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Japanese artist's hope rubs off on viewers

By Mary Thomas
Post-Gazette Art Critic

A venerable tree in a Japanese park could use your encouragement. In the creative sphere, where nothing is unlikely and everything is possible, artist Keiko Miyamori floats the notion that a visitor to her installation, "Melody," can connect across space, culture and species. A stand of trees in Japan was to be thinned a few years ago while the site was transformed into a park. Miyamori

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made rubbings of the trees' bark, which she then hung in situ in a manner suggestive of traditional Japanese paper prayer offerings. Now a Philadelphia resident and adjunct faculty member at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, Miyamori visited the completed park in February, and, while happy that some of the original trees had been spared, she noticed that the abundance of concrete and reduction of vegeta-

tion had made the area less fertile than it had been. She became concerned for the survival of the remaining trees. Miyamori took rubbings from a sprawling old tree, using Japanese paper (washi) and charcoal that she made from tree bark, and when she returned to the States she used some of those rubbings to cover a piano and bench. Now she invites visitors to the Society for Contemporary Craft, where she is artist-in-residence this month, to play that piano in the hope—the belief—that

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Japanese artist Keiko Miyamori, who teaches at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, Philadelphia is artist-in-residence at the Society for Contemporary Craft this month. She'll conduct a collaborative performance at the society tomorrow night and a workshop Saturday.

Annie O'Neill/Post-Gazette

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Artist explores science, intuition

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the notes will reach the tree and provide it with strength to fight for its health. Selected tracings arranged on a nearby wall give the tree an ethereal local presence.

Within the context of the other work in her exhibition, which probes the gray zones between scientific fact and intuition, there is a compelling logic to this action.

The monochromatic charcoal and white objects—a baby bottle, shoe lasts, frames, a pencil—at first appear light and decorative. But they gain weight when one realizes that they—like the piano—have been meticulously coated with Miyamori's painstakingly made rubbings.

As such, they not only exemplify skilled craftsmanship, but induce a quietude—somewhat in the manner of the ritualistic approach to a tea house (the tea aesthetic being one of the underlying, if subliminal, qualities of Miyamori's work)—that blocks visual noise and encourages receptivity to the epistemological conceits the artist sets forth.

The objects wear the washi like a second skin—uncannily in the case

of a "Splintered Branch"—that is metaphoric representation of an essence that links all life forms. "What is transferred from object to paper is the very soul of the natural object," Miyamori says.

She asks the visitor to use imagination to access what can't be seen and hasn't been culturally taught, to find that which is "between surface and surface." Attuned to this other way of sensing, "we can feel between the surfaces," Miyamori explains. A bird cage is roofless and empty. "We can't see the bird, but we can imagine the bird," Miyamori says. Two clear glass goblets, their bowls nearly closed, suspended upside-down over the piano, represent the "notes that make a melody," unseen but imagined. Inside a clay flower pot, the word "imagine" is gently suspended like a feather gliding through air.

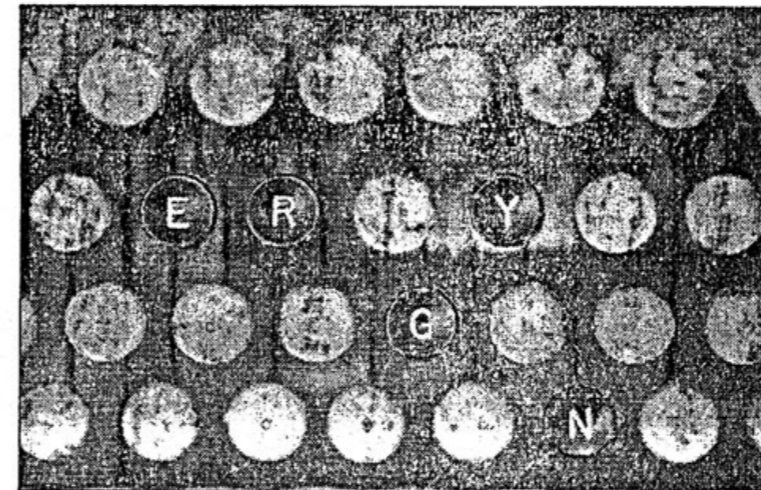
"I think people's imagination can really change the world," she says. Miyamori says that for her the purpose of art is to "make something to communicate." While she says she believes in the "creativity of people" and "still has hope" in mankind's ability to connect with his world, there is a wistfulness to the exhibi-

tion that resides in a space that hovers between invite and implore.

Melancholy and hope co-exist in "City Root," a dark mass that rises higher than the petite artist, and looms in the back of the gallery. The focal component of an installation last year at the Project Room, Philadelphia, Miyamori rescued it from the grounds of a 1950s urban housing project that was destroyed to make room for new construction. Even toppled, she admired the tree for its "urban toughness." In a video, the artist says, "Trees are a life force," echoing Shinto attitudes filtered through generations of evolved culture.

In the aftermath of the destruction, the artist points out, is the phoenix-like rebirth of the project as a mixed-income neighborhood, and the tree as an artwork. "Memory of City Treasure 1, 2" comprises artifacts—chunks of brick, sprigs of metal, opalized glass—Miyamori excavated from the gnarled, clasping entanglement of roots and placed into boxes that recall jewelry cases or mineral collections.

Miyamori asks the visitor to pause and consider elemental associations that are as ageless as ani-



Annie O'Neill/Post-Gazette

"Typewriter Stand" is part of Keiko Miyamori's exhibit.

mism and as contemporary as the environmental movement. Ultimately, what she really traffics in is collective wisdom.

The exhibition continues through June 28 at 2100 Smallman St. At 6 p.m. tomorrow, Miyamori will conduct a performance with poet Kelley Beeson and composer/pianist Joseph Domencic, and will screen a short video, "Melody," about her piano project, that was edited by Justin Shronk, a student intern at

Art in Motion studio (\$5). Saturday, she and book artist Pam Sussman will give a daylong workshop on "The Art of Tree Rubbing" (\$70, members \$50, registration required by 5 p.m. today). The duo Life In Balance will perform at 6 p.m. May 9 (\$10). Gallery hours are 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesdays through Saturdays. For information, call 412-261-7003.

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