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The Boston Globe

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Boston art museum unveils two new exhibits

Kari Bodnarchuk | February 26, 2026

Photo by Nicholas Lea Bruno, Courtesy of ICA San Francisco

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Don't miss two new exhibitions at Boston's free contemporary art museum, MassArt Art Museum (MAAM). The museum recently unveiled an installation by Masako Miki called "Midnight March" where visitors can walk through a gallery space containing semi-abstract felted wool sculptures. The exhibition references nature, Japanese folklore, and Shintoism in Miki's effort to create a new narrative for bridging cultural divides. Another exhibition, "Press & Pull: Two Decades at the Robert Blackburn Printmaking Workshop," celebrates the impact of Blackburn (1920-2003), an African American printmaker and teacher who grew up in Harlem and was known for his experimentation in printmaking and for fostering an artist community. The exhibition traces the history of the workshop, its culture of innovation, and its role as a hub for collaboration. It features more than 35 prints by artists past and present. Both exhibitions run through May 31. https://maam.massart.edu

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Ancient Demons march in Kawaii cuteness at MAAM: A conversation with Lisa Tung

Joanna Metodieva | February 9, 2026

A Museum Without a Collection Leans Into Myth and Experimentation, Turning a Boston Gallery Into a Cosmic Stage for Contemporary Yōkai

The MassArt Art Museum (MAAM) has long been a "cultural laboratory" for Boston with no permanent collection and the freedom to be experimental. Their latest exhibition, Midnight March, transforms the Stephen D. Paine Gallery into a "galaxy void"—a dark indigo universe where the supernatural beings of artist Masako Miki gather.

In this exclusive Q&A, MAAM Executive Director Lisa Tung discusses the evolution of Miki's work from 2D watercolors to massive, "huggable" 3D felted sculptures inspired by Japanese tradition 'yōkai', and how these ancient Japanese myths are being updated for a digital, contemporary age.

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Masako Miki: Midnight March. Installation view: Institute of Contemporary Art San Francisco. Photo: Nicholas Lea Bruno.

Joanna Metodieva: Lisa, you've mentioned that your goal at MAAM is to bring in shows that highlight professional artists working across vast areas of study—from textiles to sculpture. What was it about Masako Miki's Midnight March that first caught your eye during your research?

Lisa Tung: I had been a fan of Masako's earlier work, which was mainly two-dimensional paintings and watercolors. Then, I attended an exhibition called Bay Area Now, and I was very surprised and happy to see that Masako had an installation that featured the beginnings of this three-dimensional work. They were these very colorful, very approachable shapes—you wanted to hug them. I thought, "What is this?" What drew me to them was this approachability and accessibility, which are two of the things that the MassArt Art Museum really tries to do.

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Joanna Metodieva: The scale of these works is quite immersive. How does the unique architecture of MAAM enhance the experience of this "march"?

Lisa: We are in an old 1906 building with terracotta vaulting and ceilings that go up 37 feet. It's a very airy, spacious gallery. In our installation, we have covered all the walls and the floor with this really beautiful covering inspired by Masako's paintings of a galaxy. Then, she's put all her sculptures inside this "fish tank". The viewers, in addition to walking amongst all the sculptures as part of the march, can also go up our viewing balcony 18 feet above the floor. When they look down, it's as if they are another entity looking into a microcosmic world. You really are stepping into your own world.

Masako Miki: Midnight March. Installation view: Institute of Contemporary Art San Francisco. Photo: Nicholas Lea Bruno.

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Joanna Metodieva: These sculptures are based on yōkai—traditionally terrifying monsters from folklore. Can you talk about the specific characters visitors will encounter and the more traditional stories behind them?

Lisa: The characters range from tree-like forms to an inanimate object like an umbrella. In Japanese yōkai lore, the umbrella is something that is used a lot by humans and therefore can have its own magical qualities that come to life. These characters often stem from the Hyakki Yagyō, or the "Night Parade of One Hundred Demons," a tradition where supernatural beings march through the streets at night. Masako's newer work has human-like legs now; she also has an eyeball on human legs to represent heightened awareness and liveliness. Then she has animals, such as a cat and a fox. In Japanese iconography, a fox sometimes symbolizes a seductive woman; they are intelligent and they are magical. The "cat with two tails" found here is also a more powerful and mysterious figure in traditional lore.

Masako Miki. Umbrella's Whispers, 2025.
Collection Dear Kala Trust.
Photo: Nicholas Lea Bruno.

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Joanna Metodieva: It is fascinating how Masako's sculptures re-envision these traditionally terrifying yōkai. There seems to be a direct lineage between these ancient spirits and the modern 'kawaii' culture we see today—how do you see that connection manifesting in this show?

Lisa: Absolutely. It's almost like a lot of Japanese culture—the things that we are drawn to, the cuteness, the kawaii—all do stem somewhat from yōkai. The yōkai is just this imaginary creature, and then the Japanese, being so adept with animation and anime and manga, they then change that into Pokémon, into Tamagotchi toys. Our colleagues at the MFA linked this even to the Marie Kondo book about how to de-clutter. She proposes picking up every object, and if it gives you joy, you keep it, but before discarding it, you say "thank you" to the object. This is tapping into this Shinto belief that there are spirits in inanimate things.

Masako Miki: Midnight March. Installation view: Institute of Contemporary Art San Francisco. Photo: Nicholas Lea Bruno.

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Joanna Metodieva: Why do you think Masako's decision to "update our myths" is so important for a contemporary audience?

Lisa: One of Masako's MOs is to try to create new inclusive narratives that seek to bridge cultural divides. The yōkai, this parade of a hundred demons, could have been a cautionary tale warning people, "Hey, don't go out at night, it's dangerous". So, they made up a story to keep people inside. Now, we are less community-focused; we rely a lot on technology and AI. Masako is taking this historic folklore and turning it into something very approachable. The more you learn about something, the more it is part of all of us. It promotes togetherness.

Visit MAAM Boston to experience the vibrant world of Masako Miki's Midnight March.

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The Must-See Art Shows and Exhibitions of 2025

W Staff | September 23, 2025

The 2025 arts calendar is still filling up. A show from Wolfgang Tillmans entered the hallowed halls of The Centre Pompidou in June; running through September 22, Nothing could have prepared us – Everything could have prepared us gives the photographer and artist free rein over the French museum's 64,000-square-foot library; it's also the final exhibition le Pompidou will mount before closing for a five-year renovation. There's also Ed Atkins at Tate Britain, Masako Miki's cartoonish characters at ICA in San Francisco, and Calder Gardens, a new cultural destination dedicated to the work of Alexander Calder, that's opening in Philadelphia in September 2025. Needless to say, you aren't going to want to miss even one of them. If you're feeling overwhelmed, don't fret. We're keeping track of all the must-see art shows in the U.S. and abroad. So whether you want to visit a show that's popping up in your neighborhood, or plan to take in some culture while traveling, think of this guide as your well-informed pal that will keep you up-to-date on the can't-miss art shows throughout the year.

Masako Miki at ICA San Francisco

Photo by Nicholas Lea Bruno, Courtesy of ICA San Francisco

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The ICA San Francisco opened in 2022, and recently underwent its first relocation—popping up in the thick of the city's financial district inside The Cube, a perpetually vacant office tower and Bank of America's original home. The building's imposing bones, designed to project strength and trustworthiness, lend themselves to artists who are equally invested in acts of theater. Curator Meghan Smith describes the artists that thrive at the ICA SF as world-builders. This term certainly fits Japan-born, Bay Area-based artist Masako Miki, who has taken over the former bank's subterranean vaults with a four-year survey of her signature bronze and felted beasts.

As with all of Miki's work, the installation begins with a folktale—this one drawn from Shinto tradition. Hyakki Yagyō (Night Parade of One Hundred Demons) is, at its core, a fairytale about protest and the power generated when individuals unite under a common idea. Like the original story, Miki's three-dimensional interpretation seeks to blur the distinction between the spiritual and material worlds through abstraction and animism.

This dissolution begins at the entrance. Miki's underworld is accessed by a wide set of stairs that resembles an amphitheater. She leans into the space's theatricality, enhancing the stage-like quality with spotlights. These dramatic shafts of light are the only illumination on the floor, save for a few glowing exit signs. As you descend into the twilight, it feels as though you're stepping onto a stage—and falling directly into the action.

In the twilight, melancholia lingers despite Miki's technicolor palette, which almost reads as sinister here. Once your eyes adjust though there is a togetherness that develops among the demons. In other words, one is never alone in the darkness. Perhaps as you stand under a spotlight, you even catch a whiff of collective effervescence (that uplifting rush of emotion that sometimes accompanies group action). This is a quiet protest in the heart of downtown. —K.H.

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Two Site-Specific Exhibitions at ICA San Francisco Tackle Modern Day Identity and Belonging

Dual exhibitions by Masako Miki and David Antonio Cruz bring new light to fighting for community and against stereotypes

Shelby Black | July 23, 2025

Installation view of Masako Miki's exhibition "Midnight March" at ICA SF.
Photo: NICHOLAS LEA BRUNO, COURTESY OF ICA SF

San Francisco has long been known as a city that celebrates creativity. From being one of the most pinnacle hubs of the Summer of Love movement to serving as a destination where talents flock to explore aspiring ambitions, the bustling city has grown to foster talent through open expression and impressive institutions. Now, the emergence of ICA San Francisco continues that lasting legacy, and two exciting site-specific exhibitions explore themes of identity, belonging, and the importance of inclusivity.

Standing empty for years in San Francisco's Financial District, the multi-story structure formerly served as a Bank of America flagship until its eventual closing. Fast forward to the museum's relocation to The Cube in October 2024, and now both locals and tourists alike can experience world-class exhibitions completely free of charge.

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Following a successful opening, Japan-born, Bay Area-based artist Masako Miki as well as New York-based artist David Antonio Cruz have crafted the first fully site responsive exhibitions at The Cube, which not only entice visitors, but celebrate the museum itself.

Installation view of David Antonio Cruz's exhibition "stay, take your time, my love" at ICA SF.
Photo: NICHOLAS LEA BRUNO, COURTESY OF ICA SF

Installation view of Masako Miki's exhibition "Midnight March" at ICA SF.
Photo: NICHOLAS LEA BRUNO, COURTESY OF ICA SF

Upon entering the museum, the left side of the top floor welcomes guests into David Antonio Cruz's showcase, where elaborate murals and specifically curated surroundings serve as the backdrop for the portrait artist's intimate "chosen family" series. Titled "stay, take your time, my love," Cruz tackles timely societal conversations concerning the LGBTQ community, specifically within themes of acceptance, inclusion, identity, and belonging. On the walls, an expansive wallpaper mural incorporating imagery specifically chosen by Cruz such as Dolores Park palm trees, handkerchiefs, excerpts of famous artworks, and more not only relate to him personally but share a journey of queer communities's struggle for acceptance and finding a path to comfort and safety. Upon the mural, a collection four large-scale canvases speak to the artist's immense connection to portraiture. For this exhibition, Cruz created a specifically commissioned piece, of the same exhibition title, where one of his personal close friends living in the Bay Area served as the main source of inspiration for the large-scale canvas.

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Installation view of David Antonio Cruz's commissioned 2025 artwork "stay, take your time, my love."
Photo: NICHOLAS LEA BRUNO, COURTESY OF ICA SF

Installation view of David Antonio Cruz's 2022 work "thesecretofremainingyoungisnever tohaveanemotion,thatisunbecoming; thosebarriokids".
Photo: NICHOLAS LEA BRUNO, COURTESY OF ICA SF

"It's incredibly meaningful to develop a new body of work centered around a chosen family from the Bay Area," Cruz tells Galerie. "This includes a new wallpaper that incorporates imagery of the coastline, Dolores Park, and various historical and artistic references, framed by an oversized upholstered bench area and bedazzled chandeliers. This installation reflects the landscape, love, play, and history of San Francisco and is presented in the city. I hope that audiences will take a moment to pause, relax, daydream, get lost in the layers, and see themselves within the work."

In Cruz's portraits, where each figure is depicted posing alongside close friends and their chosen family, the use of vivid color, intricate poses, and touches of non-linear elements such as differently colored body parts allow for queer individuals to be seen as they are—utterly human. This intimate portrayal of relationships and community brings new perspective into the everyday life of these communities, pushing away stereotypes and instead fostering understanding and unconditional love.

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Installation view of David Antonio Cruz's exhibition "stay, take your time, my love" at ICA SF.
Photo: NICHOLAS LEA BRUNO, COURTESY OF ICA SF

Also embracing similar themes of acceptance and identity lies an exhibition by celebrated Bay Area artist Masako Miki. Once walking down the stairs to the lower level of the museum, guests are transported to another world and are welcomed to Miki's exhibition "Midnight March." Named after the storied folktale of Japan's "Night Parade of One Hundred Demons," where it was said demons also known as "yokai" left their places in the supernatural world to march the streets amongst humans wreaking havoc, Miki brings new perspectives to these villainized entities through a total of 30 sculptures placed throughout the bottom floor. As opposed to their historical depiction as monstrous, Miki's practice in crafting 2-D and 3-D artworks made of felt, bronze, and works on paper reimagine these figures in a more palatable and approachable lens, boasting vibrant colors and individualized shaping to honor their stories but humanize them simultaneously.

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Installation view of Masako Miki's exhibition "Midnight March" at ICA SF.
Photo: NICHOLAS LEA BRUNO, COURTESY OF ICA SF

To bring an even more immersive experience to these creatures, dark blue walls complemented by a bespoke star-studded mural and carefully placed spotlights truly create the experience of walking amongst these rebels. While the bulk of creatures welcome guests to join them in the protest at the beginning of the exhibition, other characters are thoughtfully placed throughout the space to further cement themselves in this historic march and guide guests through the experience.

Staying true to the folktale, each sculpture holds their own story and mission in this exhibition. From the mischievous umbrella to the sibling trio of shapeshifters, Miki's reimagination of these characters stem from the importance of evolving with the ever-changing world, particularly regarding modern day tension in the United States, the importance of protest, as well as fighting for community and against propaganda.

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Installation view of the Umbrella yokai as part of Masako Miki's "Midnight March" exhibition at ICA SF.
Photo: NICHOLAS LEA BRUNO, COURTESY OF ICA SF

Installation view of the shapeshifter yokais as part of Masako Miki's "Midnight March" exhibition at ICA SF.
Photo: NICHOLAS LEA BRUNO, COURTESY OF ICA SF

"We need to be very careful what kind of myths and what kind of fictions that we create and how we spread this story," Miki tells Galerie. "The opinions of the mass is very important. Politicians are weighing what what we want to hear. We have so much power and I really believe that we as a collective have to continue reinventing ourselves because society has been changing. It's not so much about what we've done before but we need to continue to think about what would be the best way to come together, and I think that shift and change is difficult, but I think there's no other way to to collaboratively live in safe society. That's why it's important for me to reinvent [these characters] so they don't look like what they're known to look like in the in the past."

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Installation view of the Daruma Doll yokai as part of Masako Miki's "Midnight March" exhibition at ICA SF.
Photo: NICHOLAS LEA BRUNO, COURTESY OF ICA SF

Masako Miki's "Midnight March" and David Antonio Cruz's "stay, take your time, my love," exhibitions are on view at ICA SF through December 7.

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Masako Miki | Disruptive, Vast Folklore, and of Course, Healing

Qingyuan Deng | September 17, 2024

Masako Miki. "Hyakki Yagho, Night Parade of One Hundred Demons—Haunted Indigo Blue" (2023). Ink and Watercolor on Paper. 22 1⁄2" × 29 15/16". Courtesy the artist, RYAN LEE Gallery, New York, and Jessica Silverman Gallery, San Francisco.

Recently, I had the pleasure of speaking with painter, sculptor, and installation artist Masako Miki from her quaint studio in Berkeley, California. Miki, who hails from Osaka, Japan and moved to America at the age of 19, talks at length in our conversation about boundary: that between Western and Eastern belief systems; that between public and private art; that between art of the past and art of the present. Miki's fascination with these divides, as well as her fond remembrance of encounters with deities and spirits at rituals or in everyday life in Japan, doesn't just inform her art—it is her art. "[My characters are] good and bad. They're kind. They're benevolent and then malevolent. They're sacred and secular, they're constantly embracing the dichotomies, which, to me, [is what it's] about. Blowing the boundaries."

Now living and working in the Bay Area, Miki harbors special fondness for a cultural environment where proximity to other possible worlds is not taken as a surprise or a threat, but accepted as part of the metaphysical givens. In spite of American secularism telling us otherwise, the artist recognizes that the visible world does not constitute the totality of things. Seeking the invisible and the elusive, Miki's insistence on the place

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of the spiritual in public life emanates throughout her body of work, simultaneously systematic and poetic, meticulously mining historical traditions for speculative fictions capable of repairing and healing.

Shortly before we spoke, Miki won the Anderson Ranch Visiting Artist Prize for her felt sculptures "Kyōrinrin" (2024), inspired by the spirit of knowledge formed from extravagant Buddhist scriptures left unstudied and gathering dust, and "Gobo Obake" (2024), a Burdock Roots gaining consciousness through age, presented at Ryan Lee Gallery's booth at this year's Aspen Art fair. "I use Japanese mythology as a context," the artist tells me of the ways her character work intertwines with various spiritual ideologies. "My work is not about them...when you're writing fiction you need to have convincing characters to navigate the ideas and content. I use folklore as a context, [but my work is] really all about expanding this imagination in which my characters can exist."

Miki's endeavor of imaginative expansion is evident in her current project at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art: (Super)Natural: Paul Klee and Masako Miki. The exhibition pairs up 17 Klee drawings from the museum's collection (personally selected by Miki) with Miki's own grandiose watercolor landscape "Hyakki Yagyo, Night Parade of One Hundred Demons—Beginning of Another Life with Ruby Red Fox Deity" (2021). The painting renders creatures of Japanese folklore marching through the streets of Kyoto at night. In Miki's reworking, the ominous disruption of the already blurry boundary between the real world and the supernatural world is transformed into an almost endearingly celebratory observation of colorful dynamism and playful shapes. Propelled by the affective power derived from the universally evocative capacity of imagining, Miki works expand the original contexts of Japanese folklore and mythology and creatively generate new tales for our turbulent times.

Having read Klee's diaries (Klee himself would have called them "creative confessions") in preparation for (Super)Natural, Miki feels particularly compelled by Klee's insistence on representing what is beneath, besides, or beyond the world of visible things: "There are many more latent realities," Miki says of Klee. "I think he's saying: 'What we see is one isolated incident, that what we chose to believe is the only ultimate reality.' There's more than what we see, there's more than what we believe that's in his creative process—I think he's trying to reveal something that is not quite happening yet, but it could be part of a reality. I feel in my work, this is what I'm trying to do as well. It's really about imagining something that hasn't happened yet."

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Masako Miki. “Holographic Entities Reminding of the Universe” (2023). © Masako Miki; Courtesy of the artist, RYAN LEE Gallery, New York, and Jessica Silverman Gallery, San Francisco.

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Miki also translates her various characters into sculptures. While being a visiting professor at UC Davis, Miki became immersed in the intricate process of felting, which involves a nearly endless process of needling upon textiles with heat. The hands-on and durational approach creates an often-lost intimacy between her and the materials being worked upon. Miki's felted character sculptures thus take on a considered and constantly evolving texture and materiality where the tactile, processual conditions of sculpture-making become an investiture of visual pleasure itself. "I want my viewers to come closer to the sculptures," Miki says. And indeed, she succeeds in bridging the gap between subject and object quite often. Ancient traditions become alluring symbols of non-human agency that keep spectators hooked.

Miki's public sculpture practice—like her larger-than-life bronze sculptures mounted in the campus of San Francisco's Uber HQ—evoke a different sense of the fantastical in a medium that has traditionally leaned on the side of singularity and closedness of existence. The display at Uber HQ is inspired by a common animistic story widely circulated in Japan, one in which discarded utilitarian tools that were considered replaceable could potentially become vengefully alive, feeling abandoned by their previous owners. Neither wanting to create something spatially overpowering to spectators—with the story's troubling history associated with how oppressive regimes organize didactic relations through manufactured architecture—nor desiring to fall back into the trope of celebrating the technological wonders of human authorship, Miki tried to blend the humor of pop art with minimalistic smoothness via a non-hierarchical and collaborative process between Miki and her fabricators:

"Art has the power to transform perspectives and make us question, 'What is this?' It should be a simple invitation; if it's too didactic or people feel like they're not invited, people might not feel engaged. How do you involve the community?" She asks. "To me, it's crucial that people feel they can be a part of it.They're not going to be judged by how they look or where they come from. Public art projects provide a way for everyone to access and engage with what I consider one of the most important human attributes... the public domain brings a wider audience to me, and it's important for bringing people together through all different facets of accessibility."

Confronting the question of human empathy—or lack thereof—under advanced capitalism is also of personal significance to Miki. When I point out that her

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sculptures fit into the conventional definitions of "cute," Miki gives me a crash course on the history of cuteness in Japanese culture. According to the artist, cute or its Japanese equivalent, kawaii, has often, in popular English discourse, lost its original meaning, which is to feel compassion for the subject of adoration and to delight in the magnificent matter of the living world. The word kawaii had its etymological origin in Lady Murasaki's 11th-century novel The Tale of Genji. In the novel, Murasaki uses the word kawaisō to describe feeling sad or sorry for piteous things, objects, or people. "I think that cuteness, it's not quite the word that I feel affiliated to," she says. "Even though my work has been described as cute, it's more about the subject matter. Including the complex meaning of the cuteness, meaning it's more about the subject matter in that you feel compassion. You embrace and accept [the works] as they are, which is in a very incomplete stage of how things are described. It really releases everything of why I make the work that I make, right?

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Masako Miki. “Pine Tree from Ancient Time ” (2023). © Masako Miki; Courtesy of the artist, RYAN LEE Gallery, New York, and Jessica Silverman Gallery, San Francisco.

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The question of empathy takes on another meaning for Miki, which is intimately implicated in her personal identity crisis and formation. After immigrating to the United States, Miki underwent a period of adjustment, leaving certain cultural traits behind without fully discarding them, and absorbing the unfamiliar cultural elements of her new environment—without fully essentializing them as part of her fixed self.

Navigating such cultural dilemma through art, Miki builds a cross-generational affiliation with Isamu Noguchi and Ruth Asawa, two Japanese modernist artists who strive to carve out ways of resolving this international struggle—to simultaneously understand oneself empathetically while being understood through the empathy of others—in their own practice. She finds herself drawn to Noguchi's "Play Mountain," where children are invited to self-direct creative forms of play—poignant reminders that understanding oneself is a non-linear journey and is always already situated in a community. "The most important part of being an artist is that we create content for people, but they have to apply it themselves, to think beyond what they see. The artwork is never just descriptive, right?" she asks. "It's more than that."

"I feel that my work has this kind of ambiguity. I'm referencing folklore, but it's really about embracing these imaginations. The idea of our ability to create fiction and illusion is a powerful tool for us because that's how we navigate and create a common story that connects us." I ask Miki what kind of lessons she would like her audience to take away from her art. She admits that she hopes that any of these "lessons" are not concrete givens, but rather calls for action; calls for creative becoming.

In a world torn by political despair and ecological catastrophe, old rules fail to apply, and new ways of living that acknowledge our interconnectedness—a kind of connectedness that Miki and her audience are equally navigating—are being synthesized. Making works at the threshold of what is believable and what is not, Miki sees herself as part of a larger, looser movement of breaking apart dichotomies, embracing contradictions, and forming new allegiances and alliances.

Written by Qingyuan Deng

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whitewall

Seven Highlights from Art Basel Miami Beach 2023

By Jennifer Hoffman-Williamson | December 7, 2023

We wound our way between 277 booths to find a favorite from each sector at Art Basel Miami Beach.

Masako Miki, Hyakki Yagho, Night Parade of 100 Demons installed at Art Basel Miami Beach, 2023; Courtesy of the artist and RYAN LEE, New York

Art Basel Miami Beach 2023 is in fine form with galleries from five continents presenting across seven fair sectors—from large-scale projects in Meridians to specially curated nooks in Kabinett. In what is always a bustling opening day, we focused our walking path of the 277 gallery booths by following these sectors and selecting a favorite from each.

Reginald O'Neal and Masako Miki in Meridians

Brightly lit, Masako Miki's enchanting installation compiles vibrant felted wool sculptures alluding to *Tsukumogami* shapeshifters, or forgotten household items that become supernatural spirit entities. The whimsical space *Hyakki Yagho, Night Parade of 100 Demons*, covers wall to floor in lively graphics.

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CREATIVE BOOM

Artist Masako Miki draws on ancient Japanese mythology to explore non-binary identities

By Dom Carter | August 5, 2021

Interdisciplinary artist Masako Miki refers back to the Shinto concept of shapeshifters that take the form of everyday objects and unidentifiable forms to provide resolutions to our modern-day conflicts.

Photo by Andrew Payter. Courtesy of the artist and CULT Aimee Friberg Exhibitions.

As an inter-disciplinary artist, Masako's creations include large felt and wool installations that tackle themes such as cultural identity and pluralism. By taking inspiration from Tsukumogami yōkai - the Shinto belief that objects become occupied by spirits after one hundred years - she hopes to tell new stories that explore transformation and the dichotomies of human identities.

Her latest installation, Radical Hope, has recently debuted at Ryan Lee Gallery on New York's High Line and is an extension of her 2019 Shapeshifter series. Featuring new shapeshifters inspired by Tsukumogami, the exhibition includes an animated roll of cotton, a faceless ghost and an animated pine tree, amongst other strange creations.

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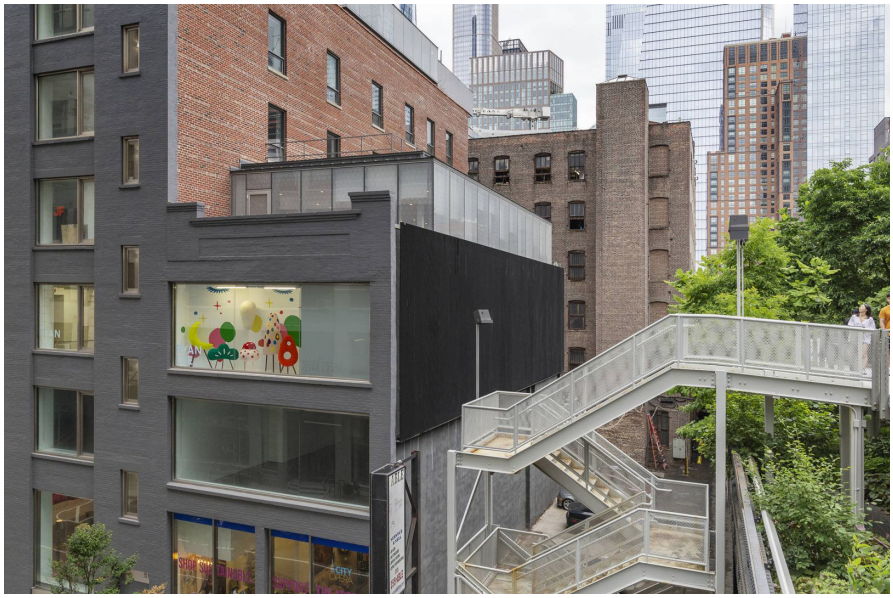

Radical Hope installed at RYAN LEE Gallery, 2021. Courtesy of the artist, RYAN LEE Gallery, New York, and CULT Aimee Friberg Exhibitions, San Francisco.

Matsuno-ki Yokai (animated pine tree), 2021 [left] Wool on EPS form, walnut wood (H) 33.5 inches x (W) 37.5 inches x (D) 18 inches Kagami-mochi yokai (animated mirror sticky rice cakes), 2021 [right] Wool on EPS form, maple wood (H) 37 inches x (D) 25 inches. Courtesy of the artist.

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"Shapeshifters are interpreted in unique ways when they are created," says Masako. "Every mythology reflects the time when it was created. I am interested in re-contextualizing these mythologies for our generation."

She adds: "While referencing these ancient mythologies, my intent is to craft new mythologies. As an artist, I wonder what kind of mythologies need to be crafted now. We see an increasing number of non-binary spaces unique to the current situations including gender fluidity, biracial identity, and multiculturalism."

The question of cultural identity is one that's close to Masako's heart. As a Japanese immigrant who now resides in San Francisco, she finds that she could explore the topic best by referencing Japanese traditions.

Mikazuki Yokai (animated crescent moon), 2021 [left] Wool on EPS form, walnut wood (H) 59 inches x (W) 31 inches x (D) 26 inches Ittan momen (animated roll of cotton), 2021 [middle] Wool on EPS form, wenge wood (H) 72 inches x (D) 24 inches Gobo Obake (possessed burdock roots ghost), 2021 [right] Wool on EPS form, walnut wood (H) 47 inches x (W) 23 inches x (D)17 inches. Courtesy of the artist.

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"Shapeshifters are inherently boundless in their nature, as they continue shape-shifting throughout their existence," Masako explains. "Because of their unique characteristics, they do not conform to accepted identities; instead, they generate new identities."

At a time when the world seems so polarised, perhaps shapeshifters with a fluid sense of identity are the best way to generate empathy. By embodying contrary characteristics, Mosako's creations reflect the nature of nonbinary spaces and encourage viewers to stay open-minded.

"As our social values need to be seriously reexamined now, it is my radical hope that we ask the right questions to redefine our collective identities," says Masako.

Radical Hope installed at RYAN LEE Gallery, 2021. Courtesy of the artist, RYAN LEE Gallery, New York, and CULT Aimee Friberg Exhibitions, San Francisco.

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Installation view of Matrix exhibition 273 Shapeshifters in a Park at Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive in Berkeley, 2019. Courtesy of the artist.

Shapeshifters at CULT Aimee Friberg Exhibitions. Courtesy of the artist and CULT Aimee Friberg Exhibitions.

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48hills

The shapeshifters of Masako Miki

By Mary Corbin | November 21, 2022

Masako Miki has much to share with us about the inherently sacred nature in all things.

"It has become how I engage my life," Miki told 48hills.

A need to find community is what initially lead her towards a playful yet diligent art practice. Now, after 30 years of creating, she thrives on a process that embraces curiosity and inquiry.

Miki grew up in Sakai City, an industrial Japanese seaport suburb of Osaka, an evolving area with a rich history of artisans and merchants. Influenced by her father's travels as an antiques dealer/refurbisher, Miki left Japan after high school and came to San Francisco in 1992.

"As a child, I always wondered about places outside of Japan. I cherish my memories of listening to my father's stories and looking at a globe together," Miki said. Miki grew

"Sound Shapeshifter and Chestnut Shapeshifter" (2022), wool on EPS foam and walnut wood. Photo by Wyatt Hall

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into the idea of being an artist. She was always creative, and her parents found her an oil painting tutor when she was in the fifth grade. But when she came to California for college, it was to study public relations.

"I think I was depressed for the first few years because I had a difficult time communicating and felt isolated from everyone," Miki said.

It was in a drawing class that she was able to make friends with other students by sharing work. The experience had a profound impact on Miki, and helped her to find her community. Changing her major to art, she completed both a BFA and MFA program.

"Art has been a communication tool from the very beginning," she said. "There are so many interesting and caring people in creative communities, and I truly enjoy meeting and collaborating with them."

During grad school, she encountered the writing of Roland Barthes, and semiology became a strong influence on her work, with his works *Mythologies* and *Empire of Signs* making the greatest impact on her ways of thinking. She describes having an epiphany of identity, and becoming more curious about Japanese culture than ever before.

"Nyoijizai animated back scratcher" and "Ichiren-Bozu" (2020), Cast bronze with auto paint and urethane. Photo by Henrik Kam

"Barthes resonates with my work as I invent signifiers that carry the signified, particularly in flux," she said. "The meaning continues to shift depending on when, who, and how it is going to be perceived."

The literary theorist's insights on how signs are used in relation to history, religion,

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and the natural environment—and how that translates based on context and individual perception—grabbed her.

"Meaning is open to the spectator," Miki said. "Things have both denotation (literal meaning) and connotation (cultural meaning). There is fluid interpretation that illuminates a candid reflection on our values."

As an artist, she invents and reinvents signifiers by referencing unique characters of yokai (shapeshifters) that appear in Japanese folklore inspired by Shinto animism. By introducing them in various media of drawing, sculpture, and installation, Miki creates new mythologies which reflect cultural identities.

Another influence is Yuval Noah Harari, the author of *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*. Harari proposes that we emerged and thrived by investing in shared mythologies that allowed us to form communities and establish economic systems, religions, and nations.

"If enough people believe the same story, this becomes our reality," Miki said, regarding this work. "Among our narratives, many fear-driven myths have been created to promote the deep chasm among us."

In her West Berkeley studio, Miki's process is organic, open, and unconditioned to materials and size. Her sculptures range from miniature to monumental, and incorporate both soft and hard materials from felted wool to bronze.

"I have a lot of colorful wool laying around and it's fun to be surrounded by these fluffy materials," she said. "The felting process is so time-consuming and physical and though this repetitive process is a big part of the work, I have a love-hate relationship with the endless hours. The reward comes at the end when the piece is completed."

For balance, Miki works on large-scale mural drawings on paper, which offers great freedom from the gravity and structural aspects of her other processes. Enjoying the fluidity of watercolor and ink, Miki manipulates both accidental and controlled mark-making practices in unencumbered exploration.

Her installations are often site-specific, with public art projects that have introduced her to new materials like bronze, stainless steel, glass fiber reinforced concrete (GFRC), and collaboration with foundries and a 3D modeling artist.

Miki's shapeshifter characters are translated as ghosts, deities, or preternatural creatures, recontextualized into contemporary time. Fluid and non-binary in nature, they exist as

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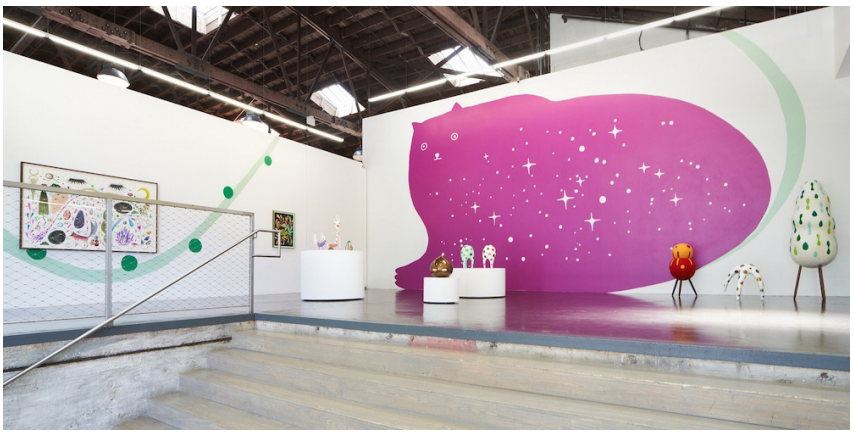
a hybrid of sacred and secular, animate and inanimate, rendering them boundless and independent.

"Their characteristics resonate with my own bicultural identities," she shared. "Being released from selecting only one, I can celebrate dual, dichotomous cultural influences. In our non-binary society where multiculturalism, gender fluidity, and bi-racial identity seem to be more the norm, our identities have become more complex."



"The Cat That Lived a Million Times" installation shot (2021), latex paint. Photo by Wyatt Hall

Shapeshifters also veer from an anthropocentric perspective of the universe. In Shinto, everything in the universe is sacred, as spirituality exists within materiality. Nothing is considered insignificant, even a mundane object like a simple tool is imbued with spirit.

"This is rooted in the concept of *Yaoyorozu no kami*, which literally translates to Eight Million Gods," Miki said. "They can only fulfill their duties as a collective, and meaningful deed can only be achieved by collaboration, not by one."

A kind of ethnology is the result of her curiosity on the topic. She is intrigued by the idiosyncrasies of each culture while recognizing the strange universality that runs through them all. Miki is curious about why we have created mythologies that continue to exist for centuries, and how narratives seemingly meant to be entertainment can offer deep knowledge about our history, systems, and evolutions.

Miki says that recent and current events have pushed our unresolved social issues to the surface. The examples of the COVID pandemic, the violences that led to the formulation of Black Lives Matter, war in Ukraine, and Asian hate crimes call into question the economic disparities which cause real suffering.

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"One thing I experienced during the pandemic was that we desperately seek to connect to each other," Miki said. "We are learning to adapt to new ways of doing so in an unpredictable world and the need to be flexible in an ever-shifting current."

Miki is prepping a new studio in West Berkeley, which will be the largest studio she's ever had at 1700 square feet, and will allow for separate drawing and sculpture spaces, and an installation area.

Now approaching 50 years old, Miki has clearly found her identity as an exhibiting artist. She is preparing for two solo exhibitions in spring 2023, one at Ryan Lee Gallery in New York, and another at the Kentucky Museum of Art and Craft in Louisville.

Locally, Miki is represented by Cult Aimee Friberg Exhibitions in San Francisco. She is contributing functional sculpture to the Minna Natoma Art Corridor Project, a unique pedestrian destination. Miki installed nine bronze pieces for the Uber HQ public art project last year, adding four new pieces more recently. She has also been invited to the Façade Project at the Institute of Contemporary Art San Jose, which runs through September 18 of next year.

Internationally, she is included in the "Certeza" exhibition at Colección SOLO in Madrid, through December. In 2023, Miki will be included in a group exhibition of Japanese artists at the Nassima Landau Foundation in Tel Aviv.

Miki invites her audience to become part of the dialogue and collaboration. In the meantime, she recommends listening to shapeshifters around you. They are always whispering.

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SURFACE

Designer of the Day: Masako Miki

By Ryan Waddoups | July 26, 2021

Masako Miki's life-size felted wool sculptures draw from ancestral Japanese traditions that open our mind to multiculturalism and non-binary identities. By employing exaggerated forms and playful pops of color that radiate an indomitable joy, the Osaka-born artist aims to carve out more inclusive narratives that feel relevant to everyone—and hopefully steer us toward a more welcoming society.

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Age: 47

Occupation: Artist.

Instagram: @masakomiki

Hometown: Osaka, Japan.

Studio location: Berkeley, California.

Describe what you make: Drawings, felt sculptures, installations, and public art.

Animated Moon (2020) at Uber. Photography by Henrik Kam

The most important thing you've designed to date: I just completed a large public art project consisting of nine painted bronze sculptures commissioned by Uber HQ in San Francisco. It's a sculpture park along a public pathway, and the sculptures range from three to 20 feet high. This installation includes the largest sculpture I've made in my career. I'm very happy to see the new appearance of bronze with bright automobile paint finish. The most exciting part is that I contributed to creating a public space for the community. It's important that we have access to art outside of museums and galleries. We should be exposed to more art and creative product in our daily lives.

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Describe the problem your work solves: What I believe is that our current social/racial injustice is resulted from old mythologies and fictional narratives. I'd like to contribute by creating a context where we can generate new mythologies that are relevant and just to all of us. The inclusive narratives and redefined social values can steer us to a better society. It's a small contribution I can make as an artist, but I believe change comes from a small place and this can grow into large collective efforts.

Describe the project you are working on now: Right now two solo exhibitions just opened in July and run through September 25, 2021. New Mythologies at CULT Aimee Friberg Exhibitions in San Francisco, and Radical Hope at Ryan Lee Gallery in New York. New Mythologies includes watercolor drawings, bronze and felt sculptures, and mural installations. "Radical Hope" is a special gallery window installation of six felt sculptures and wall design, right next to The High Line in New York. The best spot to see the installation is from The High Line.

A new or forthcoming project we should know about: I have a public art project in the San Francisco Bay area coming up, and I'm creating benches with reclaimed redwood. I'm also working on the production of large bronze sculptures and preparing to collaborate with a ceramic studio in Mexico for a large-scale mural.

Installation view of Matrix exhibition 273 Shapeshifters in a Park at Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, 2019.

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Connecting Shapeshifter and Contemplating Chestnut Shapeshifter (both 2021). Photography by John Wilson White

What you absolutely must have in your studio: Podcasts, audio books, and good coffee are musts. I have a pretty good set up in my studio. I like listening to audio books in English and Japanese. It's interesting to hear how the same content is translated with each language.

What you do when you're not working: I'm always working in my studio. But I love eating good food, cooking when I have time, and traveling. I go back to Japan at least once a year, but it's been challenging to go back there due to Covid. I always go to a new hot spring when I go there.

Sources of creative envy: I love any kind of craft/folk art from different cultures like Japanese Mingei, Mexican folk art, Danish craft, and so on. One of my favorite museums is the National Museum of Ethnology in Osaka, Japan. Ancient artifacts from all over the world are always inspiring because they illuminate the real sense of life in different times and regions. As a living artist, Hiroshi Sugimoto's installations have always been inspiring for me. My recent visit to his Enoura Observatory in Odawara, Tokyo was memorable. The glass stage with amphitheater seating facing to the Pacific Ocean was just incredible.

The distraction you want to eliminate: Social media.

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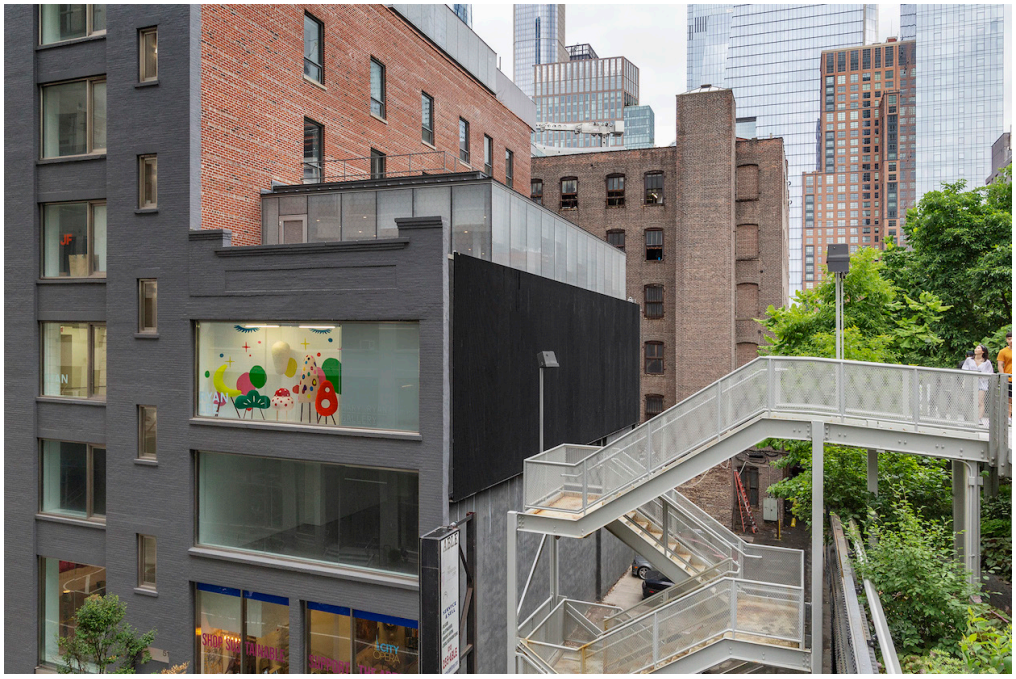

Radical Hope at Ryan Lee Gallery, 2021

Concrete or marble? More leaning to concrete now. I am developing concept designs for a public art project with concrete with terrazzo tiles.

High-rise or townhouse? Townhouse. In the future, I am contemplating building a Hiraya (traditional one-story townhouse) in the countryside in Japan.

Remember or forget? Remember and Reminder.

Aliens or ghosts? Aliens and ghosts. I am a (legal) alien who creates artwork about ghosts.

Dark or light? Dark and light. Dark is light, and light is dark.