

Fiber Futures: Japan's Textile Pioneers by Carol Westfall

EXHIBITION Fiber Futures: Japan's Textile Pioneers Friday, September 16 — Sunday, December 10
 Hamatani (1947-). W-Orbit, 2010. Rayon, indigo; special technique. Diameter approximately 157 in. (400 cm).

When this sumptuous feast of fibre art opened in Japan, it was double the present size. However, simple economics and the size of the galleries at Japan Society dictated the need for a somewhat reduced show. This reduction has served to make each of the remaining works look truly magnificent in relationship one to the other. There is no sense of overcrowding as each work has been meticulously hung with adequate room between the pieces. The beginning room offers the silky touch of Junichi Arai's works as the viewer slides between the edges of slit fabric. Never does a fibre show invite touch but in this case, not only is the viewer invited to touch but to actually make bodily contact with the fabric which covers the entrance door. Mr. Arai's second work is hung alone in the center of the room, again with an inviting slit in the center of the piece. In this case, the work consists of two images of a large circle. One side is silver and the other is gold. These works are the product of Mr. Arai's meticulous research into the marriage of metallics and fabrics. Junichi Arai, Flame-resistant shop curtain, 2005. Akiko Kumazawa, Daisy Chain, 2010. Shigeo Kubota, Shape of Red I, 2009. Installation photo by Richard Goodbody.

Kiyomi Iwata's elegant gold leaf and silk boxes cascade down one wall while next to it, a recent work in kibiso, a by product of silk production, marks a new path for this artist to explore.

Brooklyn and Japan based artist designer Yuh Okano introduced her three shibori panels and a single work incorporating a multitude of colorful silk and raw wool corsages by citing the 5 senses as her source of inspiration: sight, sound, taste, touch and smell.

Tomoko Arakawa's "Prayer for Time" and "Night Path" both use the artist's own technique to create works of great delicacy and precision. Kiyomi Iwata, Chrysalis, 2010. Kiyomi Iwata, Cadence, 2009. Reiko Sudo, Fabrication, 2011. Junichi Arai, Flame-resistant shop curtain, 2005. Installation photo by Richard Goodbody.

Hitomi Nagai's technical tour de force is named "Birth". Using the waffle weave structure, the artist has created a work which expresses "new universes through the interplay of light and shadow".

Shigeo Kubota's "Shape of Red" saturates the center of the second "room" with color and form. These sculptural shapes of Kubota's new works are imbued with the colors of the sun and/or nature's effects at dusk and dawn.

Reiko Sudo's tantalizing piece was fabricated by designer, Kazuhiro Ueno. Cotton was twisted and embroidered and finally sewn in different combinations to form a single piece of incredibly complex fabric.

Rei Saito has developed a way of handling wax resist processes so that the paper becomes as soft as velvet and exceedingly strong. The "Spal" work is a dazzling compendium of colourful pages in a magazine format and scale while the "Dots" are the enormous columnar black work with very subtle surface embellishment.

Reiko Sudo, Fabrication, 2011. Installation photo by Richard Goodbody. Akiko Kumazawa employs feltmaking to create her "Daisy Chain" which is meant to emulate "a woman's life giving body and breasts".

Akio Hamatani's work entitled "W-Orbit" provided the perfect image with which to publicize this elegant, pluperfect show of Japanese fibre art. Softly draped around an enormous ring, each thread constructs a perfect shape and the inclusion of indigo dyed threads, light to dark, at both the beginning and end of the work is also a reminder of how subtle most art of this kind truly is. If you blink, you might miss some little treasure hidden in the work.

Machiko Agano's room was full of her works filled with mirrored surfaces backed by images of greenery — trees, leaves, grasses, etc. The mirrored surfaces would every so often catch the image of a viewer and this would make the audience feel very much an integral part of the piece. This "Untitled" work from 2011 is a great departure for this artist whose early work emanated from the study of weaving and kasuri fabric.

Kazuyo Onoyama utilized folded polyester to form the lyrical, sunny surface of Orikata. The artist says "Using thin fabric to develop simple shapes that emphasize layering, shading and texture, I fold the material over and over again as a prayer for happiness, peace, abundance and good health and as an expression of the close relationship that should exist between human life and our natural environment".

Kinya Koyama's sculpture is formed of traditional materials such as kozo, silkworm cocoons and material from the hokigusa bush. The piece is entitled "Space-Time's Memory"; Mitsuko Akutsu, Time J-15, 2009. Kinya Koyama, Kioku suru jikû (Space-Time's Memory), 2010. Installation photo by Richard Goodbody.

"Mitsuko Akutsu has recently begun to specialize in computer-assisted Jacquard weaving.... a deep knowledge of Jacquard technology acquired during a recent period of study at Montreal's Centre for Contemporary Textiles has resulted in a series of works that place more emphasis on the nature of the medium itself." This is normal as the study of jacquard is very intense. The work will become personal in a short period of time if the artist concentrates on production.

Tetsuo Kusama's "Horizon" works from 2010 are a superb color study in 3 separate parts. Mr. Kusama actually demonstrated how the works are put together and held in place by various pleating constructions.

Tetsuo Fujimoto's "machine drawings" seem to become more lyrical every year. In this particular work, the artist is creating a surface which emulates nature but ends with the soft, undulating curves of a petticoat.

Hisako Sekijima is a world renowned basket maker. Early in her career, the artist had the opportunity to work in New York City where baskets were being made of everything and anything and the rules were never stringent as to what a basket was. Hisako took what she needed from this interaction and went her merry way. The 3 baskets shown here in this show are typically Hisako — perfectly assembled in pristine materials and always moving ahead in terms of pushing the parameters.

Misao Tsubaki creates collaged "canvases" of extraordinary beauty. The artist says of her work: "The colors and shapes reverberate, vibrate and dance in an endlessly expanding space, looking for all the world like birds soaring through the sky or fish swimming in the ocean."

Emiko Nakano's "Cambodian Letters" reflect her interest in places such as Cambodia, Brazil, the United States and the South American Andes areas which she has been fortunate to visit. Japan is actually a very small country and thus many Japanese take it upon themselves to travel as frequently as possible in order to experience the "outside". Remember that this culture was, for a very longtime, quite cut off from the rest of the world. Emiko's letters are printed on old Japanese papers which are cut into strips and then woven. The last process of soaking in hot water creates a denser sense of the many layers of time and memory that went into its making.

Kyoko Ibe is exhibiting a commissioned work made specifically for this show entitled "Airy Sonnet of Blue". The piece is suspended over the waterfall in the main lobby area. Ibe is also exhibiting a screen from the Hogosho series which is made entirely of antique papers.

Hideho Tanaka's work entitled "Vanishing and Emerging" reflects the process of art making as experienced by this artist. Hideho says: "I'm acutely aware of accidents that actually help me achieve the expression I am striving for, and other accidents that take my work in a completely different direction."

Fuminori Ono states that he "started making "Feel the Wind" by imagining a shifting, changing fall landscape; then he let it spread out toward the cosmos as if carried aloft on the wind." This piece is exceedingly rich in color. It almost vibrates!

Hiroko Watanabe's "Red Pulse" is such a powerful piece that it must have adequate space around it so that it does not overpower an adjacent work. This red is feral! Atsuko Yoshioka, Gengaku shijûsô no konsutorakushon (Construction for a String Quartet), 2009. Installation photo by Richard Goodbody.

Atsuko Yoshioka's work entitled "Construction for a String Quartet" may not be a true musical instrument in any sense of the word BUT there is a wondrous flow through these three thickets. Be it simply a visual flow or not. The connection is made and one wants to somehow connect with the individual "thickets";

Asuko Iyanaga's "A Gift from the Sea: Air X" invites touch but unlike the work of Arai, the "Do Not Touch" warning is very evident in this piece. Asuko enjoys spending time in Indonesia where the people and their surroundings are a rich inspiration for this artist.

Naomi Kobayashi and Kyoko Kumai requested that their works be hung, one above the other. Kumai used thin wire to create a rocky landscape above which hovered Kobayashi's delicate paper "halo" creating hallowed ground beneath the sculpture.

Takaaki Tanaka "Nest Flowers" work was created by arranging threads tightly in space and then covering these threads with a paper fibre mixture which, once dried, hold their given shape in space. Combining prepared units,

the artist has built a substantial wall of what he refers to as "nests". Takaaki Tanaka, *Su no hana* (Nest Flowers), 2011. Naomi Kobayashi, *MA* 2000, 2000. Kyōko Kumai, *Toki no katachi* (The Shape of Time), 2011. Dai Fujiwara, *Taiyō no ie* (The Sun House), Kanagawa Prefecture; architectural project initiated in 2000. Naoko Serino, *Generating—8*, 2006. Installation photo by Richard Goodbody.

Naoko Serino's work entitled "Generating—8" and "Generating—12" involve creating "ambitious, sometimes room sized installations made from unspun jute, woven and set with adhesive over a preformed base that is removed after the drying process to create soft sculptures made out of fibre, light and air."

This exhibition began by looking at Junichi Arai's superb, sensuous circles on fabric panels in both silver and gold. It now ends with the work of architect, Dai Fujiwara, whose circular top, which is likened to a Tupperware lid, allows sunlight to shine through the thirteen-foot opening unfiltered, without passing through glass. The building's unique construction enables it to support a roof with such a large opening even without a central pillar. Traditional boat builders created the earthquake resistant walls of the Sun House as it is called. These "bending, slanting lines of the interior walls captures the sunlight so there is no need for artificial lighting during the day."

Joe Earle, Japan Society's Director of Galleries, led the press group through the show and at one point, answered the age old craft versus art query thusly: "If a work of art is interesting, why question the choice of materials?" Then, in a press release Mr. Earle stated: "These works remind us that important art need not always be about rebellion or subversion. For most of the 30 artists represented here, it is the material that tells them what to do next in the spirit of "tariki", originally a Buddhist term meaning the "power of another";". On both evenings, 9/14 and 9/15, the 18 artists who came from Japan were in the galleries to greet private guests. On 9/16, the galleries were open to the general public. On the 17th, The "Dissolving Boundaries and Shaping Discourse" panel discussion was held. Mr. Earle again served as the panel moderator and introduced each of the 4 speakers. Kazuyo Onoyama, *Orikata* (Folded Form), 2006. Kyōko Ibe, *Screen from the Hogosho series*, 2009. Fuminori Ono, *Feel the Wind*, 2010. Hisako Sekijima, *Kōzō o motsu ryō II* (Volume That Has Structure II), #546, 2009. Hisako Sekijima, *Renzoku suru sen* (Continuous Lines), #559, 2010. Hisako Sekijima, *Jūsan’yō no satsu* (A Book with Thirteen Leaves), #553, 2009. Installation photo by Richard Goodbody.

Akira Tatehata has recently been named President of Kyoto City University of Arts and Director of the Museum of Modern Art in Saitama, Japan. President Tatehata is an active poet and has received both the 1991 Rekitei Shin ‘ei prize and the 2005 Takami Jun Prize.

The President's lecture focused on several very high profile contemporary artists such as Yayoi Kusama, Man Ray, Christo, Lee Ufan, Tetsuo Kawaguchi, Ei Anatsui, etc. Summing up, Mr. Tatehata stated "Contemporary art and fibre art have no boundaries. One easily segues into another."

Hiroko Watanabe, Professor Emeritus, Tama Art University and Chairman of the International Textile Network, among other titles, is an incredibly energetic and a moving force behind so many Japanese textile activities within Japan and internationally, in point of fact. Without Hiroko, this exhibition would never have materialized.

In 2007, Hiroko led the women only Silk Road group from Nara, Japan to Rome, Italy visiting 10 countries and holding textile exhibitions and workshops with local groups along the way. Professor Watanabe states "the very qualities that are unique to fabric inspire me and my fellow artists to try to move beyond mere technical mastery to create daring and beautiful "works of art".

Hiroko blames the industrial revolution for creating the schism in the west over the art versus craft quandary. MOMA, for instance, has its own singular section for design and craft This is where the NUNO fabrics are always hung. The MAD museum seems to have lost its previous incarnation as the American Craft Museum and is now veering very heavily towards design. However, art speaks its own language, a common tongue, encompassing all aspects of design, craft and art In the late 20th century, many art critics criticized on the same level as art criticism. The strong tradition in Japan is causing a crossover which is beginning to occur not as fiber art but as art period. Kinya Koyama, *Kioku suru jikū* (Space-Time's Memory), 2010. Misao Tsubaki, *Work No. 81*, 2010. Emiko Nakano, *Tsurunaru* (Range): *Cambodian Letters*, 2009. Installation photo by Richard Goodbody.

Our moderator, Mr. Earle interjected at this point that some artists were embroidering their painted canvases, thus crossing over from art to craft and back. It seems to be in the process of becoming an accepted procedure amongst some artists.

Hiroko concluded with the statement that the spirit of tradition is very powerful in Japan and that beautiful, well made objects last forever.

Matilda McQuaid has written many books and articles on art, architecture and design. Some of the works like "Structure and Surface: Contemporary Japanese Textiles", "Extreme Textiles: Designing for High Performance", Shigeru Ban: A Paper Arch" and "Envisioning Architecture: Drawings from the Museum of Modern Art" served as catalogues for exhibitions held at MoMA or at the Cooper-Hewitt Museum where Ms. McQuaid serves as head of the Textiles Department. Like Hiroko Watanabe, Matilda McQuaid cited tradition in formulating Japanese textiles as very, very important. The co-existence of old and new, the open attitude towards experimentation and updating without a total return to an old method. Citing Nuno's Bubble Pack, Hiroyuki Shindo's wrapped indigo dyed balls, Yoshiko Kimura's printing technique, Yuh Okano's personalizing the shibori technique, Jorie Johnson's felt and lacquer works, Michiko Uehara's silks from Okinawa, Kyoko Kumai's wire sculptures, Junichi Arai and Sheila Hicks collaborating at Bridgestone in Japan, needle punching felt with Issey Miyake, etc. Japan's rich traditions continue to assist the artists' journeys of experimentation and innovation. Kyôko Ibe, Requiem, 2011. Junkyû Mutô, Kaze no wa (Circle Wind), 2010. Installation photo by Richard Goodbody.

Christy Matson is an Assistant Professor in the Fiber and Material Studies Department at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Ms. Matson presented an interesting body of work. The issue of the combination of sound and woven surface is the prime mover here. Hopefully, as this wondrously assured young artist matures, and continues to work, new doors will open to new avenues for exploration which will enliven and enrich the entire body of work.

Industrial processes plus hand techniques plus being open to experimentation creates the right atmosphere for extraordinary success in altering, adapting and developing the next new textile. No one knows this better than these gifted Japanese artists.

Fiber Futures remains at Japan Society Galleries, 333 East 47th Street, New York, New York until December 18, 2011. <http://www.japansociety.org/event/fiber-futures-japans-textile-pioneers>

Carol D. Westfall

September 26, 2011 Tomoko Arakawa, Toki no inori (Prayer for Time), 2010. Yuh Okano, Flower: Coming Events Cast Their Shadow Before, 2010. Yuh Okano. Water-Sunset, 2004. Jun'ichi Arai, Flame-resistant shop curtain, 2005. Shigeo Kubota, Shape of Red I, 2009. Kiyomi Iwata, Chrysalis, 2010. Kyomi Iwata, Cadence, 2009. Reiko Sûdo, Fabrication, 2011. Installation photo by Richard Goodbody. Bio: Carol Westfall's work has been exhibited extensively in Asia, Europe, South America and the US. She has taught at both Columbia University's Teacher's College in New York City and in the Fine Arts Department at Montclair State University in New Jersey and is one of the artists included in the upcoming exhibition, Distinguished Educators, at the Crane Arts Building in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania next March. Since retiring in July of 2002, Westfall has written and lectured extensively about fiber artists and their work, especially those artists who are actively exploring the new materials and processes of the 21st century.