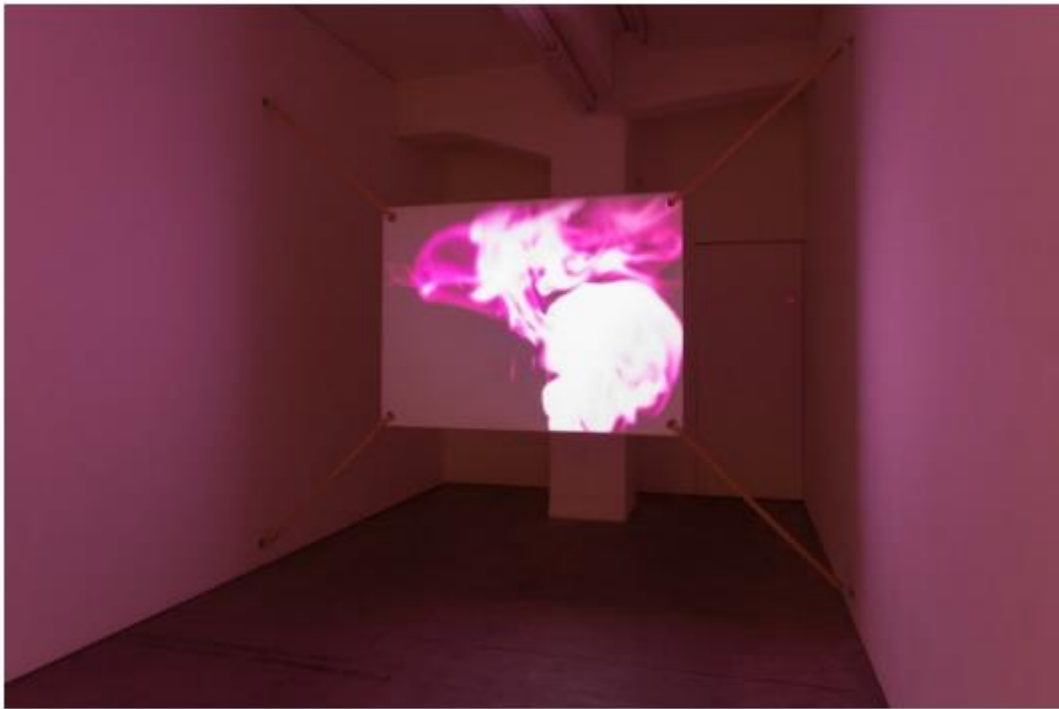


Forbes^{JAPAN}

Mika Tajima



Human Synth, 2017. Courtesy Mika Tajima and TARO NASU.

Takashi Murakami, Yayoi Kusama, and Yoshitomo Nara are not the only Japanese artists to find an audience on the global stage. While the number remains small overall, there has been a gradual increase in the number of Japanese artists receiving focus abroad. One of those artists is Mika Tajima. Born in America to Japanese parents, we wanted to find out how her identity is reflected in her work and what message, if any, she has for artists who want to tackle the challenge of exhibiting abroad. The interview was conducted on site by Yuri "Yureeka" Yasuda, herself raised in New York and currently active as an entrepreneur and art collector.

What was it like for you growing up?

Both my parents were Japanese students who had moved to the US for graduate school. I was born in Los Angeles and grew up in Austin, Texas. It was rare to see other Japanese in town, so I always felt like there was something different about me. I had a desire to fit in, but that's something that all children feel. Because of my parents' work and the fact that they traveled around the world a lot, I felt from the time I was a child that the world wasn't so small. I was proud of the fact that I knew about both America and Japan. My mother has told me that from the moment I picked up a pencil, I started drawing - circles, squares, triangles and other shapes. From what I'm told, I was determined to become an artist even back then. My parents did take me to a lot of art exhibitions, but

not as many as I've taken my own daughter. They also took me to a lot of concerts.

Is the music you listened to as a child reflected in your work?

Absolutely. My work is based on ideas that I develop through research. That approach is something I inherited from my parents.

I'm a fan of what I consider to be your elegant, yet edgy canvases. What is on your mind when you create a piece like Negative Entropy, for example?

The ideas for those pieces come from Physics. I've been creating them for eight years, since 2010. I only make about ten pieces a year, but quite a lot of them have ended up being works from that series. I consider them to be a kind of "acoustic portrait".

Tom Hill (a billionaire who is scheduled to open a museum in NYC this Fall) has also used that term to describe them. When I met him in Beijing, he talked about how much he admired your work. It was then that I realized that you must have fans all over the world and wanted the chance to talk to you. What sort of process goes into creating your works, from the Negative Entropy series and otherwise?

The first thing I do is take photos and record sounds in a lot of different locations. One of the first places I did that was at a textile factory, one where they still used traditional means that haven't been overcome by contemporary technology. In doing that, I realized that all of the industries that make up the world we live in today began from textile plants.

How did you settle on the idea of recording sounds and then capturing them as a canvas? This was the first time I had seen such a technique. How does that relate to textiles?

I did a project at a studio in Philadelphia called "The Fabric Workshop". The idea was born then. Industry, machinery, and a lot of other elements have had a big influence on my practice. I also spend a lot of time contemplating those experiences around us which are borne from our sensory organs. That means the sensory experiences we gain by interacting with architecture or letting our minds wander over the overwhelming amount of light which travels through space. It was in that context that I began taking a great interest in sound. Sound is something you can't touch, but I wanted to grasp it in some way.

These days, the fusion of sensors and technology has become second nature to us, but when you think about it, our own senses operate in a very analog way.

While not quite irreconcilable, there is a subtle relationship between the material and immaterial that is quite

ephemeral. For me, sensory elements are those things that are buried within the history of technology and that will point us toward the future.

It's like carving history into sound waves. You're able to retain the present moment as a work of art.

Yes, it's like taking a snapshot of "now". It's the sense that, at this very moment, technology has already aged. In terms of how they freeze the moment and capture it as an image, I am fond of portraits for the same reason.

How do you go about portraying something like sound, which is colorless?

After making the audio recording, I use a special program that realizes the sound as a visual image. The actual image of the sound waves emerges only in black and white. I then go about adding color, as if I were applying a digital filter. After that, I send the results to a textile plant where they weave together the different layers in loops. The amount of information that is in each piece sometimes increases and sometimes is scraped away.

Like a personification of communication.

When I was thinking about all the different types of translation there are, from text to interviews, videos, paintings... it seemed to me that what travels through all these mediums is not human. It's some kind of essence. When 'translation' is carried out multiple times, there are things that are amplified and things that disappear in the space between the woven threads. That is why I love weaving as a metaphor. The resulting fabric contains hidden messages.

How do you decide where to record the audio?

I always choose somewhere different. Some of the places I consider are very private spaces, so it can be difficult (laughs). For that reason, I have a network I use to search for new spots. In Japan, I recorded sound at a Toyota factory. That's when I learned that Toyota began as a textile plant. That made me very happy. They let me record a lot of different sounds.

Has living in New York added to your imagination or had other influence? Have you ever considered working from Japan as an artist?

People's identities are formed from their experiences and behavior. Since I was born and raised in America, I think I am very American. I can't help seeking out the more flamboyant kinds of inspiration that can only be found in New York and it's also the center of the art world, so that's why I choose to live here. My parents were against it, but I actually wanted to go to university in New York as well. I wanted to be in close proximity to the exhibitions, museums and artists that I had begun to long for. Every culture and language can be found in New York and I can interact with those as an artist. In Japan, I'm not confident that I could fully communicate in Japanese and I've

gotten too used to things here... I do think about spending more time in Japan but it would be difficult for me to be based there.

I travel abroad a lot, but I've lived in Japan for more than 20 years. As such, I have a subjective view of Japanese art. There are a lot of unique and very creative people, but to be honest, there's not much that inspires me or makes me feel more creative. Do you think people with ambition should leave Japan?

A lot of Japanese leave for abroad, but I get the impression that their desire to compete is not that strong. That's probably because there are a lot of ways to be creative in Japan other than just art -- things like architecture, food, fashion, and literature. American architecture and fashion are not that strong, but art here is at an overwhelmingly high level.

What impressions do you have when you travel to Japan?

I always fall in love with Ryokan. When I visit a ryokan, I find it mysterious how they know that I've arrived. The smells, temperature, and atmosphere are all perfect. Even if the environment changes, the perfection of that space does not. It really resonates with me. And I think that, in and of itself, is art.

Japanese possess that level of sensitivity. So why do you think there aren't more Japanese artists?

Tradition may be to blame. I've never really experienced Japanese education, but I get the feeling that it is based more on older culture than newer things. In terms of culture or art, I imagine that people are only exposed to those older things. It's not just education, though. There aren't many collectors in Japan who can provide support to artists, either. In the west, it is normal for people, from childhood on, to see artworks in their home or purchase artworks themselves. That's not true in Japan. A culture of collecting art has to be cultivated. That will take time. With that said, Japanese shouldn't consider success in the west or moving abroad as the only measure of success. They should also think about the things that only Japanese living in Japan can do.

It's important to begin from our own roots. Do you have any message for Japanese artists who are struggling with their career direction?

I think knowing what is happening in the world will enable them to be more creative. I also think they should take advantage of any opportunities they have to go to graduate school or hold exhibitions abroad. It's also important for them to find a like-minded community. My studio is in Brooklyn. Artists in Brooklyn have formed their own community. They both collect and create art. This creates an ecosystem for higher culture. Sometimes you get new ideas just from encountering that sort of community. My previous studio was once a textile plant and looking back, I'm glad I chose somewhere that possessed the same energy as my work. History and inspiration provide the bridge between the artworks of the past and future.