



Born in Osaka, Japan, Masako Miki has made the Bay Area, and Berkeley in particular, her home for more than twenty years. She works in multiple media, creating sculptures, installations, murals, and works on paper. In her work, Miki remains close to her ancestral traditions, especially those that arise from Japanese folklore and her association with Shinto beliefs and practices. The centrality of this inspiration is evident throughout Miki's artistic work, as she continually looks to the spiritual realm and places herself at the intersection of animate and inanimate spiritual crossroads.

Miki often portrays different species of animals in relation to one another as a metaphor for personal transformation or the precariousness of our physical and emotional surroundings. The natural world is a constant source of inspiration, and she delights in juxtaposing unlikely pairings, such as the wolf and whale that appear in a large mural she created during a 2015 residency at the Facebook headquarters in Silicon Valley.

The feather is a new character for her that arose out of another recent residency at the Native American Sanctuary of Gualala, in Mendocino, California. The feather drawings come directly from a spiritually charged experience she had while on a tour of the sanctuary, in which a feather appeared to follow her and eventually ended up in her hands. In a number of her two-dimensional print works she explores Native American imagery in a quest for its spiritual roots that is similar to her approach in the Japanese-inspired work. She is interested in the process of cultural assimilation.

A number of Miki's works explore her interest in Shinto, Buddhist, and native Japanese culture. The characters she develops are inspired by these traditions, such as her own Japanese traditions around communicating with the deceased in Obon ceremonies, in which the dead return each year to visit their living relatives. That interest in the supernatural can be discerned in her images of the spirit world. During a 2016 residency at the de Young museum in San Francisco, Miki created an environment exploring spiritual realms. Illuminated by glowing paper lanterns of various organic shapes, the installation recalls the experience of visiting ancestral temples in Japan where lanterns line the pathways and greet the visitor. Although abstract, the lanterns convey an ambiguous sense of a figurative spiritual world of ghosts inspired by the artist's deeply held Shinto beliefs. This lantern installation suggested a place of intersection, where tangible and intangible realms connect.

In exploring this world of shifting boundaries, Miki also creates larger-than-life-size, felt-covered forms drawn from the Japanese folk belief in *yōkai*, shape-shifters who can disguise themselves in different forms. In installations such as her current exhibition at BAMPFA, she sets the brilliantly colored forms in magical environments, suggesting another reality. The installation moves from the three-dimensional forms to the abstract images on the floor and walls, conveying a sense of expanding boundaries. Visitors are encouraged to interact with the sculptures by walking around and among the large forms, and to sense the changing dynamic between the forms as they morph and shift between two and three dimensions. The installation reflects Miki's interest and connection to Shinto traditions of the interrelatedness of all beings, animate and inanimate in the universe.

The artist says about this work:

My current series is inspired by the idea of animism from Shinto traditions of Japan. In Shinto belief, we say, "*Yaoyorozu no kami*," which literally translates to "eight million gods." It means there are a myriad of gods in this universe. They are both good and evil, with a wide range of personalities and characters. Sometimes it's interpreted that so many exist because they are incomplete deities. They fulfill their duties as a collective. This idea manifests in the belief of *yōkai* in Japanese cultures. The translation of *kami* as "god" is somewhat misleading, as Shinto practice and belief systems are less religious and more an intuitive understanding of the universe and the forces within. The *kami* are forces of good and evil and do not reside exclusively within one person, object, or thing, but are a combination of many forces working together.

The felt sculptures refer to the *yōkai* of Japanese folklore. The term means "shape shifter," and indicates a state of transformation represented by preternatural creatures, monsters, or ghosts. The *yōkai* may disguise themselves as animal (such as a cat or a fox) or human, or they may appear in a strange form such as a one-eyed goblin or a faceless ghost. One type, the *Tsukumogami*, consists of objects and tools that have come alive after 100 years of existence, such as the animated prayer beads (*Chiren-bozu*), animated ancient sutra (*Kyōrinrin*), and umbrella ghost (*Karakasa-obake*). *Tsukumogami* are both animated and inanimate objects, and there exists no distinction between material and immaterial worlds. In my work, shape-shifters are used as the signifier that creates the idea of dissolving boundaries; the signified.

In this installation, my intention is to create an environment where visitors can interact with the sculptures. The scale may invite a more visceral response. The accompanying wall and floor design signifies the expanding boundaries. These two-dimensional designs relate to the three-dimensional form of the sculpture. Shapes and forms are continuously dissolving, morphing, and reconstructing throughout the space.

My work attempts to challenge our notions of boundaries. I want to create a context where the familiar and unfamiliar lose their distinctions and the boundaries of dichotomies become blurred. By reinventing narratives from my cultural traditions, I want to suggest alternative interpretations where a new synthesis becomes possible.

Shinto tradition emphasizes the idea of interrelatedness in the universe. Its rituals are constant reminders of how things are connected, rather than disconnected. Thomas P. Kasulis, in his book *Shinto: The Way Home*, brings up the notion of the nostalgia associated with existential religious forms. The etymology of the word "nostalgia" is the "ache" (*algia*) to "return home" (*nostos*). This home may be interpreted as a way of living and thinking. It envisions a world beyond human-centric logic, where humanity was once a responsive part of nature, rather than an exploiter. In this spirit, Miki's work suggests that we are only a part of this universe, and these shape-shifters are reminders of our connectedness.

Julia M. White  
SENIOR CURATOR FOR ASIAN ART



MASAKO MIKI / MATRIX 273 IS ORGANIZED BY JULIA M. WHITE, SENIOR CURATOR FOR ASIAN ART, WITH MATTHEW COLEMAN, CURATORIAL ASSISTANT. THE MATRIX PROGRAM IS MADE POSSIBLE BY A GENEROUS ENDOWMENT GIFT FROM PHYLLIS C. WATTIS AND THE CONTINUED SUPPORT OF THE BAMPFA TRUSTEES.

THE ARTIST WISHES TO THANK THE WATERMILL CENTER'S INGA MAREN OTTO FELLOWSHIP FOR SUPPORT OF THE CREATION OF THE ARTWORK IN THIS EXHIBITION.

## Artist's Talk

Wednesday, January 16, 12:00

### FRONT

Left to right: *Karakasa-obake (Umbrella Ghost)*, 74 × 21 × 21 in.; *Ungaikyo (Possessed Mirror)*, 25½ × 35 × 10 in.; and *Kinoko (Mushroom Ghost)*, 38 × 34 × 19 in.; 2018; wool on foam, walnut and wenge wood.

### ABOVE

*Hitotsume-kozō (One-Eyed Goblin)*, 2018.

### CENTER

*Kuchisake-onna (Mouth Tear Woman)*, 2018.

### RIGHT

*Mori no Yokai (Shapeshifters of Forest)*, 2018 (installation view); wool, gold-filled pins, wood, paint; installation 8 × 20 ft.; individual sculpture dimensions vary, 3–7 in. Photo: Maria Baranova.

All images courtesy of the artist and CULT Aimee Friberg Exhibitions.

## Biography

Born in Osaka, Japan in 1973, Masako Miki received her BFA from Notre Dame De Namur University in 1996 and her MFA from San Jose State University in 2001. She has had solo and two-person exhibitions at The Watermill Center, Water Mill, New York; the de Young Museum, San Francisco; CULT Aimee Friberg Exhibitions, San Francisco; and elsewhere. Her work has been featured in group exhibitions at The Lab, San Francisco; the Worth Ryder Art Gallery, University of California, Berkeley; Kala Art Institute, Berkeley; Headlands Center for the Arts, San Francisco; Root Division Gallery, San Francisco; BAMPFA; and Pro Arts Gallery, Oakland; among others.

Miki was an artist in residence at The Watermill Center where she also completed a commissioned installation; Kala Art Institute; the de Young Museum; Facebook, Menlo Park, California; Kamiyama Artists in Residency, Tokushima, Japan; Project 387, Gualala, California; and Wassaic Project, Wassaic, New York. Among many honors, she received the Inga Maren Otto Fellow Award from The Watermill Center in 2018; the Artist Fellowship Award from Kala Art Institute in 2017; and The Santo Foundation Individual Artist Award in 2010. She is represented by CULT Aimee Friberg Exhibitions, San Francisco and she lives and works in Berkeley, California.

## Checklist

All works courtesy of the artist and CULT Aimee Friberg Exhibitions.

### 唐傘お化け

*Karakasa-obake (Umbrella Ghost)*  
2018  
Wool on foam, walnut wood  
78 × 23 × 23 in.

### 一つ目小僧

*Hitotsume-kozō (One-Eyed Goblin)*  
2018  
Wool on foam, walnut wood  
46 × 59 × 11 in.

### 口裂け女

*Kuchisake-onna (Mouth Tear Woman)*  
2018  
Wool on foam, cherry wood  
42 × 71 × 13 in.

### 鏡口

*Abumi-guchi (Stirrup Mouth Furry Ghost)*  
2018  
Wool on foam, walnut wood  
53 ½ × 48 × 29 in.

### 雲外鏡

*Ungaikyo (Possessed Mirror)*  
2018  
Wool on foam, walnut wood  
38 × 36 × 12 in.

### きのこ

*Kinoko (Possessed Mushroom Ghost)*  
2018  
Wool on foam, wenge wood  
54 × 54 × 28 in.

### 白澤

*Hakutaku (An Intelligent Creature with Knowledge of Harmful Spirits)*  
2018  
Wool on foam  
30 × 30 × 18 in.

### のっぺらぼう

*Noppera-bō (Faceless Ghost)*  
2018  
Wool on foam  
36 × 24 × 16 in.

### 目目連

*Mokumokuren (Continuous Eyes in Torn Shoji)*  
2018  
Wool on foam  
18 × 56 × 16 in.

### 一連坊主

*Ichiren-bozu (Animated Prayer Beads)*  
2018  
Wool on foam, mahogany wood  
128 × 12 × 12 in.

### 経凛々

*Kyōrinrin (Animated Ancient Sutra)*  
2018  
Wool on foam, mahogany wood  
84 × 48 × 14 in.

### 如意自在

*Nyōijizai (Grandchild's Hands—Animated Back-Scratcher)*  
2018  
Wool on foam  
96 × 48 × 48 in.

### 如意自在

*Nyōijizai (Grandchild's Hands—Animated Back-Scratcher)*  
2018  
Wool on foam  
4 × 6 × 6 in.

### 一連坊主

*Ichiren-bozu (Animated Prayer Beads)*  
2018  
Wool on foam  
24 × 16 × 16 in.; 12 × 16 × 16 in.



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