

# Around Town: London, UK



Several recent exhibitions in London focused on Japanese artists linked to mono-ha, or 'School of Things', a movement active in Japan in the late 1960s and early '70s. Mono-ha shunned image-based representation in favour of materials in their raw states, and sought to reveal the ways in which objects shape the space around them. *Perimeter* (Entai) (1985), by Kishio Suga, one of mono-ha's founding members, was installed in a brightly lit basement gallery at Blain|Southern. A large, three-sided sculpture that can be adapted in relation to its indoor or outdoor surroundings, *Perimeter* is composed of 15 upright weathered stones with peaked tops, some marked by their quarrying and others showing traces of whitewash, linked by assorted lengths of wood with irregular profiles. The simplicity of *Perimeter*'s materials and its enclosing shape evoked rural surroundings and improvised architecture, somewhat at odds with the polished gallery setting. In an adjacent corridor, visitors encountered *Plural and Buried* (Fukusenka) (2007), a plywood relief with circular and oval craters revealing the different woods that had been laminated together. Nearby, four works – with titles such as *Divided Space* (Babun) and *Enclosed Space* (Kaikō) (both 1980) – made of folded pieces of paper bore grids and lines drawn in black pencil, echoed by runs of tiny perforations along which the sheets had, in places, been torn and folded.

A few streets away, across both gallery spaces, Stephen Friedman showed works by Jirō Takamatsu, who taught mono-ha

artists including Suga at Tokyo's Tama Art University between 1968–72. A founding member, with Genpei Akasegawa and Natsuyuki Nakanishi, of the collective Hi-Red Center, whose fluxus-style happenings included creating personalized nuclear fallout shelters for each of the group's members, Takamatsu later embarked on a solo career committed to the deconstruction of illusionistic space through drawing, painting and sculpture. In the first gallery, sculptures from his 1970s 'Compound' series, in which iron and brass rods and volumes seem to be precariously balanced, were shown alongside works on paper from his 'Frame' and 'Space in Two Dimensions' series (late 1970s–80s). Across the street, Takamatsu's works were brought together with furniture by designer Shiro Kuramata – a pairing inspired by their 1967 collaboration on the interior of a Tokyo restaurant.

In Takamatsu's *Three Shadows of a Man* (1997), three grey silhouettes of a smoking figure splay out on a white background from a pair of footprints, left unpainted. Takamatsu saw his 'Shadow' works, a series he started in the early 1960s and returned to towards the end of his life, as 'devices to generate absence' via the visualization of a highly ephemeral phenomenon. There is no clear light source for the shadows, the footprints are negative space and the composition is shrouded in ambiguity. The shadows suggest movement and are arranged like the spindles of a turning wheel or a tilted peace symbol. They recall the visual imprints of people and furniture cast on walls and floors in Hiroshima when the atom bomb was dropped in 1945. The work challenges our confidence in what we are seeing. It faced Kuramata's *Glass Chair* (1976), whose seemingly levitating planes are joined by a state-of-the-art glue used by the designer in the 1970s, and a pair of his acrylic *Feather Stools* (1990): squat, trapezoid blocks of clear resin in which colourful feathers are frozen in the act of falling.

At White Rainbow, a gallery dedicated to bringing contemporary Japanese art to London (where I curated an exhibition in

spring 2015), 'Index I' comprised photographs by Shigeo Anzai, who documented seminal exhibitions in the history of mono-ha, including the 10th Tokyo Biennale, titled 'Between Man and Matter', in 1970. The biennale was heavily influenced by Harald Szeemann's landmark 1969 show, 'When Attitudes Become Form', which had brought together post-minimal American art with European movements such as arte povera and conceptual art – although nothing from Japan. Thanks to his command of English, Anzai was hired by the biennale to assist Carl Andre, Daniel Buren and Richard Serra. Korean artist Lee Ufan, a key mono-ha figure, encouraged Anzai to photograph artists as they created ambitious works that often involved ephemeral processes, such as Ufan's block of ice, which melted to settle the stones it contained in their final resting positions, a work documented in Anzai's *Lee U-Fan*, Tamura Gallery, Tokyo January 21, 1970 (1970/2015). Tamura Gallery, an important platform for mono-ha, features in a number of the 50 or so black and white photographs included in 'Index I', as do the studios of artists including Takamatsu and atmospheric views of works by Suga, including a precursor to *Perimeter* (Entai). Shot with a hand-held camera, the images convey a sense of privileged access and intimacy; artists with their backs to the camera are captured mid-movement, whereas out-of-hours installation shots are devoid of human presence, revealing the relationship between objects and spaces that was so central to mono-ha.

Concurrent with these shows were a number of other exhibitions of postwar Japanese art including Tetsumi Kudo's colourful post-atomic, gender- and species-fluid sculptures at Hauser & Wirth and Keiichi Tanaami's video animations in Tate Modern's survey 'The World Goes Pop'. All of this helps furnish a story of post-war Japanese art at a time when its interest to private collectors in the West has also been increasing.

Developed in reaction to the industrialization of Japan following World War II and the increasing influence of Western art history, mono-ha was one of the country's first critically engaged art movements; its radical rejection of modern technology is still resonant in Japan today. In helping to develop a uniquely Japanese modern art, mono-ha also performed a kind of recursive loop that tied it back to some traditional aesthetic elements, as with the pastoral minimalism of *Perimeter* or the grid structures of Suga's perforated and folded paper works, which recall the simple elegance of typical Japanese architecture. Although now several decades old, it's an approach that may yet have something to offer, presaging a current need for a more ethical and sustainable alternative to our ever-accelerating visual culture.

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