

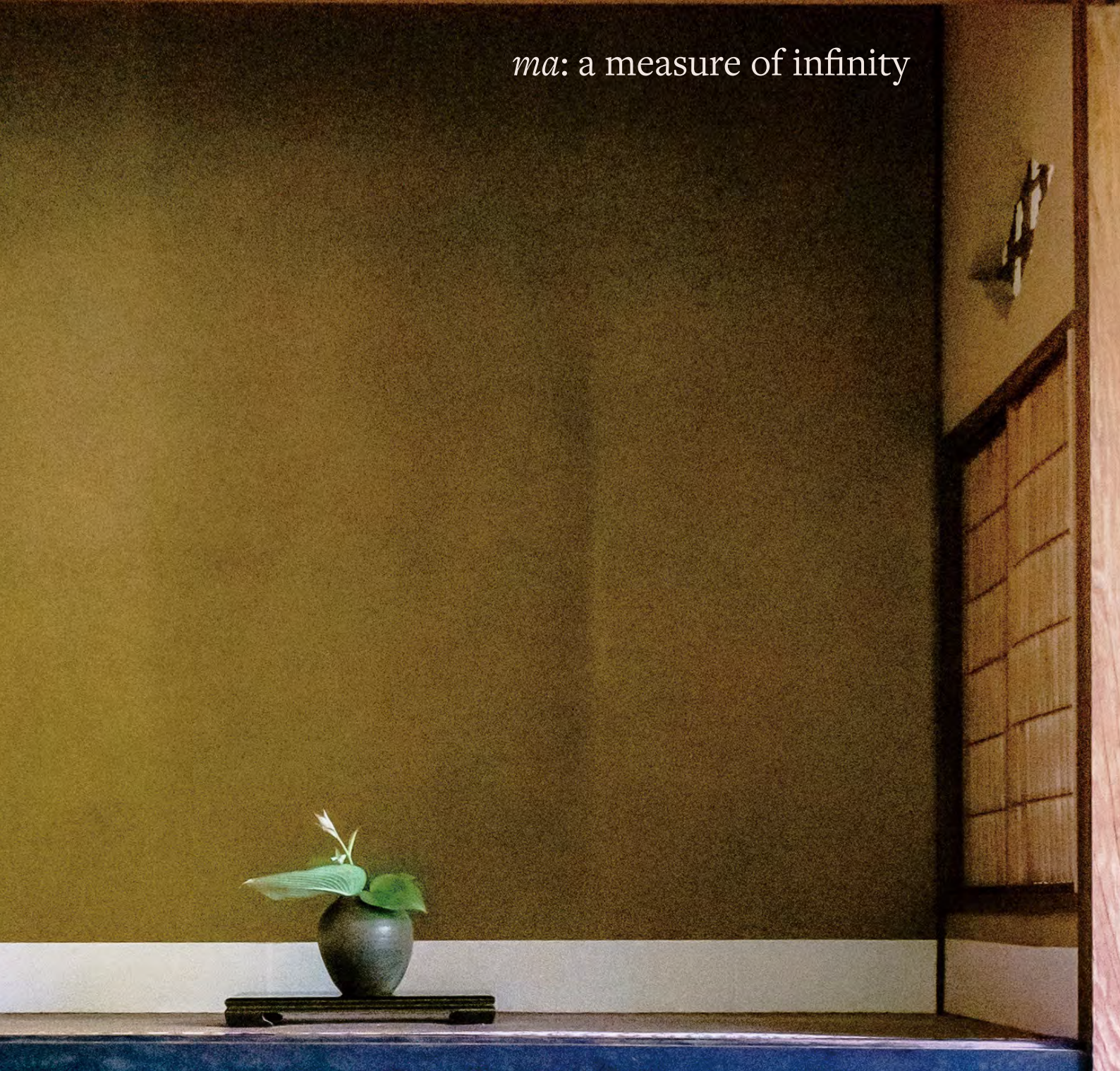
# KYOTO

JOURNAL

INSIGHTS  
FROM  
ASIA

98

*ma*: a measure of infinity





between form and emptiness







The Cathedral

LEANNE OGASAWARA INTERVIEWS ARTIST MIYA ANDO

## CONVERSATION

**A** descendent on her mother's side of Bizen sword-makers and Buddhist priests, American artist Miya Ando's childhood was spent between her family's temple in Okayama, Japan and the Californian redwood forests near Santa Cruz. Her work in metal, canvas and sculpture is deeply rooted in Buddhist philosophy and are meditations on the human experience of time, the seasons, and ephemerality. In addition to her numerous solo exhibitions, one of her large-scale works was exhibited at the 56th Venice Biennale in 2015, in the historic Museo di Palazzo Grimani. Leanne Ogasawara interviewed Miya by email, prompted by her recent exhibition at the Asia Society in Texas, 'Form is Emptiness, Emptiness is Form.'



**Leanne Ogasawara:** Miya, thank you for talking with us during these strange times of Covid-19. I think the lockdown might be easier for introverts. Are you finding this to be a fruitful time for making art?

**Miya Ando:** I'm very happy being alone all day in my studio not speaking to anyone, so that part of the lockdown I don't mind at all. I'm finding this period to be reflective and fruitful; I enjoy the quietude. I'm also very concerned about the deaths and danger.

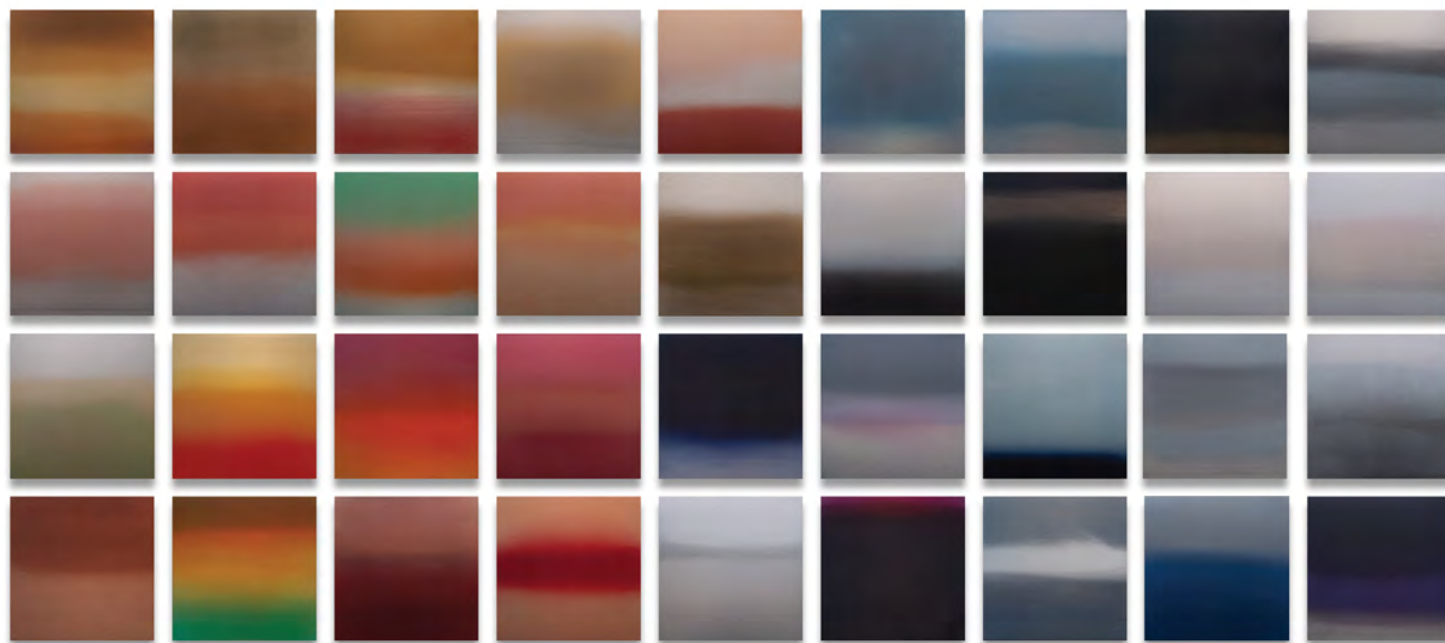
**You spent your childhood in the forests of Santa Cruz, as well as in a Buddhist temple in Japan. I wonder if you could discuss two specific works that relate to these different places?**

I made 'The Cathedral' ('The Shrine of Trees, The Sisters and the Mother') for an exhibition at The Museum of Art and History, Lancaster California in 2018. It is a homage to the Santa Cruz mountains where I grew up. I lived on twenty-five acres of redwood forest, very rural and off the grid. My father once made my sister and I a treehouse in a cathedral of redwood trees.

**What is a cathedral of redwood trees? —I've never heard that expression before.**

A naturally-occurring ring of trees is called a "cathedral." In the center is the oldest, largest tree. It drops seeds, which become seedlings and eventually large trees surround the center tree. There is a natural ring of redwood trees (200 plus feet tall) where I lived in the Santa Cruz mountains. In the center of the ring was a "mother" tree that had been struck by lightning and was charred black. I have been fascinated by the fact that within a ring of trees, if the "mother" tree suffers very serious damage the trees around it send glucose via their roots to the dying tree and keep it alive, sometimes for decades. The piece invites visitors to enter the ring of trees, created with gossamer silk chiffon panels, aiming to create a tranquil and contemplative, immersive environment.

Kisetsu (Seasons)



**California's redwood trees are a sight to behold...**

Yes. They are the largest living organisms on earth and some of the oldest. I've seen these giants sway and bow in thundering rain and during extreme storms—and yet they stand. I always thought that these trees are so wise, they've seen it all and they are majestic and elegant. I'd like to be just like them. I've also heard a redwood tree fall in a storm and the crashing sound is like no other.

**Where is your family's temple located in Japan? Which sect is it?**

My grandfather was the head priest of a Nichiren temple in Okayama. Now my cousin has taken the position.

**Is there a particular work that reflects your time there?**

I have made several works in homage to the Japanese part of my upbringing. '72 Kō' (Seasons) is a grid of 72 paintings (pigment and urethane) that I made in 2018 for an exhibition in Singapore. There are 72 seasons in the ancient Japanese calendar. When I was a child, I would watch my grandmother put on her kimonos and take careful time planning the color of her obi and various parts of the outfit.

Every decision was based upon the perfect color of the season. This acute attention and respect for nature made a huge impression on me. It felt so refined to be so aware of this type of harmony with nature.

**Could you tell us about your apprenticeship with the Hattori studio and your family's background in metal-working?**

My ancestor Ando Yoshiro Masakatsu was a swordsmith. Notably, he created a sword that is considered a national treasure of Japan. I studied as an apprentice at Hattori studio when I was a young woman, and learned about respect for materials, techniques and practices of metallurgy.



In November 2019 your solo show “Form Is Emptiness, Emptiness is Form” opened at the Asia Society in Houston. Could you tell us a little about the show?

The exhibition’s title is from the cherished Mahayana text *The Heart Sutra*, and my works evoke the idea of ephemerality through images of water and light, as well as chemical and electrical processes.

We really see your experience studying metallurgy in ‘Tides’ (*Shou Sugi Ban*). On my computer screen it seems painted, or like a photograph. What is so fascinating is that this is actually metal and wood, that has undergone a radical transformation.

The wood is reclaimed redwood from the Santa Cruz mountains. I charred it in the ancient technique of *shou sugi ban* (or *yakisugi*), which is a material that reminds me of Okayama. The Buddhist temple that I lived in as a child and also all of the houses in the area are clad in *shou sugi ban*. The traditional wood that is used is cedar (*sugi*), but in this case I selected a material that is of my other upbringing in Northern California. I’m intrigued by this material of transformation and the idea that one burns or destroys



**“My works evoke the idea of ephemerality** through images of water and light, as well as chemical and electrical processes.”

**“I’m intrigued by this material of transformation** and the idea that one burns or destroys something in order to protect oneself and one’s home.”

Tides (Shou Sugi Ban)



something in order to protect oneself and one’s home. (*Shou sugi ban* is used as a fireproofing and bug repellent in Japan). I also find the metaphor of a material undergoing intense duress and coming out stronger in the end. The composition of ‘Tides’ is inspired by tides moving in and out.

For this exhibition I was very interested in investigating the interaction of elements and their transformation as well—as a transformation in the mind. The *karesansui* garden at Ryōanji is comprised of rocks, however the imagery conjured is of the sea, the Milky Way, a tiger swimming with cubs across a body of water, all sorts of things. I find this of interest. Could a charred piece of wood evoke the tides, or perhaps, in the example of ‘Mizukagami,’ a hammered stainless sheet of metal might evoke a body of water?

**Your ‘Clouds’ are also breathtaking explorations in transformation...**

Like fire, it is another way to explore transformation and change. And though in ‘Tides,’ fire is the agent, the title reflects water. Clouds have fascinated me for a long time, I’m very interested in clouds as a perfect vocabulary for impermanence. Clouds are so evanescent, ever changing and moving. However, clouds are water and the change of state of these elements has interested me.



Above and Inset, right: Ryōanji

**Could you tell us a little about your work, ‘Ryōanji’?**

I recreated the Ryōanji garden at 1/3 scale for my exhibition. I am very interested in karesansui gardens in general, but in particular I have been mystified and captivated by Ryōanji since I was a girl. My investigation begins with the idea of Ryōanji being a *mutei* (garden of emptiness) and looking deeper into the idea of emptiness, within the context of *The Heart Sutra* was the genesis of this project. Traditionally, one may chant *The Heart Sutra* before viewing gardens in Japan and this has always struck me. My exploration of transformation is executed with materiality, changing elements (rock to a more ephemeral element: wood), charring the wood and in some ways minimizing even further the forms of the rock groupings.





**You have mentioned both Buddhism and quantum mechanics in talking about your current work. In quantum mechanics, matter and energy are constantly in flux—continuously transforming. I wonder how you came to focus on notions of time as a way to explore ephemerality? How did this evolve for you?**

I have always been interested in the idea of impermanence in Buddhist thought. Living in Okayama with my grandparents influenced me quite a bit, as impermanence and nature—the recognition of the beauty in all things being transitory was instilled in me from a young age. Looking deeper at time and temporality led me to physics and I realized the striking similarities that exist in both Buddhism and science. I have been exploring this in my work ever since.



It is so interesting. We know that the chair we are sitting on is composed of a kind of empty space. Harder to conceive of is the way form is generated from a vacuum. Or that everything that exists “is” composed of fields in a vacuum.

The *Heart Sutra*, which informed the exhibition at The Asia Society discusses this notion. “Form is emptiness and emptiness is form” speaks to the idea that all things are ephemeral. The fundamental nature of reality is that all constituent forms that make up the universe are temporary. (Buddhism and quantum physics). Since everything is in a constant state of flux, nothing has a fixed identity.

**I hear you have a show coming up in Tokyo. Could you tell us about it?**

The exhibition in Tokyo in September 2020 will be a solo show at Maki Gallery. I plan to make works that speak to the idea of *heijiyoshin* (equanimity) in the context of the pandemic and will exhibit new paintings and sculpture. The works will also be inspired by autumn, a perfect time for reflection.



**LEANNE OGASAWARA** has worked as a translator from Japanese for over twenty years, in the fields of academic translation, poetry, philosophy, and documentary film. She has been contributing to KJ for twenty years—from poetry translations (Takamura Kotaro’s Chieko Poems in KJ 39) to interviews (Kyoto artist Daniel Kelly, in KJ 91) to articles (‘Travelling Through a Painting: Dream Journey over Xiao Xiang’, KJ 47; ‘Nachi Falls’ in KJ 92, the Devotion issue). Her blog Tang Dynasty Times was the catalyst for our Silk Roads issue, KJ 74. See also her monthly column at the science and arts blog 3 Quarks Daily.

Photographs provided by Miya Ando. Photograph of Miya Ando by Yiru Chen.