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# Q1 \ MAGAZINE

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## MIYA ANDO ISSUE (NO-9)

by Jennifer Chiu and Leonard Fong in Interview

After starting and restarting many attempts at conveying my illuminating conversation with Miya Ando, I always came back to how we ended our conversation.

As we wrapped up the interview, I left Ando with a quote from an article I had read recently. I thought of it all the while she spoke:

*If, however, the alienation that women and other Others often experience can be painful, it can also be liberating. It interposes a primal question mark between feeling and form, and it can kick off a lifelong quest to find a form that fits and...a certain looseness and play in one's choice of form at any given moment. There's a doubt, a shadow, a friction between the inner world and...the exterior container. That shadow between feeling and form, which may begin in gender, releases artistic energy all one's life. The paper is always torn, the eyes always peer out from within borrowed shapes. — Stacey D'Erasmio*

Interview by Jennifer Chiu  
Photographs by Leonard Fong



### The Borrowed Shapes

childhood \ family \ physical spaces \ the natural world \ Buddhism \ hippies

If you look up 'Miya Ando' you'll find a profile of a Japanese American artist defined by her heritage. She was born in Santa Cruz, California and at just a month old, moved to Okayama, Japan to live with her family inside a Buddhist Temple—one where her grandfather was head priest.

*“Some of my very earliest memories are in my house in the temple in Japan. It’s unusual to be in a family where your grandfather is a Buddhist priest and your family and your religion are so interconnected.*

*My father was Russian American so I’m American and Japanese and I was raised in Asia and California. I don’t really feel like I’m Japanese, I don’t really feel like I’m American. I really consider myself a hybrid. I have a lot of Japanese influence because I speak Japanese with my mom and I spent a significant time with the Japanese side of my family.*

*I came back to America, to Santa Cruz, at 5 or 6 years old. There are three-hundred-foot tall redwood trees, the cliffs and the ocean— there’s something really mystical and magical that happens there. It’s like being on the edge.*

*My parents were hippies. We didn’t watch TV, my sister and I. I just remember so much of my childhood was making things. We had film, a potter’s wheel and paint. I lived off the grid in Santa Cruz. We had a generator and it was really, really rural. In Japanese there’s a word—when I was growing up, my parents and people around me used to always say that I was ‘kiyou’, which is really good with my hands. I could make little things and tie little things. I think that is just part of the way that my intellect works now. It’s a part of my playing and thinking and relaxing and just my way of working things out.”*



### A Quest to Find a Form

swords \ iconography \ inside the mask \ metal \ the language of light

An often cited and irresistible fact about Ando is that before her family turned to Buddhist priesthood, they were Japanese swordsmiths. Though she has chosen metal as her medium, we should be clear: *she doesn’t make swords.*

Ando’s journey towards metal began with the love of making; it wove itself through her fascination with religious iconography and her need to connect with familial history. Metal cut right to the heart of her desire to express that which is difficult to capture.

*“Once I really started to think about what I wanted to do, making things was really a natural thing for me. I went to school to study Buddhist iconography and the canon of how visual communication has been put forth, especially this didactic iconography that communicates these really beautiful messages. Things that are communicated in religion are special; you don’t even have to be able to read to get these messages. I did my undergraduate at UC Berkeley and went to Yale for grad school. I left my masters program at Yale and I moved back to Japan to study metal smithing.*

*I’ve tried a lot of different mediums. I’ve done stone, paint, oil—I did a lot of blacksmithing. I did a bunch of things. But when I started welding, I had sort of... I don’t want to call it an epiphany but I was in this dark, dark helmet inside of a welding mask and I said,*

***“Okay, this is really captivating.”***

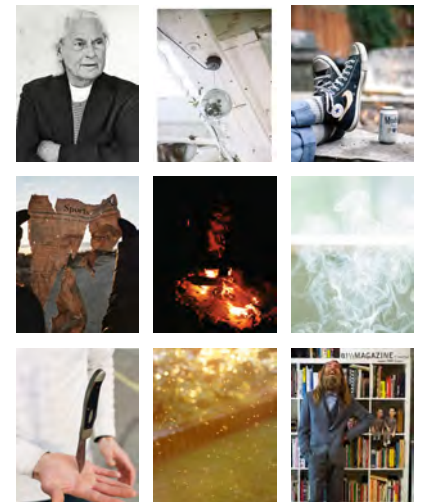
*It was a way for me to connect with my Japanese heritage. As a mixed person you look for things, ways to connect and make harmony out of disparate things.*

*I remained working with metal because I like the language of light. I don’t know of any other material that redirects light the way metal does. You can paint something metallic and it does not act like metal; it has its own nature. I’m most interested, in my art practice, in discussing paradox and contradiction. The material choices that I make are part of that discussion and part of that vocabulary.”*



NEIGHBOUR

### MAGAZINE ARCHIVE





## A Primal Question Mark

**contradiction \ ephemerality \ connectivity \ the moment**

For Ando, her material choice and career-long commitment to mastering the visual language of light reflects a deep desire to express something so universal that it achieves transcendence.

*"I find metal to be a metaphor: its very strong, it's very permanent. But my interest has been in communicating impermanence and recognizing that all things are ephemeral in life. My work is about the human condition, it's about something that has to do with our experience with nature, the way that we spend our lives while we're here. It's a fleeting experience. The recognition that all things are fleeting —there's beauty in that. There's sadness, and it can be terrifying.*

*Ultimately this idea that all things are ephemeral brings you to a discussion about time and temporality and moments. There's something that fascinates me about these moments where you become aware of the moment.*

*I think that there's something about interconnectivity that really attracts me. This is a force of nature that affects all things and all beings. I have an interest in finding things that connect, not in things that separate."*

## CONTEMPORARY (ISSUE NO-9)

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 MARTEN ELDER  
 INGO MAURER  
 ZIOXLA  
 L'OISEAU DE PARADIS  
 ARIK ROPER  
 HIS CLOSET: Matthew Burwell  
 RACHEL CATTLE & STEVE RICHARDS  
 TOM DIXON  
 HER CLOSET: Jennifer Mackay  
 MIYA ANDO  
 BaseRange- Marie-Louise Mogensen  
 DOUG JOHNSTON  
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 AN TE LIU  
 JIM MANGAN  
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 Beth Richards (4)  
 Bree Apperley (1)  
 Caine Heintzman (7)  
 Charlie Engman (1)  
 Chris Taylor (2)  
 Colin Leaman (1)  
 Denise Schatz (1)  
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 Hanna Terese Nilsson (1)  
 Hasisi Park (1)  
 Hell Beelzbub (10)  
 Jabari Jordan-Walker (3)  
 James Turnley (1)  
 Jan Pfeiffer (1)  
 Jeff O'Brien (3)  
 jennifer chiu (1)  
 Jennifer Latour (3)  
 Jennilee Marigomen (25)  
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 Jessica Williams (1)  
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Miya Ando: *Aurora*. Mead Carney Fine Art. Photo courtesy of Miya Ando.

### **A Form that Fits flames / patinas / black steel / a million shades of gray / colour**

The pieces from Ando's first public showing in 2003 were made in a San Francisco naval shipyard called Hunter's Point. It was a gigantic, windowless metal frame warehouse filled with professional metal workers. Amongst them was Ando, a young female artist fabricating giant panels of hot rolled black steel (Ando's favourite material) and painting them with lacquer, pigment and complicated chemical patinas that she herself had concocted.

After only the first half of the day, during that first open studio, she sold every one of her pieces.

*"I was terrified [about showing]! Everyone said the same thing: "What is this? I've never seen anything like this!" Because basically they were 2 dimensional paintings. I had changed the colour of the steel with torches and flames and patinas and I just... I knew it was unusual. I guess part of my nature is that I have a pioneering approach because I see something and I try to figure out a manner to execute.*

*I love metal, I love the way that it can look a thousand different ways. It really captured me, and it still really has me. Steel metal goes from black to gray and there are a million shades of gray. There's this quietness about gray. I did grayscale work for eight years straight. There was not one colour in my work until maybe a few years ago. When I was younger and dumber, I said "I will never work with colour because I find that working with gray is very difficult" and I thought I would spend, actually this still applies—I think I will spend my entire career studying shifts in gray.*

*I don't know exactly what occurred but I started looking very carefully at light and in changing light in the sky. I've been working on this project for two or three years where I record light all around the world at the same exact moment in time. I have all these webcams of skies all over the place and I take a snapshot of all these different places and compare them. I started making paintings about shifting light and colour and about colour as speed of light.*

*I did this piece for this show in London. It's a four foot square. It's about the sun just coming up into the sky. It's actually dyed aluminium, but goes from faint gold and dips into this silver colour and I thought it was the strongest piece. There was so much control and restraint and focus in making something of that nature, but it's pretty subtle [laughs]. It's barely, barely there. But that threshold between something barely there and not there, I find that there's something really sublime there. There's something really elegant about understated things.*

*I want to have this vocabulary of transformation in elements. So if you can turn something really permanent and hard and strong like a piece of metal into something that is really fleeting like a rainbow, there's a really interesting paradox. You've captured something that's not capturable.*

*Work comes from work. Every painting comes from the previous painting or group of work. Artwork is thinking. It was just a natural evolution in thought to go from spending eight years looking very carefully at subtle shifts in gray to start looking at the spectrum. Never say never. I said I would never work in aluminium but look at me now!"*

John Jones (1)  
 Johnny Burgess (1)  
 Josh Olson (1)  
 Kenta Kimura (1)  
 Kin Chan (1)  
 Koko Jubilo (3)  
 Konstantinos Mavromichalis (1)  
 Laura Vignale (5)  
 Lisa Giroday (1)  
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 Mark Hall-Patch (2)  
 Maryanne Casasanta (2)  
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 Oscar Mendoza (1)  
 Patrick Tsai (1)  
 Pia Riverola (1)  
 Rachelle Sawatsky (1)  
 Redia Soltis (38)  
 Robert Arndt (1)  
 Ryan Smith (1)  
 Saager Dilawri (1)  
 Sam Falls (1)  
 Sara Cwynar (1)  
 Scott Lewis (4)  
 Seth Fluker (3)  
 Wai Tse (1)

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## The Shadow Between Feeling and Form

missing voices \ metal kimonos \ the first novel \ grass writing

In 2011, Ando completed a commission to build two memorial sculptures commemorating the victims of 9/11. Made from thirty foot tall pieces of metal that had fallen from the World Trade Towers, Ando painstakingly polished both pieces to a mirror finish and titled them toward the sky so as to “shine light back into the world”. To build such a symbolic and historic memorial is no small feat for anyone; being chosen as female artist of a visible minority makes it that much more significant.

Ando has never felt her art to be gendered but admits that her own exploration into her identity as a woman and mixed-race individual has led her down different paths of process and material.

*“I’m very grateful when someone selects the voice of the Other that isn’t the most dominant voice, which is Caucasian in the art world. I think that it’s important to have all voices heard. Women and mixed race women are in the minority.*

*People ask me all the time for some reason how it is being a female artist and working with metal. I don’t think of metal as being gendered. I don’t think of gender first. I don’t think the poetry changes based on gender. Poetry is poetry. But I’m Eurasian, I’m a woman, so of course some pieces I have made discuss some of those things.*

*I’ve been making these steel and metal kimonos. When I turned twenty-one my grandmother made me the most beautiful long-sleeved Kimono. I took that Kimono and I made an exact replica with little plates of metal that I put together with little rings. These pieces take a really long time. It’s like armor but it almost sounds like bells when it moves because the little pieces of metal clink together.*

*When you get married you have to wear the short sleeve kimono and I thought it was so interesting and anachronistic. In our lives today we are judged by the way that we look and the way that we dress and these ideas about the roles we play. That piece for me is really an investigation of the idea of what it is to be a woman. It’s halfway between armor and a garment. The idea that we draw strength from certain things.*

*The world’s first novel was written by a woman named Murasaki Shikibu. At the time [in the 11th century] women were not allowed to study Chinese characters when the Chinese kanji were imported from China to Japan. They only taught male scholars because they thought it was too complicated for a woman. So women wrote in alphabet, in Hiragana, in this really beautiful telegraphic style called grass writing. And they got so fast at it! At the same time men were trying to incorporate Chinese characters into the Japanese alphabet and so men’s writing was actually stunted for a period of time and women’s writing flourished.*

*I’ve been doing this project with my own grass writing which I do in phosphorescence so it’s invisible in the day but at night you can see it. Pieces of that nature are the areas where I get to look at those parts of my identity a little bit more carefully.”*



## A Certain Looseness

**personal truths \ comprehension \ kokoro \ dialogue \ jump**

Living outside the proverbial box can often be an alienating experience but above all, it is a defining experience. It necessitates a constant re-examination of oneself. It forces recognition of the divides that make one person's reality different than another's. It puts into focus things outside of the frame and stirs up joys, anxieties and curiosities that agitate to be expressed.

The form comes after, the fearless exploration first.

*"We are all in a dialogue and art making is really just being part of a dialogue. I put artwork forth and they are viewed or they are collected or they are exhibited so there is that dialogue.*

*I try in earnest to put things forth that are truthful to my own self. I've found that if you can be honest with your intentions and your technique and process and why you're making work, then it's helpful in the comprehension of the work. I do think of my work as expressions of my personal truth.*

*In making things, it's also the way that I think about things so there's that connection. Art, the act of making, is when your hands, in Japanese they say your "kokoro"—that's your soul or your heart or your spirit— and then your brain—the kind of intellectual part, the conceptual part— when those three things, your hands, your head and your kokoro, are all working together then you've got an art practice, it all just flows together.*

For anyone compelled to express or create, Ando's words are reassuring.

They are a welcome reminder that art, at its core, is about connection through personal honesty. To achieve connection is to bridge the infinite abyss between one human experience and another, no matter the distance or the age. Being honest with oneself can be a vulnerable and terrifying experience, but all those who are capable of true honesty in creation, can be capable of great art.

*Like all good things, if you're not a little scared you're not doing it right. You have to be a little bit afraid! You have to just close your eyes and say a prayer and jump off the cliff. You just have to."*

You can check out recent work by Miya Ando during her solo exhibition (until November 15th) at Sundaram Tagore Gallery [here](#)

***miyaando.com***

