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In the Studio with Mariko Mori: At One with the Universe

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Forging New Relationships among Humans and Nature

With the new century, Mariko Mori's art changed from super-sleek fashion and commercial "pop" images of herself and others into art without human bodies that focuses on notions of inner peace; oneness with the cycles of life and history; and art oriented toward harmony with nature, the environment, the solar system, and other humans. Mori's exhibition *Rebirth* at Japan Society features four thematic sections: emerging life, the origin of things; rupture; and rebirth, symbolized by the artist's vision of a white hole emerging from a black hole. Her extensive research into prehistoric periods as well as into cosmology, including neutrinos born from supernovas – the birth and death of stars – is all in the service of figuring out, by connecting science with art, how humans can be one with the universe.

Rebirth is part of an even larger FAOU mission – to create art in six places of natural beauty worldwide, and to foster collaborations with others that will spread ecological well-being and spiritual harmony (without religious affiliations). Mori's art has been designed and installed on Seven Light Bay, Miyako Island (180 miles southwest of Okinawa) according to these principles, and another project is starting in Brazil.



Mariko Mori's studio.

This interview took place on the top floor of a building in Manhattan' fashion district, in the artist's all-white studio overlooking water towers and the city skyline.

Jan Garden Castro: How do you use your New York studio now that you've moved to London?

Mariko Mori: It has not changed. I do a Skype meeting almost every day. Before I moved to London, I was always traveling for exhibitions and for production, so communication with the studio was done remotely.

Castro: Skype does make localities universal. Could we discuss your new style, and could you discuss the transition from Manga and photo compositions to sculpture, drawing, and the theme of rebirth? Was it sudden or gradual?

Mori: The last photographic work was produced in 1998, quite a long time ago. In 1999, I produced an architectural installation called *Dream Temple*. Since then, I've been producing photographic work, but there's no appearance of myself since 1999. The main reason was my interests moved toward visualizing deeper consciousness with a person, so I no longer needed to utilize my body in my work. Instead of my body, people could see a computer graphic installation in an architectural setting.



Mariko Mori, Jomon Vase, Jomon period (3,500 – 2,500 BCE). Earthenware 11 5/8 inches high, 11 5/8 inches diameter
Collection of John C. Weber ©Mariko Mori . Photo: Richard Goodbody

Castro: How did you discover the Jōmon (cord-covered, c. 3500 – 2500 BCE) flame-like earthenware vase, and why is this an important symbol in your new body of work?

Mori: In the year 2000, I did a series of photographic and video work called *Beginning of the End*, with a video called *Link*. I visited five ancient sites — the Pyramids of Giza, [Teotihuacan](#), the Mayan Pyramids; Tiwanaku, Bolivia, and Angkor Wat. Even though the times were different, I saw some kind of universal concept in those five different civilizations. But I wanted to go even further into the past in history to an era before religion that was more universal – with more common faith. Then I started to look into both Japanese and Northern European ancient Celtic pre-historical civilizations. That’s how I discovered the pre-historical [Jōmon] because I wanted to find a universal idea that we all once connected to and shared. I was introduced to the collection at the Tokyo University Museum and was able to get many papers, many documents on the Jōmon archeological site, and that’s how I began my research more deeply.

Castro: You have also created stone installations on Kudaka Island, and some are repeated in the gallery using ceramic and Corian materials. Could you discuss what the Flat Stone and Transcircle installation patterns mean?



Sun Pillar, 2011. Layered acrylic, 4m © Faou Foundation, N Y. Photo: Richard Leroyd

Mori: For Kudaka Island, when I visited the real prehistoric site, I noticed some kinds of aesthetics that are not familiar for our culture; it’s chaotic, looks unbalanced, but it’s harmonized – it’s very new to me. I installed the coral [in the exhibition] by looking at the aesthetics and logic of the historical site and trying to learn. At the historical site, there are no rules about how they laid down the stone. Like people in modern society, they let go of all the rules and tried to feel natural. Kudaka Island was my first trial in trying to understand the feeling of it.

Castro: To achieve the feeling of the ancient stones, do you want to talk about the materials you chose to use?

Mori: Right. The primal stone is made of Lucite and very much inspired by the FAOU *Transcircle* made for the Akita prefecture. I felt the archeological site was also mirroring what

was happening in the sky. Then I decided to create, using Corian, an artificial stone material [with translucent properties] and using LED lights to display the movement of our solar system.

Castro: How did you discover the Corian?

Mori: It is used as countertops; one particular one is translucent, so that was new at the time, and I utilized LEDs inside to show the color. Each color represents each planet of our solar system: Earth is blue, Venus is magenta, and so on.



Real-time control system. 132 inches diameter, each stone 43 x 22 x 13 inches © Mariko Mori

Transcircle 1.1 Indoor, 2004. Stone, Corian, LED,

Castro: They're in a perfect circle instead of spread out in relation to the sun.

Mori: Yes, it's like a window, but when a star passes it, you see the color of that star; when you see two planets together, the color will be mixed.

Castro: Does the "white hole" installation in a spiral chamber have a scientific basis or is it a symbolic answer to the black hole theory?

Mori: Kyoto University gave me this black hole formula. From that formula, I created a black hole to eat the star and created the movement of light in a white hole [neutrinos]. The white hole that I produced is an interpretation, not a physical concept. According to black hole theory, 96% of the universe is invisible dark energy, so I wanted to visualize the *invisible energy* of the white hole starting to be reborn again from the black hole.

Castro: You seem to be working with scientists at a very high level to design your projects. Could you describe your FAOU mission to create six site-specific art installations in six unique ecological settings on six continents?

Mori: For the FAOU first project on Miyako Island, we invited specialists in ecological studies, the ocean, engineering, landscape engineering, and so on to give us guidance about the most eco-

friendly and delicate way to install the work. I couldn't have done this without their advice and support.

Castro: They were in Japan?

Mori: Yes. I invited many local engineers, for example, from Tokyo University and structural engineers from Okinawa mainland. Then, too, the production of the work itself was done by a company called Nippura who usually produce aquariums. Everything was a collaboration with specialists and engineers.

For Brazil, we invited an established, well known structural engineering company called Arup. We just finished a site survey and also have a landscape engineer. It's quite a learning process – understanding the natural environment as well as knowing the ecological needs and care of the site.

Castro: The FAOU mission includes clean energy, cultural studies, eco housing, agriculture, environmental studies, and eco tourism. How far has the Brazil project advanced in these directions?

Mori: We believe art can be a link to those disciplines. The Brazil project has just begun. Using the example of Miyako Island, a group of people are already doing eco-housing, and a professor from Tokyo University would like to use wave energy. Also, the island itself wants to change all cars to electric hybrid cars. We don't do these activities ourselves. We just make a network linking those people. *We want the art we create to help people focus on new relationships between humans and nature.* We have done eco-tourism already, introducing different sites on the island and bringing more awareness of how nature needs to be protected. Miyako Island is already an eco-island, so it's a good demonstration for people how the balance can be maintained. Miyako Island took four years.

The same thing is true in Brazil. The timing has to be right and will depend on how well people are responding. I have a staff that speaks Japanese, Portuguese, and English.

Castro: Good. Is there government involvement, making it a national park?

Mori: (Goes from her office into the main office and brings back a folder of documents) This is the letter for the commission from the Secretary of the Environment of the state of Rio de Janeiro. This is INEA, responsible for national water because it's a waterfall. This is from a mayor, from a secretary of the environment, from an owner of land, and so on.

Castro: It's great that you have good cooperation. I guess it's a challenge to create a network in every country. Your exhibition turns Japan Society into a spiritual, shining, reflexive space. Do you believe this kind of pure environment helps people find inner peace? What is your goal at Japan Society?

Mori: Before religion, in pre-historical times, our ancestors shared a universal idea. It seems to me we were more connected to each other and to nature. In contemporary society, we have

removed ourselves from nature. Countries and cultures have been divided in war. My goal is to re-introduce prehistorical ideas in order to connect ourselves once again. When I was researching the universe, it's all connected. It's strange to think human connections are not included. Family connections should remind us that we're all connected, that there is a life cycle of birth, death, and rebirth.

Castro: Are neutrinos — the death and rebirth of stars — a guiding metaphor for your project?

Mori: I produced a work called *Tom Na H'iu II* (2006, Glass, stainless steel, LED, 177 x 61 ½ x 29"), which was not included in the exhibition due to its size. This is a light sculpture whose theme is the neutrino, the soul of the universe. I wanted to connect this work to a super nova, the death of a star. A neutrino detecting system is the only way to connect with a supernova from earth. The symbol of rebirth was present in all of the pre-historical sites I visited. By connecting that to the supernova, I wanted to contribute to the idea of rebirth.

Mariko Mori's home in Japan:



Kundaka Island Site 2, Installation 3. Mariko Mori Lucite ring, 2012. Primal Memory, 2004, Lucite. This interview took place in October, 2013 in Mariko Mori's New York studio and is used with the artist's permission.