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What makes Aiko Miyanaga tick? Naphthalene!

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Japanese artist Aiko Miyanaga's work in naphthalene
(Photo: Leo Bieber)



Aiko Miyanaga

What makes **Aiko Miyanaga** tick? Or should the question be: What makes art from the Orient just a wee bit above the average abstracts?

The answer to the first one: A truck load of naphthalene.

As for the second: It is a mystery one hopes to unravel one day. For the moment, we shall leave it at philosophy of

the craft probably beating the technique of the art.

As London spreads out its red canvas for the **Frieze Art Fair** (October 15 to 18), **White Rainbow**, a new gallery (on Mortimer Street) specializing in contemporary Japanese art, has opened its doors to artworks from the fascinating Orient. As the preview set off, it was clear who the show-stealer was: the demure 40-year-old Aiko Miyanaga, queen of the ephemeral.

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Aiko, who won the grand prize of **Japan's Nissan Art Award** last year, creates site-specific installations using ephemeral materials such as salt and naphthalene. It is both delicate, and resilient. Through strings of crystallized salt or cracked ceramic glazing, Aiko explores material resilience as well as processes of transition.

Too philosophical for the uninitiated?

Aiko, who is more comfortable speaking in Japanese when it comes to her work, explains, "What I am trying to achieve is not based on Japanese art or its philosophy. I am challenging and exploring the new form and notions of sculptures (such as carving stones, using clay modeling or welding metals) that existed in the past. In the example of naphthalene, it sublimates at room temperature. By using this substance, the piece changes its form; and by controlling the temperature, it crystallizes and re-crystallizes constantly."

The gallery, White Rainbow, is on an exploration mode too. Says founder Yukiko Ito, "Our effort is to introduce some of the most important contemporary artists from Japan in the dynamic and increasingly global art centre which London has become in recent years. Many of them rarely get a chance to show in the UK or Europe – be it rising stars such as Aiko or well-established artists such as Chu Enoki."

A series of sculptures Aiko created for Liverpool Central Library's Picton Reading Room during the Liverpool Biennial 2014 will be developed further for this exhibition at White Rainbow. Keys, high heels, clocks and other objects will be cast in naphthalene; a volatile compound which sublimates and re-solidifies in response to temperature and humidity.

Remind Aiko of her radical experiments and she laughs, "Once I was making a trial piece with naphthalene cast in resin, I was trying to rest the naphthalene key within the resin before it hardened. The next day, I was looking forward to seeing the work in progress with much expectation and excitement but the key was gone without any trace. The resin creates a certain level of heat as it hardens and the key could not endure the increasing temperature. All I could see was a large block of transparent resin."

In a way, Aiko's humour in her art makes it borderless making the perennial debate of East vs West seem childishly silly.

She says, "As people describe the impressions of the moon differently in West and East, I cannot conclude by saying that there is no boundary. On the other hand, I don't find it necessary to change my exhibition consciously depending on where my shows are. Regarding my ever-changing work, some use the term "evanescence" and others use "alchemic". My work always involves transformation. This leads to a perception of the work as being concerned with the ephemeral or being introduced as an alchemist, but beyond that it seeks to question why the process of change should be transient."

The exhibition will also include a new instalment of Aiko's Soramimisora series, a ceramic sound work, comprising newly-fired ceramics too suddenly exposed to cool air, the series of bowls will generate a subtle sound, unpredictable and erratic, which continues for years. By intentionally accentuating a process known as 'crazing', which is usually considered a defect in traditional ceramics, the work hints at a process of constant change underlying apparently stable objects.

But when it comes to choosing her favourite medium, Aiko is reluctant like a mother being asked to pick her favourite child. "It is a slightly problematic question to answer. I am not sure which medium I like because I don't think in that way. I always try to observe and search for a medium that I can use in my work to explore ideas. Ceramic can be said to be "traditional" but I feel it is more an ancestral medium than traditional."

As much as Aiko debates about tradition and transition, her base was set quite early in life as little Aiko spent much of her time watching her family work in their ceramic kiln. "My parents had a hands-off policy. When I was a child, my father used to tell me if you don't create something new, it's just a rehash or imitation of someone else. My mother supported me from a certain distance."

Aiko's family has been running a ceramics kiln workshop for more than 100 years.

"However, neither my great grandfather, grandfather nor my father, inherited the tradition or styles from the previous generations. What was instead inherited throughout the generations was working in the art industry: what "Art" means here is to face what era or times you live in, what you think at that moment, expressing your intention."

As an artist in a world that is shrinking by the minute, Aiko has learnt the art of adapting as much as respecting tradition, "With the Internet, I see there is no border. I can easily obtain any information I would like. However, it is limited in comparison to exploring the reality. Internet cannot offer the actual experience of looking at an artwork or feeling the connection to artworks. Globalisation certainly offers convenience in many ways, but I also see a lot of important elements are lost through this. Through my artwork, I would like to pose a question about where you actually stand (referring not just to time and physical space but at this point of your life)."

Her ancestors' commitment to 'creation' has obviously rubbed off on her as she sees each of her work as a thrill ride. "What I find most thrilling is when I spend a good deal of time picturing what can be manifested with what materials and concepts. The actual process of making work starts whenever the imagination takes me, so I am working all year around. Creating sculptural work goes through many layers in the manufacturing process. Therefore, it takes a long time. For example, the encapsulation of the naphthalene within the resin takes twice as much time because first you have to wait for the resin to dry, followed by the naphthalene."

But for this rising star, the high-point of her career still remains her solo show in 2012 at the National Museum of Art in Osaka. It coincided with the El Greco exhibition. Says Aiko, revealing her sense of disbelief even today, "El Greco and me. Two shows - the age difference is 300 years! El Greco, the old master, attracted a long queue outside of the museum. The audience came to see Greco and unexpectedly encountered my work. The people who visited the museum at that time had a chance to think (unconsciously) about us in society today, the presence of art, and the presence of the world."