

EP: When you live through what we're living through right now, you start to understand. So many times you think, "Nazi Germany, Japan between the wars, I would have stood up and stopped it." But then when you live in it, you realize it just happens in a way that is so fast and subversive, it's hard to grasp a center to fight.

MM: It just kind of happens. There's so much rhetoric, and the media was so censored, and ordinary people like ourselves weren't exposed to the real story. At the time, people in Japan thought they were winning. But then it's, "Wait, how come they have to take my iron pot and the kids' tin toys because they need metal?" And you get less food every day. So something is wrong. But in that moment you can't fight it, because when you question, you're unpatriotic, and you're going to get executed.

So I'm really interested in that, and also worried, because we could be there before we notice anything. Things don't happen right away. They accumulate. What I really took from learning Japanese history is that there's a point where it's a little too late. I hate to say this, because it's so dystopian and so negative.

But that's why my work is so cheerful. I want to talk about something that's uncomfortable to talk about, this part of us, this idea that as human beings we could turn either way. We're not all good. We're good and bad, always, but we have to strive to go in a better direction.

EP: What I found fascinating when I walked in is that you're almost making happiness, or cheerfulness, something you have to contemplate. You've put it in the style of a Zen garden, and as you walk down it's fun and psychedelic, but it's so quiet. It's like a form of protest.

MM: It definitely is. This is loosely based on the Japanese scroll painting called the Night Parade of One Hundred Demons, which is basically a protest march of shapeshifters [yōkai]. These are anonymous shapeshifter spirits that have been abandoned, that were labeled as replaceable. Throughout history there are a lot of paintings of them marching out, because they're angry, but they're always depicted in a very humorous way. I definitely took that part of it.

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One thing I want to mention about the garden idea is that I'm researching the Japanese garden right now. I'm working on one of the Japanese gardens in the United States, in Miami. And I'm really curious about the fact that there are so many Japanese gardens in the United States.



Installation, *The Garden of Wandering Spirits*, SCAD MOA

EP: I just went to the one in Portland. It's unbelievable.

MM: Oh my gosh, it's unbelievable. I'm actually an acquaintance of Aki at the Portland Japanese Garden, because I met him when he was in Tokyo. I was fascinated by the history. It started with the World's Fair. I'd have to check the numbers, but it was before World War II. And since then we've had hundreds of Japanese gardens in the United States.

I started to think, why? The United States was willing to accept this manifestation of another culture, and there are hundreds of them, at different scales. A lot of the time the garden becomes a park and goes under the city's parks and rec department. So that means people have been taking care of this thing that came from a foreign country. Given the history of Japan and the United States, I was really curious: why did Americans want to have this many gardens? Somehow it surpassed all the hatred and discrimination that came with World War II. They're okay with it living in their town, and people visit. If people don't visit, the park won't sustain itself.

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So I was thinking, there has to be an experience that goes beyond all these judgments you make about a person, or a culture, or a place. When you go into a Japanese garden, like when you went to Portland, it's your experience, right? You recalibrate. You went somewhere. All of those feelings and emotions are real. It's a peaceful, harmonious experience, and I feel like that has to happen more often.

That's why, with this crazy long space, I felt it was almost like walking in a garden. That is my interest right now, so I thought, I'm going to try to make this garden installation and see if I can capture that kind of feeling.

These characters really become an essence. They don't have genders. There's no age information, no class information. It's just who they are. They're idiosyncratic characters, and they're here. I feel like if we could go to that place, we'd all just appreciate who you are. And I feel like that's really the only way we don't fall for the wrong narrative.



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