

INTERVIEWS, NEW YORK

Interview with Keiko Miyamori

02/12/16 by Nick Rogers



Tree-Bark rubbing in Hiroshima

Nick Rogers: What is your relationship with trees?

Keiko Miyamori: Japan has been called “a country of trees”, we have many trees (2/3 of our small land is forest), and the relationship between people and trees was very close in the old days. For example, Japanese traditional houses were made mostly of wood and paper instead of stone and glass. I believe most Japanese still love wood, appreciate the detail of grains, and enjoy touching wood’s surface. As Japanese, I grew up within this culture, so I simply like trees. If I have the choice of going to the beach or to the forest, I pick the forest.

In my personal history, both my mom and I belonged to the “biology club” when we were in high school. She was a pharmacist, very sweet natured and an animal lover. My father was a car engineer, very strict, stubborn guy, but he had a sweet side. Every December, he drove to the countryside to “borrow” a small size momi-firs from a farmer (with soil and root in a pot), and let us (my sister and I) decorate the little Christmas tree in our living room (we were moderate Buddhist but I think he wanted to make childhood fun for us). Then after December 25th, we drove back to return the tree, so the farmer could continue to grow it. He didn’t have much

money, so returning the tree may have been for an economical reason, but I believe he did it in order to not kill the tree every year. (Now I live in New York, seeing so many huge trees without roots trashed on the street after the holiday season, makes me sad.)

My other personal memory is my house, a wooden house with three large persimmon trees, which my sister made me climb to get many persimmon fruits. We knew the branches were frangible – but I was light enough, and indeed I was like a small monkey moving quickly from branch to branch, I made conversation with tree when I took the fruit, as a friend, I believed he would not make me fall.

(By the way, my name Miyamori (宮 miya + 森 mori) means palace + forest)

NR: You have been known to do bark rubbings in a forest slated for demolition, do you find the feeling of impending doom or inevitable destruction to be an inspiration?

KM: I have been performing this technique on washi for about 18 years. (I have been saying “tree rubbing,” though I realize it doesn’t exactly sound right, “bark rubbings” sounds much closer to what I do, so maybe I should switch to that...)

As you mentioned, I did it in a forest slated for demolition (in 2000, I visited the forest in Ryugasaki-city and made an installation in the forest) many of the trees do not exist anymore. But I also did it in the nature, in a city, in a wealthy neighborhood, in an impoverished neighborhood, in a peaceful country, in a distressed country, on a young tree, on an old tree, on a healthy tree, on a bombed survivor tree, and so on.

Each tree had a connection with me in a certain place at a certain moment for a certain reason, but I usually don’t select one as a special tree. I live on the earth where so many different environments simultaneously exist. I respect the fact that I touched one of the trees in my life and spent time with it. I think life is the connection of those moments.

When I see many of the tree-bark rubbings that I created, imagining the layers of surfaces connected, I see the ways I am unified with all environments. When I think of different trees, different people existing beyond their physical selves, then the time and distance are less important/meaningful. I try to find more inspiration in this feeling of connection, to seek the answer for how I can agree with the fact that we keep existing here on the earth, and how we can survive without losing a sense of being in our cosmos.

NR: Your use of clear resin to encapsulate something, thus making it unalterable and simultaneously immortal or a moment preserved forever in a stasis, is very striking for me. Is that part of the statement of the artwork? Can you elaborate?

KM: The artwork has both unalterable aspect and alterable aspects. So yes, it is a part of the statement of the art work.

My clear resin sculpture seems to be “preserving the moment” or “freezing time”, though I am not so interested in showing the rigid unalterable stage of matter in my work, rather, I would like

to see the flow of the energy. The energy which is constantly trying to sift, or the conflict of power which is making stress against each other in front of me, and yet, they are trying to find a balance between the connection.

In my sculpture City Root (2006-2007), the root inside of the resin is actually trying to “keep sifting” and making stress around the polymer chain of resin, thus sometimes even after the years of the curing process, I can still see the changes of the cracks, shells (I call “shell” for the shell-like-figure created around the object by the stresses). I am interested in letting the objects express the unalterable fact that nothing is unalterable. And I found the clear resin is a good tool to show my concept.

It is totally fine people imagining “the moment preserved forever” in my sculpture, part of me also wanting to “preserve the beautiful moment” all the time. Having the concept of the moment eternity together, we are able to appreciate or respect the moment that we experienced. I think we live in such continuing moments, as a part of universe. And we have a capacity allowing us to feel as the unity of the connection.



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NR: What is the story behind the choice of which typed words appear on the page preserved in clear resin in your typewriter pieces?

KM: The typewriter in solid resin: “yes, I can,” was made in 2007, and became the first model of my Object in Solid series. The actual typewriter was shipped to me from Japan, but the journey left it broken beyond repair. The work originally entitled “Broken Typewriter” without resin, but I re-titled it as “yes, I can,” after adding the typed paper and embedded them together in the liquid resin. I had been in a tough time, and I wanted to encourage myself with this creation. In 2008, I heard Obama was saying “yes, we can!” I thought he stole my line...

I haven’t sold this “yes, I can,” so every time I moved my studio, it traveled with me. It sounds odd, but I have never known the price of my artworks. I did many art projects, but my actual artworks were given or traded as exchanging labors. Since I was making money with conservation job in a public library for a long time, I only traded when I needed the extra money. When I moved my studio in Brooklyn, someone saw my “yes, I can,” and he said he would buy it for \$5,000, it was a lot of money to me, but I knew my boyfriend wanted it, so I didn’t sell it. Instead, I decided to make a new version. The first sculpture had a very personal note appeared on the paper, so again, I typed a short, ambiguous personal phrase* for each typewriter, and covered each with matched tree-bark rubbing before embedded in resin. I made four additional cubes in 2012, and sold two of them.

*One example of typed phrase: “I was once on the top of this tree” (Typewriter in Solid #3);

This reflects my experience in collecting the rubbings from a sixty-meter-tall Samauma tree in the Amazon, Brazil that I climbed to the top. The height allowed me to see and feel the “breathing” of the rainforest below, and to experience a sense of complete connection with my surroundings. I certainly felt I was part of this breath.

NR: What is the importance of paper and, in particular, of washi? What is bark rubbing?

KM: First, I like paper, especially washi. Washi is a handmade Japanese tree-fiber paper which forms the body of my work. It has an organic, soft surface, it can absorb water, it can form into various 3D shapes, it needs breathing (sounds like living creature). I earned my MFA with Japanese-style painting as my major, so I got very familiar with the material. Besides the tree-bark-rubbings, I still use washi in my drawings, paintings as well as in my installation pieces.

The “tree rubbings” or “bark rubbing” consist of washi paper, which is placed on the bark of a tree; charcoal is then applied to “rub” the surface. The bark’s surface pattern (of living tree) is revealed on the paper.

Tree rubbings inspire me in many ways: Each tree rubbing is the physical representation of a specific tree bark; but the mark on the paper is also a depiction of the soul of the tree at that moment, so to me, when I integrated and combined it into other media, the tree rubbings take on new meanings to connect here and the place I was there.

NR: Do you believe in the power of spontaneity? I have heard about your providing typewriters to poets for improvised poems on and offering pianos to musicians to improvise music pieces on as part of your installation. Can you tell me more about this?



Keiko Miyamori - Tree Rubbing and Umbrella #2

KM: I have made some collaborations with writers or musicians before. It is always fun working with other creators, especially performers. I also perform “tree-bark-rubbing” but it is just for myself. When I create artworks as an artist, I am more on the crafts-man side, and try to finish my dues as perfect as possible, (which is mostly setting the site). However, after finishing my dues, I let performers do whatever comes up with, hoping some “power of spontaneity” would come inspired by my artworks. It is not necessary that all collaborators

see the world as I see, but it is important that we know each other’s perspective. Actually it is more interesting to collaborate with someone who has opposite ideas or different perspective.

In my exhibition Melody (SCC: The Society for Contemporary Craft, Pittsburgh, PA from March 21 through June 28, 2003), I set up my typewriter and my piano piece, both covered with the tree-bark rubbings, facing each other in the gallery. A local poet and a pianist (composer) were invited. I asked the poet; “Sit here, feel the space, and just type whatever comes up in your mind. Then speak it up to the pianist in front of you.” And I asked the pianist; Listen to the word or phrase, absorb, and just play a short melody which comes up in your mind.” And I said to both; “Please keep going till you feel like the conversation has completed.” I also added; “If you want to keep silence, which is totally fine. I am Japanese so actually I like silence.” I was personally thinking about the demolished forest in Japan where I created the tree-bark rubbing for this piano piece, but it was just in the beginning. I just enjoyed the conversation between the poet and the pianist, the world they created had a positive energy in it and it was a powerful collaboration.

NR: Tell me in your words about the story surrounding the original City Root?

KM: In 2000-2001, I was commuting from my apartment to North Philadelphia, where the Cambridge Plaza Housing Project started. Many trees were bulldozed and thrown away with construction debris. This is where the original City Root was found.

It was a large oak tree standing at the corner of Girard and 11th Street. I used to drive in front of the tree. When I saw the tree was knocked down, exposing the root, I was absorbed by the strength of the once standing tree. There were many pieces of brick, glass, and metal in the root. It was striking to see the tree was still growing strongly despite all the obstacles it had to overcome. This root had a metaphorical meaning of the energy of the city: life of a tree in the city and life of the city in a tree.

I dug brick, glass, and metal from the root, and displayed them in an alternative space in Philadelphia with the original root. (IMAGINA at Project Room, Philadelphia, PA in June 14 - July 26, 2002).

To me, the root represented the history of the neighbor beautifully, and I tried to preserve it as a monumental piece for the neighbor development project, but I couldn't find anyone who saw this root as an art. So I applied to the sculpture competition in Michigan, with a big funding opportunity. Despite no one ever having made such a large pour at that time, my proposal of a 7-foot cubic resin casting proposal received the grant.

When I proposed the idea of a large root in 7' solid cubic resin, I was told multiple times that it would be an impossible pour. Experiments with a plastic company turned out successful. I was granted the opportunity with this report. After another set of experiments with a plastic company, City Root was finally cased in March 10th, 2006 and finished in 2007. Due to the mass power from the root fiber, there were many cracks in the sculptures, which visual effect I liked since it was simply beautiful, present the nature power strongly. Eventually the City Root was installed in Philadelphia. It now looks bloody red and is still "growing."

NR: Jackson Pollock denies the accident, can't this approach be applied to the cracking of City Root?

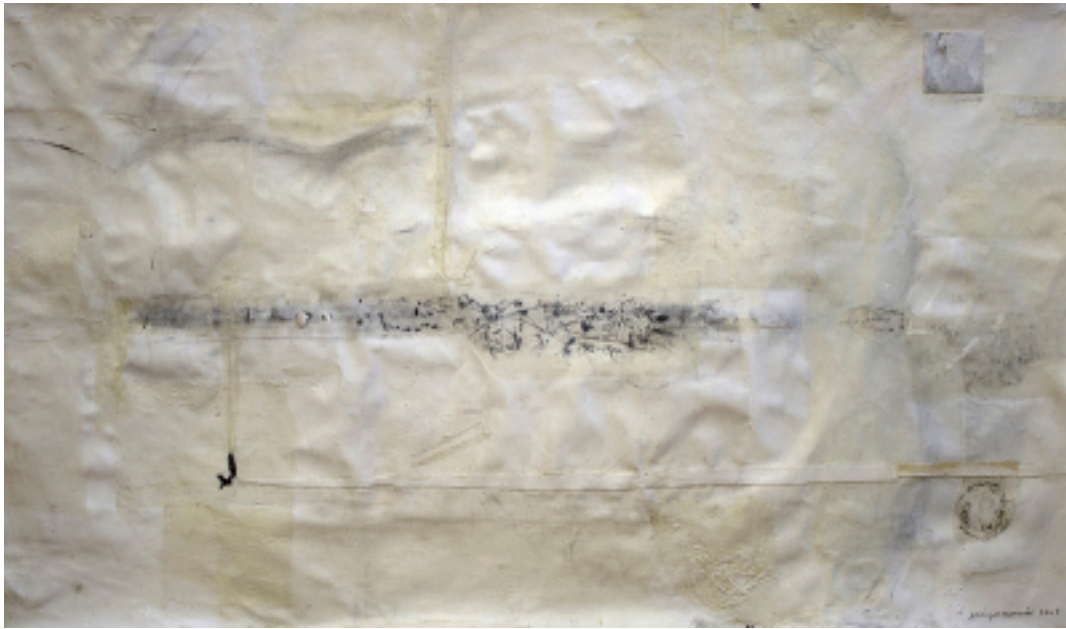
KM: The style of lines you see in Jackson Pollock's well known work number 1 (1950), known as "dripping," that comes up on top when you do online search, for example, is probably controlled to some extent. However, the ultimate factor that determines the exact location that the paint lands on canvas is the relationship between the direction that he shoots the paint, the viscosity of the paint, and the gravity.

I think the reason this type of his work gives an expansive feel instead of a suffocating one, despite its density, is because he let the natural law (unity) determine the ultimate result. I interpret his denial of accident as meaning that he calculates the approximate integration between the choice of the paint, movement and dripping.

My "Object in Solid" series are composed of organic objects in clear resin – the various phenomena you see in them happen as a result of inhibited pure chemical reaction due to interaction between organic components and materials with different thermal expansion rates. What I can control in the process is the ratio of resin and objects, the moisture of the surface of

the objects, and clearing of the bubbles developed by a purely chemical reaction using the vacuum chamber prior to pouring the resin. Doing so enables me to express bubbles, produced by the moisture in the organic components, and various sized cracks, developing as a result of stress from the difference of thermal expansion rates, more significantly.

In brief, the major difference between the two types of works such as Pollock's Number 1 and City Root (2006-2007) is as follows – In the former, the artist moves his body with deliberate intention from whose hand's orbit the liquid paint is released and draws parabola in the air according to natural law, and finally determines the final results. On the other hand, the primary agent in the latter type of work is the conflict between two different natural forces rather than the artist's intention. In case of City Root, one can also interpret the cracks as the result of the relationship between the trees and human because the direction of the cracks are largely effected by the distortion of the root fibers developed over time, as it grew living in the city with humans. It can be said that the roots have remnants of the city from that time, so to speak. I'm not creating the relationship, only trying to show it. However, it is the natural result from the energy from conflicts, rather than accident.



Keiko Miyamori – Tree Rubbing and Umbrella

NR: What does your piece “A Tipped Boat on a Warm Pedestal” say about the connection of humans with nature?

KM: I suspended a wooden boat at an angle, and titled “A Tipped Boat on a Warm Pedestal. ” (It was exhibited at the group show titled Perspectives by CFEVA at Ice BoxProjectSpace, Philadelphia, PA between December 3 to 20, 2008)

The outer surface of the boat was coated with Japanese washi paper, and rubbings of trees growing in different cities were transposed, which act as a new skin over the old wood frame. As a reminder that these trees were silently supporting and holding this boat.

The inside surface of the boat was gilded with gold. Gold represents one of the natural resources that we take from the earth, but it is also represents the special value added by human beings. I think many people consider gold as the most valuable elements from the periodic table. It is one of the precious metals for humans, and has been used for the richest exchanging currency in old days, now for investment to store wealth. It also has been used for jewelry, sculpture and paintings as a valuable art.

From the elevated bow of the boat, white animal fur was placed as a reminder of the threatened existence of animals and all other forms of life.

I made this installation to show the interface between humans and nature. The “boat itself” did not care at what angle it sat, but the people inside were in danger of falling out when the boat began to capsize. If the boat flipped, more disasters may occur surrounded by this event. However, the boat will regain the equilibrium eventually and it will gain a new form of balance.