ASIAN ART NEWS

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Reviews * **Books** * **Auction**

Always Fresh Surprises

A traditional Japanese aesthetic and ephemeral technology are woven together into the colorful and lyrical oeuvre *of Japanese media artist and scientist Naoko Tosa. Color, light, and sound make for something quite magical in her art that speaks not only to a seductive hallucinogenic beauty but also to the abstraction of chaos and to the transient quality of experience.*

By Marybeth Stock

In 1964, Sony developed Japan's first portable video camera. In that decade, pioneering Japanese video artists looked beyond Western conceptual practices and engaged in a Japanese aesthetic driven by technical experiments, socio-political statements, and performance. Moving into the 1970s, they investigated various speculative approaches, including psychedelic and animated 16mm films; the pioneering Computer Technique Group (CTG) experimented with CGI animation; and filmmakers Katsuhiro Yamaguchi and Toshio Matsumoto manipulated video through electronics technology, spurring more controversial, innovative forms of media art. Japan's first two generations of video artists focused on the medium's technical capabilities and experimented with single- and multi-camera live feedback setups well into the 1980s. Moreover, in a critical summary of early Japanese video art, the Getty Center notes: "[these] artists also engaged in a careful dissection of the formal and poetic complexities allowed by editing ... unaffected by the headlong rush into narrative being pursued in other parts of the world."

Eminent media artist Naoko Tosa was a student in Tokyo during the 1980s and 1990s: her conceptual investigations embrace those early elements of experimentation, hands-on electronics, and subtextual editing. Yet her foundations in film, video, and computer graphics inform only part of her practice. Tosa is also a scientist: technology is her medium. Her works encompass the digital and the analog, including intuitive software and scrolls, video art, sculpture,

Naoko Tosa, Oiran, 2014, video (color, sound), 5 min. 28 sec., 1080 x 1920 pixels. © Naoko Tosa. Image: Courtesy of the Artist and Ikkan Gallery, Singapore

Above left: Naoko Tosa, **Thunder God,** 2014, video (color, sound), 6 min. 45 sec., 1080 x 1920 pixels. *Above right:* Naoko Tosa, **Wind God,** 2014, video (color, sound), 6 min. 45 sec., 1080 x 1920 pixels. Both works © Naoko Tosa. Image: Courtesy of the Artist and Ikkan Gallery.

media installations, and photography.

Most recently, Tosa has contemplated odd and evocative materials in varying states of physical turmoil, adroitly editing their chaos into allusive cultural insights. Her most recent solo exhibition *Space Flowers* was held at Singapore's Ikkan Art Gallery this September. Featured were six videos (all 2014) grounded in the shimmering ecstasies of Rimpa, a major historical school of Japanese painting based in Kyoto during the late-17th and early-18th centuries. One of the most illustrious practitioners of Rimpa was painter Korin Ogata (1658–1716), whose bold impressionism revolved around simple, highly idealized forms. Ogata typically painted his lively nature-based subjects—birds, flowers, trees—on gold-leaf backgrounds; he mixed colors directly onto the surface of the paper, resulting in gradations ranging from subtle to vivid, almost delirious effect. Luminosity underlies Ogata's works: in the refined technique and style dictated by the times, the artist gilded his paintings with precious materials such as mother-of-pearl and gold.

L iving in Kyoto, the birthplace of Rimpa, for the past nine years, Tosa has had opportunity to immerse herself in its rich aesthetic. The works in *Space Flowers* referenced not only Ogata's imagery, but also the gorgeous luster of his palette. Tosa's Rimpa-inspired work is lush with glitter and shining pigments, whose voluptuous forms allude to the Byzantine twists of Ogata's branches and streams. At the core of the show was the artist's *Space Flower* series, comprising a quartet of videos that evoked the magnificent gold screens (*byobu*) for which Ogata was renowned. Mounted in a row on the wall, Tosa's four videos resembled their analog origins—the painted panels of a large folding screen. But these were subliminal, rather than literal, recollections of Ogata's imagery: Tosa plucks out the raw forms of Rimpa and reweaves them into beauty and violence. Two other works, the videos *Wind God* and *Thunder God,* were also inspired by an Ogata *byobu*. In these, Tosa invoked the essence of two Japanese mythological characters; though their intensity is subdued, at Ikkan these two videos faced each other from opposite walls like two fierce guardians at a temple gate. For the exhibition, all six videos were displayed on 4K resolution monitors, otherwise known as ultra-high definition screens. These were hung vertically—reminiscent of Japanese traditional paper scrolls—on a black background. The gallery was radiant with color, movement, and distracting entropy.

Tosa originally created the *Space Flower* works as four separate videos, each with its own identity: *Space Jungle, Space Flower, Moon Flower,* and *Oiran.* Their slow-motion blasts and improbable reverse-actions verge on the hallucinogenic—ideal for space-borne jungles and flowers in zero gravity. At Ikkan, the four pieces were grouped as a series, their distinctive gestures mingling into a glowing impasto. *Oiran* refers to Japanese courtesans: this piece throbs with roses and fragility. *Moon Flower* references a famous *byobu* by Ogata, entitled *Red and White Plum Blossoms,* whose flowery imagery Tosa deconstructs in dramatic tempests. In *Thunder God* and *Wind God,* Tosa choreographs mercurial eddies of pigment at a Noh-like pace, while a hovering moon anchors the scene. For Tosa, this moon carries further implications: "I thought of the moon as a macro-world, and of the high-speed camera as visualizing a micro-world," she says. "Connecting them is very powerful."[1]

Unlike Ogata's contemplative scenes, Tosa portrays pure movement: her slow-motion pulses of bright pigments and live flowers are assaulted by flying debris—and at first it is difficult to understand, in practical terms, how the artist's sculptural colors can surge like molten glass, or how flowers

can explode. It is easy to assume this is straightforward digital manipulation, but Tosa has created the ultimate science-fair project: her productions, materials, and processes are completely real—analog, so to speak—captured in real-time. Using a high-speed digital camera, Tosa shoots at 2,000 frames per second while she imposes sound vibrations on various materials, including paints, flowers, and treacly oils. They react: paint flies and quivers; flowers burst; faceted beads soar and reflect glints of oily color. Vibration impels Tosa's intentions, both literally and figuratively: "Vibration means living things, life," says Tosa. "We are alive, we have vibration ... these concepts have beauty, and that beauty is infused with life." Tosa devised vibration-generating software and improvised, but reveals little more about the nuts and bolts of her processes, preferring that the audience focus simply on her baffling, beguiling compositions.

Tosa populates those compositions with an intriguing cast of materials—often chosen, she admits, through sheer curiosity. Paints, oil and pigments, including emulsions used in traditional *nihonga* painting, are the most obvious. Tosa then injects sly flashes of humor by introducing bubbles, weird and unidentifiable foodstuffs, sprays of beads and

quivering wire coils. Their hypnotic pavanes are accompanied by the ambient soundtrack of Japanese musician Aki-Ra Sunrise, whose echoes of Japanese gongs and drums, hints of gamelan, and inundations of thunder, waves and wind tempt viewers to construe Tosa's surreal abstractions as allegory.

This was not Tosa's first appearance in Singapore. Her video installation, *Sound of Ikebana: Four Seasons* debuted at Singapore's ArtScience Museum in 2013. Presaging the finer intricacies of *Space Flower*, the sumptuous pigments of *Ikebana* are likewise propelled by sound vibrations. In an exhibition highlight, *Ikebana* was video-mapped onto the exterior of the museum, which, designed by Moshe Safdie, suggests the shape of a white lotus or, as some argue, two cupped hands. The mapping process, recalls Tosa, "was like thinking about space ... and the [museum] building was like a planet." Whether petals or fingers, the overlay of *Sound of Ikebana* onto the gestural forms of the museum not only enlivened the Singapore skyline, it animated the museum itself. On opening night at Ikkan, the artist video-mapped *Space Flower* onto the exterior of the warehouse where Ikkan and other galleries are housed. As with Ikebana, the video

mapping not only charged the works with an expansive energy, the process rewrote the character and texture of the surrounding industrial complex. "The environment not only changes these works," says Tosa, "we can also rewrite architecture and make it move by adding these aesthetic elements ... this makes it somehow organic. This is image architecture."

Naoko Tosa was born in 1961, in Fukuoka, Japan. Her early desire to be an artist was met with classic parental advice: that she find a "real job" and create art on her own time. Tosa's singular response has been to incorporate art directly into her profession as a scientist ... or perhaps she instills science into her artistic career. She began with film studies, and later turned to video; in doing so, she remarks, "It was necessary to understand technology. Then in my late twenties, I became interested in technology and started to create works utilizing computers and computer graphics." During the 1970s and 1980s, Tosa was among Japan's third generation of video artists inspired by artist and video-art pioneer Fujiko Nakaya (b.1933), known today for her ephemeral works that use fog as a sculptural medium. Nakaya was a member of

Naoko Tosa, **Space Jungle,** 2014, video (color, sound), 5 min. 33 sec., 1080 x 1920 pixels. © Naoko Tosa. Image: Courtesy of the Artist and Ikkan Gallery.

Naoko Tosa, **Moon Flower,** 2014, video (color, sound), 5 min. 24 sec., 1080 x 1920 pixels. © Naoko Tosa. Image: Courtesy of the Artist and Ikkan Gallery.
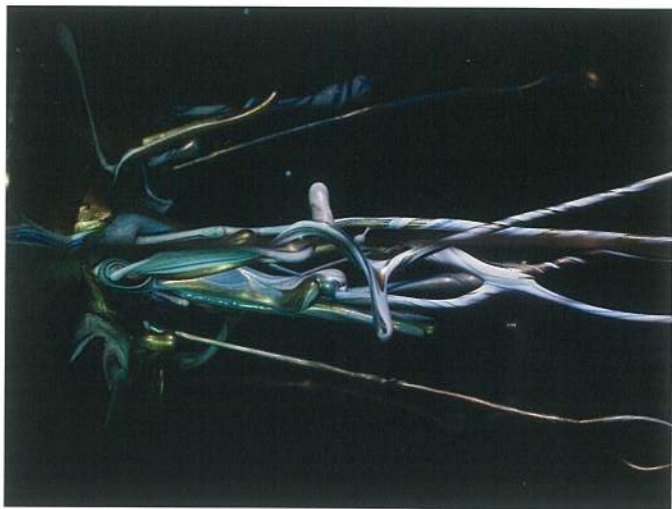
Naoko Tosa, **Sound of Ikebana: Four Seasons,** 2013, video (color, sound), 27 min. 30 sec., 1920 x 1200 pixels. © Naoko Tosa. Image: Courtesy of the Artist and Ikkan Gallery.

the seminal group Experiments in Art and Technology (EAT), which fostered collaborations between the arts and technology. In 1972, Nakaya co-founded Japan's first video-art collective; in 1980, her Gallery SCAN promoted and inspired young video artists, including Tosa. At the same time, Tosa studied and worked in computer graphics and design production; she earned an engineering PhD. in Art and Technology, and currently teaches media art at Kyoto University's Academic Center for Computing and Media Studies.

As artist, scientist, and educator, Tosa encounters new, often unforeseen, directions in her practice. When asked how research and teaching have inspired her artistic practice, and how in turn that practice influences her scientific inquiries, Tosa sees no distinction among the disciplines. To teach, she says, "means to express explicitly what I have in my mind with words. What I feel unconsciously can be changed into my thoughts and style, and so teaching clarifies my basic artistic concepts." Early on, Tosa considered ways in which she could integrate the physical, analog world with the digital realm to create new forms of art, using technology as her medium. "My art comes from my deep desire to create something new," she says, "and this is not something rational. Usually those working in scientific areas carry out their work and experiments based on reason, but this can sometimes limit them. In my art

practice, there are no such limits, and this leads me to new creations and discoveries. When I started to develop *Sound of Ikebana,* for example, no researchers or engineers anticipated that I could create such fantastic liquid forms."

Given the kinetic character that underlies Tosa's video practice, it is unsurprising that, as a young artist, she was drawn to the works of kinetic and video artist Katsuhiro Yamaguchi (b.1928). Yamaguchi's collective, Jikken Kobo, spearheaded the emergence of media art in postwar Japan, and was focused on incorporating technology into art. Yet Tosa has never felt the temptation to experiment with three-dimensional kinetic sculpture: "I'm more interested in *images*," she says. Another inspiration, Tosa adds, was experimental video artist and filmmaker Toshio Matsumoto (b.1932), whose technology-infused works merged the avant-garde with documentary. Possibly her greatest inspiration, however, has been Nam June Paik (1932–2006), whose

work negotiates connections between art and media, between technology and thought—and, Tosa points out, between East and West. She laughingly contrasts the late artist to Rudyard Kipling (1865–1936), who wrote that " '... east is east and west is west, and never the twain shall meet.' " Tosa rejects this rigid notion of explicit, preconceived boundaries and, like Paik, clearly shares the late artist's conviction, "our life is half natural and half technological." It is through the process of "cultural computing," Tosa believes, that such dissimilar perceptions can be mediated into new art forms.

Tosa coined the term "cultural computing" in 2003, which can be defined as utilizing computing technologies to explore the human experience. More than this, however, cultural computing is "a method of interactive expression for experiencing cultural understanding," as Tosa has written. The world's many distinct contemporary cultures, dissimilar and often opaque to each other, share a common primal unconscious. This commonality was obscured, Babellike, ages ago; but "cultural computing methods," Tosa says, "enable us to model and structure the deepest essentials of culture [such as] sensitivity, intuition, and racial memory." Tosa has long pioneered this philosophical and conceptual field; in Kyoto in 2011, she spearheaded the
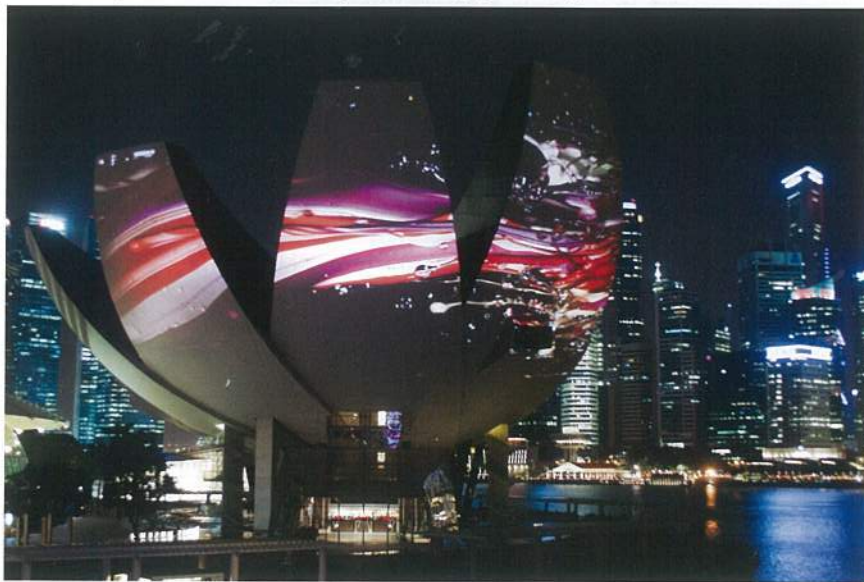
Video-mapping of *Sound of Ikebana* at ArtScience Museum, Singapore. Image: Courtesy of the Artist.

International Conference on Culture and Computing, whose varied topics explored cultural computing in terms of intercultural art and media, linguistics, communications, and digital aesthetic and information technologies.

Similar to cloud computing, Tosa continues, cultural computing is a platform to access and link the common structures, grammars and symbols that lie at the core of our shared global unconscious. Revealing and sharing these through the process of creative connectivity results in "new forms of art." While a fellow at MIT's Center for Advanced Visual Studies (CAVS) (2002–2004), Tosa created ZENetic Computer (2003), an interactive computer program *cum* digital-sculpture installation that allowed users to generate a virtual, Zen-inspired garden by manipulating ancient Japanese cultural metaphors and linguistic symbolism which Tosa describes as "components of the Japanese unconscious."

ZENetic Computer referenced the Sansui school of Japanese ink painting, whose austerity and integration of white space is associated with Zen. Based on the tenet that Zen provokes the unconscious in order to "wake up" the inner self, Tosa programmed paradoxical Zen *koans* to "provoke" Western viewers into experiencing fragments of "ambiguous connotations," in order to construct their own intuitive Sansui landscapes. In other words, as the artist explains, "I tried to visualize the process of how the unconscious mind approaches enlightenment in Zen." Themes related to Zen and to Japanese culture recur throughout Tosa's works. In her exhibition *Sanctuary* (2012), held in Kyoto, the artist explored the intrinsic silence and dynamism of Zen and Shintoism through large-scale photographic images. Included in this exhibit were two large digital prints, *Power* and *Infinity* that reconceived classical Zen gardens as mirrored, virtual dreamscapes. Another work was a photographic installation of traditional *fusuma* sliding doors covered in mannerist swathes of cloud, foreshadowing the propulsive energies in *Ikebana* and *Space Flower*.

What provoked the artist's own enlightened leap from Zen and ascetic Sansui ink painting to the opulence of Rimpa? "Japanese culture is bi-polar. It examines and reacts to things in two ways," says Tosa. "There is the *wabi-sabi* aesthetic, where simplicity is beauty. Yet we also have gold and shining Rimpa, from a different time and place." While Zen-related art is based on sim-

Naoko Tosa, **The Art of ZEN** (projection view), 2004–2010, screen, rock garden, calligraphy, 2 computer, speaker, mixer, 300 x 600 x 400 cm.

plicity, she continues, "I have come to understand that the elements of Rimpa, with its gorgeousness and colors, exist within the basic concept of Zen. I am trying here to realize an alternative visualization of Zen, based on Rimpa concepts." The Rimpa-sparked imagery in *Space Flower* may thus be construed as an avatar of minimalist Sansui: both styles depict, not actual landscapes, but rather, imagined scenery.

Tosa the scientist formulated chaos algorithms to run the intuitive sensibility of ZENetic Computer; and while the term

Naoko Tosa, **ZENetic computer.**

Naoko Tosa, **Sansui Ink Painting,** 2010, iPhone app., 11.5 x 5.8 x 0.9 cm. Images: Courtesy of the Artist.

may not translate directly from computer programming to visual aesthetics, chaos, and its manifestations, are arguably the impetus behind her conceptual practice. Tosa's sound vibrations disrupt structural surfaces in random, unpredictable ways: "I can control color combinations," says Tosa, "I can control the use of materials such as flowers, plants, etc. But their shapes I cannot control. This is based on chaotic physical phenomenon ... and here is the actual beauty." Cultural computing applies here, she continues, both consciously and unconsciously. For example, she makes conscious choices about her Rimpa-esque materials; but her editing is guided by unconscious—and very personal—connections with Japanese culture, as she follows "a storytelling method reflecting ... symbols of emotion, consciousness, memory." And so in Tosa's final, polished syntax—what she refers to as a "time-line"—viewers are immersed in the artist's intimate cultural perspective, which might allude to roguish mythical spirits, or to the rhythm of festival fireworks, or to the tortuous writhing of *butoh*, or perhaps to the disquiet inferred in the arrogant sweep of a sleeve in *Kabuki*. These time-lines unfold like splintered *haiku*: *Space Flower* portrays a ruptured iris; pink shards of a shattered rose; petals drowned in gold. The tumultuous mythical persona in *Thunder God* swells in pearlescent green wrath before a half-moon; gilded filaments pirouette and beckon. Bombarded by these abstractions, the viewer's unconscious awakens to confusion—then ascribes singular new meanings to them.

The artist writes: "Coupled

with the subconscious effort exerted to link fragmentary stories, these user-interactions decrease the gap between our daily self and our hidden self. This process of bringing our selves together is called MA-Interaction; *ma* is a Japanese concept that stresses the ephemeral quality of experience."

Tosa inscribes this "ephemeral quality of experience" into her science and her art; her works, both scientific and artistic, hover between form and emptiness, movement and rest. Ever curious, always the scientist, Tosa the artist experiments with ambiguous shreds of meaning that resolve into unexpected, vivid tales of the imagination—or, as Tosa would have it, new forms of art. "I always see new surprises," she says. "I could never have imagined such beauty." Δ

Naoko Tosa, Power (from the *Sanctuary* series), 2012, Giclee print, 72.7 x 103 cm.© Naoko Tosa. Image: Courtesy of the Artist.

Note:
1. From an interview conducted with the artist on September 17, 2014, at Ikkan Gallery, Singapore; and e-mail correspondence.

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Naoko Tosa, Shangri-la (from the *Sanctuary* series, for *fusuma*), 2012, photography, 185 x 360 cm. © Naoko Tosa. Image: Courtesy of the Artist.