



# Art Radar Asia

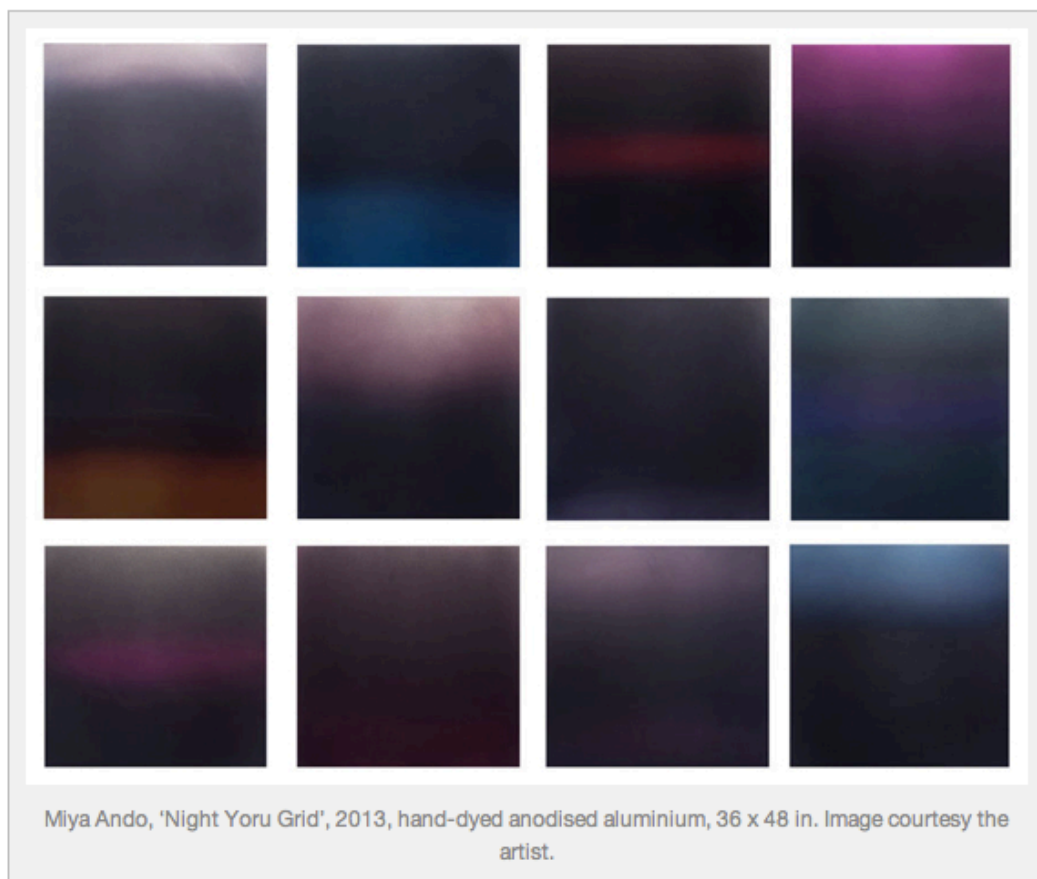
Contemporary art trends and news from Asia and beyond

## Woman of Steel: Miya Ando's solo debut in Hong Kong – interview

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### Chemistry meets art as Miya Ando transforms metal surfaces into minimal watercolour landscapes.

Brooklyn-based artist Miya Ando shares the unusual combination of traditional Japanese techniques and individual innovations that went into creating her recent body of work, displayed in her first solo exhibition "Light Metal" in Hong Kong.



Miya Ando, 'Night Yoru Grid', 2013, hand-dyed anodised aluminium, 36 x 48 in. Image courtesy the artist.

Descended from Bizen sword makers, half Japanese and half American artist **Miya Ando** grew up bilingual with two distinct cultures influencing her unusual art practice. As a child, Ando lived in a Buddhist temple in Okayama, Japan, and was raised among swordsmiths-turned-Buddhist priests. This upbringing led her to undertake a Bachelor's degree in East Asian Studies at Berkeley University (California), as well as attending Yale University to study Buddhist iconography. The artist also apprenticed with the master metalsmith Hattori Studio in Japan.

Subsequently, this background inspired Miya Ando to develop an uncommon technique and apply it to an unconventional canvas: swordsmith skills onto steel. She works primarily with light and metal, combining traditional techniques of her ancestors along with a modern industrial technique known as anodising. This process involves electroplating sapphire crystals onto metal, allowing the artist to create minimalist landscapes and abstract metallic horizons. She has received several awards such as the **Pollock-Krasner Foundation Grant** in 2012 and recently the **Bronx Museum AIM Residency** in 2013.

Ando has also produced public and private commissions in South Korea, New York, California and London, notably her **two memorial sculptures** marking the ten year anniversary of 9/11, created from 30-foot tall pieces of steel fallen from the World Trade Centre. In addition, her work has been exhibited worldwide, such as her recent exhibition curated by Nat Trotman at the **Guggenheim Museum**.

Her exhibition "**Light Metal**" at **Sundaram Tagore** Hong Kong will be on show from 13 February to 22 March 2014.

*Art Radar* interviewed Miya Ando to learn more about her combination of distinct art practices and her feelings about her Hong Kong debut.



Miya Ando, 'Ephemeral Pink', 2013, dyed pigment lacquer, resin on aluminium plate, 36 x 36 in.  
Image courtesy the artist.

### **Bridging two distant cultures into one**

**Being of Japanese origin and a descendant of Bizen sword makers, could you explain what traditional practices you use or are influenced by in your work?**

I consider myself half Japanese, half American. My mother is Japanese and my father is Caucasian. My mother's family made swords hundreds of years ago before they became Buddhist priests. I lived in a Buddhist temple with my mother's family [with] my grandmother, my grandfather and my cousins. I was very influenced by the philosophy of living in a Buddhist temple; a lot of my ideas stem from being Buddhist and living in a Buddhist temple. It's not a spiritual belief. These were the people who took care of me, so I have an emotional connection to that. I became very interested in swordsmithing and the techniques that were used by my family. Although I don't make swords, I have been very inspired and interested by their materials: steel and metal. It really started as an emotional connection. It's a way, I think now looking back, to connect with my family. As soon as I started to work with steel, it really resonated. So, I spent my adult life in the transformation of metal surfaces. This has been the underlying methodology for the paintings.



**Could you explain the combination of techniques in your artistic process?**

The reason is twofold. It is something from my family and I feel connected to that. It's also because the idea of the work, or the thesis of my work, is that everything is ephemeral. Everything is transitory: all things, all people. We share that. This is something that connects us. Everyone is having this experience and all things are having this experience. There is beauty in recognising this: the recognition that everything is ephemeral and transitory. So, I choose materials, which say "I am permanent, I'm very strong. I am a hard permanent material: I'm metal." Then I evoke the idea of the transitory quality of light. The show is all about that: light that's changing and getting dark, getting light, shifting. So the concept is expressed with the material and also with the picture.

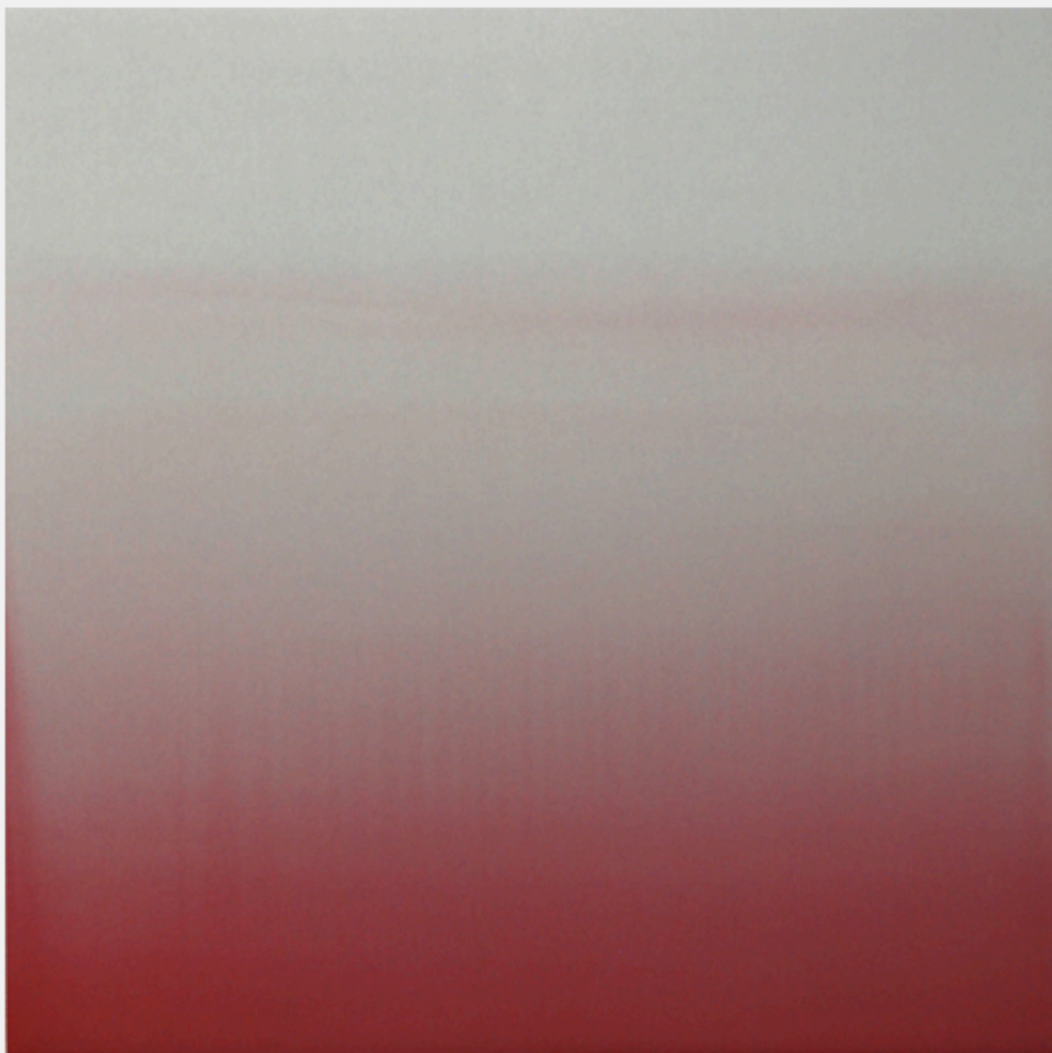
I work with a layering process. I layer colour, lacquer and chemicals. The paintings have twenty to thirty layers of different types of painting techniques on them. I also sand (and) I polish. The nature of metal is one that can be very reflective. It beautifully reflects light, it redirects light, and that's part of the vocabulary of the work. If it were just on a canvas, it wouldn't do that. So I do a lot of different types of hand-working to prepare the piece.



#### **How did you come across the anodising process?**

It was a discovery. Well, I had very bad fortune- I had a small accident, where a painting hurt my side. I was so injured I couldn't pick up a piece of steel after that. Then I had the very good fortune, after the misfortune, of sitting next to anodiser at a dinner party at Miami [Art] Basel. He said he had worked with steel [before changing to aluminium]. I love steel. I love the gray, it's very elegant, it's a very beautiful material and it's the material of my family. Aluminium just wasn't within my range of work. I had tunnel vision, focused on steel.

So I started to look very carefully at aluminium, because I could pick it up. Then I discovered there is a way to dye the material. So I embarked down the rabbit hole of dying, which I knew nothing about. I thought this was so fascinating, because with a bit of experimentation – since no one had actually used a dye to make a painting before – I thought: "this looks like a watercolour." It then became another tool to create these transformations.



Miya Ando, 'Sui Getsu Ka 7', 2011, dyed aluminium, 24 x 24 in. Image courtesy the artist.

**Is there a spiritual element to your work and if so could you explain that?**

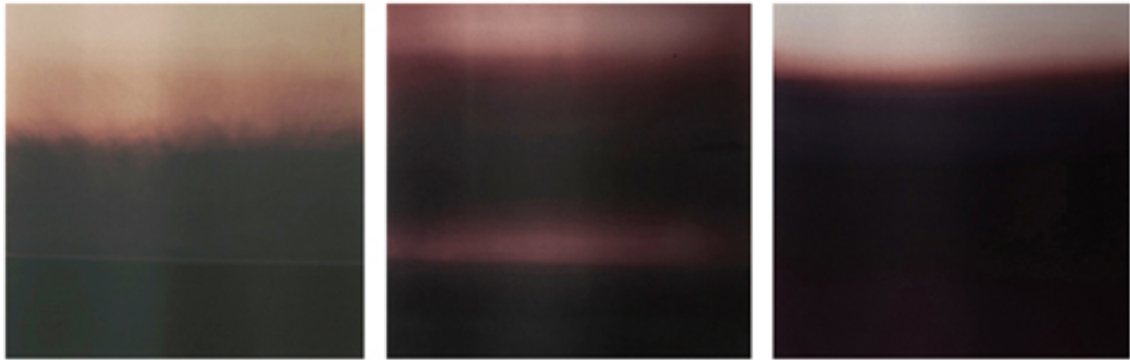
I think you could probably say that. Some of the really core concepts of the work are inspired by my philosophical interests. I think noting or recognising that everything is impermanent to me is probably a more spiritual than non-spiritual thought, even if it's not religious. It's noticing something that is a truth of the world. It also happens to be one of the maxims of Buddhist thought, because as a little girl I lived with Buddhist priests and I am Buddhist myself. I think it comes into it.

**So is your art didactic in any way?**

I would say in no way is it didactic. I think the work is abstract. The paintings are abstract. The inspiration is from my philosophical beliefs. I don't make the paintings in order to teach something philosophical.

**Is Buddhist iconography important to your work and if so how?**

In Buddhist temples you often see these deities and this imagery. There are sometimes very serene beings or sometimes more ferocious looking deities. There's a pantheon of deities, imagery and religious iconography. When I was little, I could tell these peaceful and contemplative deities were saying something. So I became very interested as a young woman in studying how things are expressed visually. I became quite fascinated by imagery, which is communicating; in my case, Buddhist imagery. And so, as an artist, I am in a dialogue with the rest of the world via my paintings. My study of iconography, and in particular Buddhist iconography, has really enhanced that notion of communication that is non-verbal. I like religious iconography because I think religious iconography has this very pure intention. It is to communicate the beliefs of that paradigm of thinking which I find fascinating.



Miya Ando, 'Sui Getsu Ka Black Red Triptych', 2013, hand-dyed anodised aluminium, 24 x 72 in. Image courtesy the artist.

**You shared in certain interviews that you play with the idea of contrast in your work, by placing impermanent elements onto permanent canvases such as steel and metal, mirroring the Ying Yang philosophy. Was this intended to reflect Buddhist ideas? Or do you have a deeper meaning by doing so?**

I'm Eurasian. My experience has been in the East and the West. I have a distinctly Asian upbringing, but I also spent a lot of time living in the United States. So, I see now, that in my art practice I take very disparate things and I put them together, creating these very harmonious pictures. I take very permanent materials and I put very impermanent imagery on there. Now that's paradoxical, but then again, I believe in trying to be truthful with oneself and who one is. There is that authenticity of transparency of "I am what I am," and I make something that is a combination of my life's experiences. I like this idea of bridges between things that wouldn't necessarily be harmonious – I find that to be one of the pillars of what I do. I don't think that has a lot to do with Buddhism.

But, I see in my art practice that I work with very ancient and very old ideas [such as] impermanence. This is something that is ages old, this idea that "everything is impermanent." But the manner in which I make things is very unusual and contemporary. The materials used in anodised aluminium are very industrial, they have not really been used in visual art as a painting. Also the techniques are new. So my mind is also a mind that loves tradition and loves ancient things and loves the heritage. Also, maybe it's because I'm also an American, I don't believe in rules. I see plates of aluminium and I think "Oh, I'd really like to see that in faint, faint, faint, faint pink!" These ideas of no rules and the freedom of taking any material and working with that as a canvas are opposites to bring together, I would say.

**Currently living in Brooklyn, New York, does the local art scene influence any processes in your art?**

I live in Manhattan and my studio is in Brooklyn. I've had a studio in many different places and I seem to make very focused, similar work. I don't know if my geographic location changes the work. I haven't seen that... I think work comes from work. I think the painting that you have finished is a thought. Making art is a visual representation of a thought. I think I have a tunnel vision consciousness. I've had this same idea of permanence, and these materials have been in my work since the very beginning. It's a constant refining of that idea as I get older in my practice.

I just did a whole series of all white paintings, and we've been under snow in New York, so maybe I am. Maybe I'm just not aware.

**Having exhibited in the US, England and Japan, have you received different reactions to your work?**

I think the context is very important. For example in Japan, they'll say "Oh, it's so zen!" But then in America they'll sometimes say "It's very minimal." Then there's also what the culture brings to it. The context changes the meaning and how the work is. But [the work] is what it is, I think.



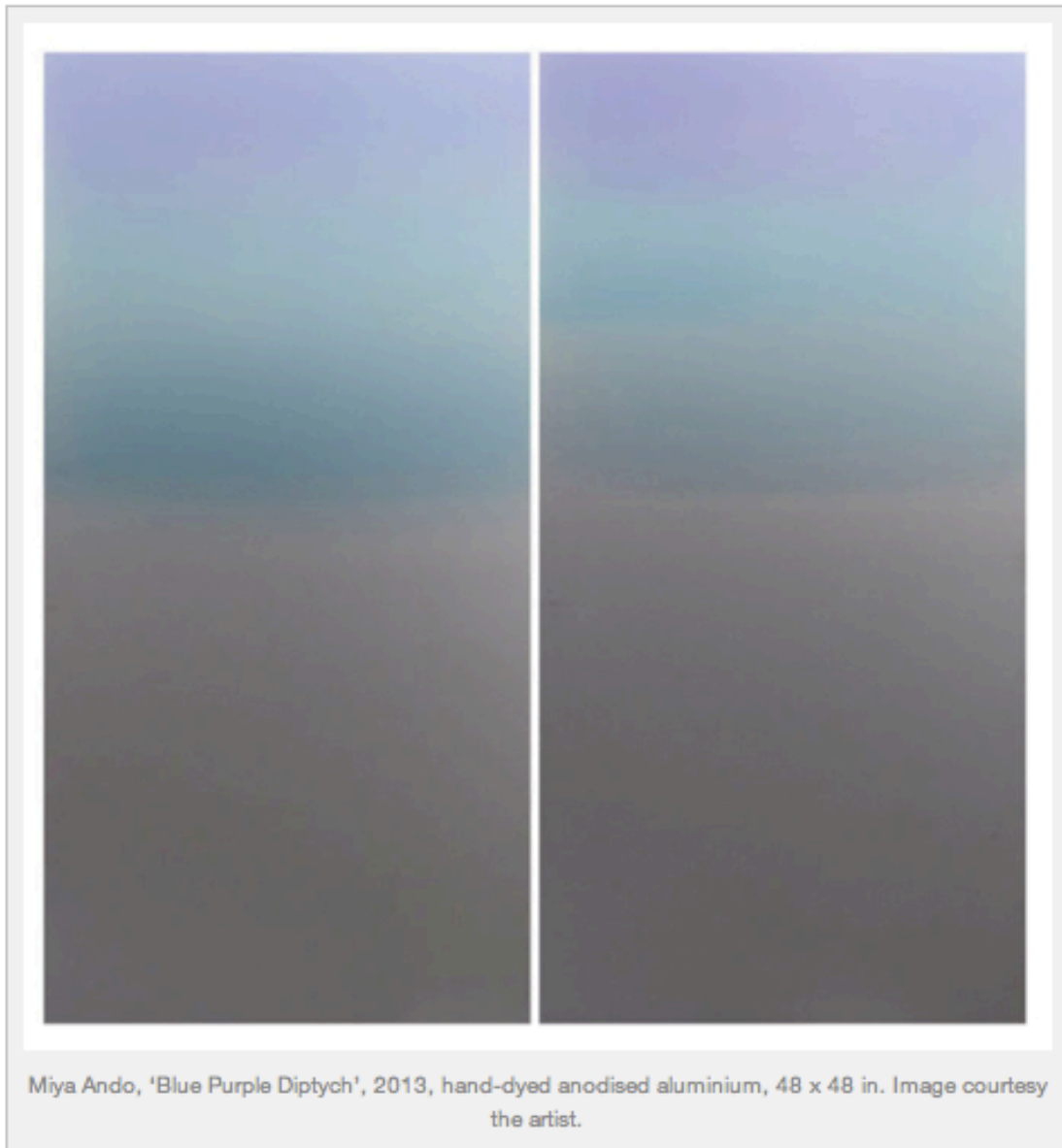
Miya Ando, 'Ephemeral Vermillion Yellow', 2013, dyed pigment lacquer, resin on aluminium plate, 36 x 36 in. Image courtesy the artist.

**This is your first solo exhibition in Hong Kong, showing at Sundaram Tagore. Do you think your work will be received differently in Hong Kong?**

I think so and the reason is because in Hong Kong, much like Japan really, there is much more of a history and a tradition of thought. So people are used to looking at imagery and things with a more philosophical nature, I think. My guess is that what people bring from their culture changes the way it looks. I hope it's received well!

**Your layering technique has now become something of a trademark. Are you planning to develop it in new directions? Do you have any plans for the future?**

I will continue to develop it, because it's really enjoyable and I'm very curious about what can happen. It's so brand new! I'm a very curious person and I like experimenting. It's play for me. There is that sense of what's going to happen. I'm in my childhood self mixing chemicals.



**Do you think the process is more important to you than the outcome through this essence of play in the work?**

I don't. I think the absolute most important [thing] is that your painting looks the way you planned. The king in this whole entire thing is that you've made something that is articulating or expressing a thought on its own. So I can have lots of playing time and developing, but this is all just in the name of developing a tool. So if I want to make a piece of steel turn from light, light pink to darker pink, I need to know how to do that. That's very complex. If I have to invent that myself, I have to play with it and see how to do that. But all of these techniques are tools to make something. They are particular to the medium. I'm a very processed-oriented person.

**Are you working on other projects now?**

I am! I'm always working! I'm happily doing a number of commission pieces. I'm doing a museum show at the moment at the **Queens Museum** in New York and so I'll be going back home and working on these different pieces.

**Claire Bouchara**