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MAGIC EYE Mara Coson

There may be a man hunched over on a stool who could be smoking a cigarette, three figures with eyes and mouths large and open listening through a thick cloud barrier of something, a soundless bamboo wind chime, a volcano quietly blowing long strands of hair over the garden of earthly delights, a dappled dog, a game of Nokia snake, two very big feet, mushroom smog rising from a top hat, a glimmering sea where tiny figures pick seashells under the moonlight. *Some enchanted evening, you may see a stranger ... across a crowded room ... and somehow you know ...*¹

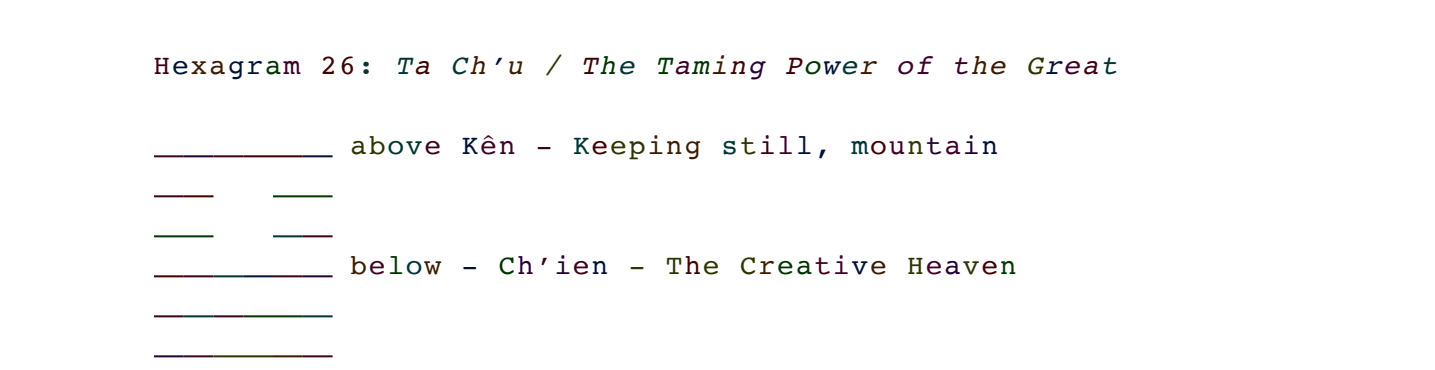
This may be a door, some kind of portal, something see-thru, containing or keeping in, or keeping out, a turnstile in-and-out that in the late hours of a night at the museum comes alive, like in the film, and out of which something emerges.

“Did you see the woman standing right there?” He rubbed his mind’s eyes, blinking and opening them wider and wider. “There was a figure of a woman, I saw her, inside the painting, I swear I saw her yesterday but she’s gone now!”

Opening night a year later and suddenly an apparition of one closed eyelid the size of a wall clock’s shadow at the bottom right, wet with tears. “But the leak from the ceiling is at least a metre away,” said someone crouched down training his head like an antenna up and around the ceiling skylight, moonlight. “No, it can’t have been ...” Commotion, clouds, wine glasses emptied, a wail, the closed eyelid whose one tear began absorbing into nowhere. A technician stood by, mouth open, holding a tissue. Stigmata ... Moments later, it disappeared completely. Another artist looked over and whispered, “Tears happen to me all the time.”

The smaller ones on the wall presented themselves for a mistaken moment as I Ching hexagrams. Hundreds of compressed interlocked fingers appearing as hands and as one or all of the sixty-four combinations from the *I Ching, The Book of Changes*, of which Carl Jung wrote: “Rerum novarus cupidus. Why not venture a dialogue with an ancient book that purports to be animated?”²

I closed my eyes and asked the oracle, “How do I describe what I’m seeing?” And I cast the coins, digitally, on an old website with an ochre background and many ads, rather than my own coins and my own hands, asking about how to see something that somehow so resembles it:



Heaven within the mountain: I meet another where the pursuit of self-knowing is a dark leap into so much unknowability.

My minutes recall how the Bodhidarma faced the wall for nine years. My eyes bulged and my nose grew into a bulb out of which another eye could emerge. It has been said that in his anger of accidentally falling asleep, he cut off his eyelids to stay awake. Back on the Internet I overhear: “The wall is there but the wall is not there.”

But this is not meditative, there is so much surface tension. The man who saw the apparition returns. “Now you see?”

“But goddammit, why all black?” Screamed a viewer suddenly appearing, appearing like me, maybe having just arrived from the wing of Impressionists, pulverising her heels, protesting that a multicolour painting must exist, colourful like the colour spill in the 1958 film *South Pacific*, forever penetrated into the vistas of the imagined Bali H’ai. Closer to real life, in the Pingelap Atoll, somewhere in the Pacific Ocean, many are colourblind.

One day the colour violet appears like a shadow to the black, an acid glow, like a tell of a magic spell or some kind of abstract enchantment. The impact is simultaneously subtle and almost blinding.

“But goddammit, is the pattern saying *something*?” Insisted the same person, emerging again from the hall of the Impressionists, déjà vu, her fingertip one centimetre scanning from left to right trying to read, foregoing in her search for words that may be alien code that would one day be processed and understood by a future version of a super computer in a form that might read like poetry. That all this chance can become words. Carl Jung, again, describing the possibilities presented by the I Ching: “We must admit that there is something to be said for the immense importance of chance. An incalculable human effort is directed to combating and restricting the nuisance or danger represented by chance.”

Once, standing in front of it, many arm-spans wide and almost twice me, tight and taut leaning against a wall, almost mimicking the capture of light in some areas, itself a mirror to a shiny crowd, suddenly the quiet eclipsed the room, and I imagined silence to be the colour grey. Another time, standing in front of a particularly big one, I was eaten.

“‘It’s so chaotic’: Humpback whales are forming super-groups” went the headline of an article in the BBC of a couple who had witnessed the sight and stench of 300 whales coming together. And much like this room, “We heard the breathing of over a hundred whales.”

Now, the last hours of the show. A viewer stares before the work and it stares back, wondering where they’ve seen each other before. The wind blows. His companion thinks of Chinese ink and describes this vision as like a motherboard. Another recalls her mother and her oils. A crowd gathers, listening, thinking of vanquished demons, Fra Angelico, breathing, free drawing, aliens, a cake of *pu-erh* tea, a Philippine woodpecker, a wall, nothing at all, and all sorts of shapes that a mouth makes. There are people who miss it. Somewhere, the smell of a phantom cigarette. “Hey!” A shout from a distance, from an invigilator warning from his high stool, and seeing no stirring, goes back to his air guitar and its silver strings, pressing against its imagined fretboard to play something as invisible as the work he watches over.

But if by chance we should have discovered the knack of holding wide our attention, then the magic thing happens. – Marion Milner

- 1 Lyrics to the ballad “Some Enchanted Evening” by Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II, from the 1958 film adaptation of the musical *South Pacific*.
- 2 The Latin phrase translates as “desiring new things.”

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Maria
Taniguchi:

Afterimage

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The act of drawing a form on an empty plane. The act of casting material into empty space. Creation may seem like an ordinary, everyday matter, yet when one considers that it brings something into being from nothing – that something is thrown into the world – the action suddenly feels as strange and wondrous as moments when the existence of countless people in this world becomes inexplicably unfamiliar.^[1] To release a work into the world, is in itself a kind of unanticipated accident – as fresh and strange a matter as one’s own existence in the world. What if we were to pose such a question – if the very process of creation were offered back to the world as the work? Perhaps, its method might be this: refusing the complete resolution of material and form, making us imagine that what exists might just as well not have existed, and helping us remember that what we have seen is not the whole of what there is. Something like loosely driving a wooden post into the floor, attaching a thread to it and letting it sway gently with the wind – I find myself thinking that creation might be possible along those lines.

Because the question can be complex, let the shape be the most basic, the form the most concise and the colour the most restrained. Would it not be most effective, ultimately, to retrace any matter from the ground up, reconstructing it through its very mode of generation? Here, chance is produced through the act of repetition;^[2] what at a glance appears precisely completed still bears the trace of the hand; what seems to tell no story in fact contains personal narrative. This duality, or rather, this complexity, I propose is the entry point to Maria Taniguchi’s work.

This exhibition opens with wooden sculptures in the shapes of the numbers 0 and 1 that are suspended in space, slightly lifted off the floor and reaching nearly to the ceiling. These simple circular and linear forms call to mind the digits of a binary system^[3] while also tracing something like an undulation through space, and the repetition of their making guides the viewers’ steps as they enter the exhibition. The surfaces of these smooth sculptures, upon closer inspection, reveal the delicate grain of wood. They are carved piece by piece from the *duhat*, or Java plum tree (*Syzygium cumini*), and assembled into lines and circles. The *duhat* fruit, which stains the entire mouth a vivid indigo-violet, is one that the artist’s mother craved while she was pregnant with the artist. In the Philippines, such craving is called *lihi* – a longing that extends beyond food to encompass the proximity of objects or even people. It is believed that certain qualities of the craved thing are somehow passed on or encoded into the child, and these sculptures serve as a cipher for this process. Accepting the natural shapes produced by the wood’s surface, density and curving form, the sculpture is infused with the porosity of body, sensation and memory.

The experience of this contrast – the concise form seen from afar, and the delicate materiality and marks of the hand that are revealed up close – connects to the grammar of the artist’s most well-known series, the so-called “brick paintings,” which she began in 2008. All bearing the title *Untitled*, these canvases come in a range of sizes both large and small. In these paintings, a pattern repeats like a wall of densely stacked bricks. On a canvas prepared with a flat, even basecoat, the artist draws a rough grid^[4] of two-by-six-centimetre rectangles in graphite, then fills the interior of each brick with a thin wash of acrylic paint. While many are rendered in black on a dark grey basecoat, there are also paintings filled with white tones or with the deep purple reminiscent of *duhat* fruit. As Taniguchi does not use any fixed formula for her pigments, each canvas is filled with a slightly different density of colour, and the saturation of hue, the tracks of the brush and the absorption of paint differ each time, such that these minute differences are inscribed differently on every canvas.

The labour-intensive paintings born of this repetition also involve a deeply physical process. The artist works with the canvas laid flat on the floor, her body pressed almost flush against the surface as she paints. When she fills each brick, her body concentrates wholly upon that one spot, as though laying each brick in turn, so that the subtle shifts in tone across the whole, and the accidental patterns that emerge, can only be witnessed once the body has fully separated from the canvas. In the period when she worked mostly at home, the size of each canvas was sometimes determined by the dimensions of a room in her house. One canvas, for instance, might be sized to what would be possible within the space of the living room. This physical intimacy and spatial closeness situate these patterned paintings less as geometric abstractions and more as traces of an environment where living and working are woven together, bound to the places held in the artist’s personal memory.

The series acquires a structural volume when the works are installed leaning against the wall in the exhibition space. This choice departs from the convention of flat painting affixed to the wall and instead situates the work somewhere between sculpture and painting. Viewers lean their bodies in close to the canvas to take in the subtle colour and touch within each brick. Their postures, echoing the very proximity the artist had while painting, construct yet another compelling tension between the painting and the viewer’s body. Each canvas exists independently while also is part of an assemblage of canvases – part of the broader brick painting series – that connects and extends physical space, both inside and out.^[5] Through this protocol, we can imagine paintings placed in some wider space, beyond the rectangular gallery, layered onto the afterimage of the exhibition in which we now stand.

The four videos placed throughout the exhibition are a medium that extends, in compound ways, the artist’s interest in repetition, labour, the process of making, the contingent and subtle qualities of material, and time and memory. *Mies 421* (2010) and the newly commissioned *A painter, if black were a place* (2026) form a parallelism, while *Figure Study* (2012) and *Figure Study* (2018) are presented as a pair under a shared title.

If, at the threshold of the exhibition,

^[1] What distinguishes transformation – the shaping of clay, for example – from creation? Is it this inner life that we recognise in others but cannot access; a subjectivity that artworks may also share? If so, perhaps this act of creation is both the shaping of clay and breathing life into it; a golem that navigates the world on its own terms, as intriguing and inaccessible to us as the inner lives of others.

^[2] Every time I see one of Maria Taniguchi’s canvases I’m reminded of Gilles Deleuze’s concept of *repetition* which, if I remember correctly, might be understood in its most basic terms as a force that actively produces *difference*. The assumption that repetition can only re-produce – the same ideas, forms, systems – ignores the countless human and inhuman, perceptible and imperceptible variables from which difference – sometimes subtle, sometimes profound – emerges.

On another note, I’m also reminded of an adage that is most commonly misattributed to Albert Einstein – something along the lines of “insanity is doing the same thing and expecting different results.” The complexity and singularity of Taniguchi’s systematically painted canvases challenge this received wisdom, although its continued misattribution might point to a form of collective psychosis.

^[3] While in the realm of language, machine language (really, the binary code of the digits 0 and 1) offers near-endless possibilities – at the most fundamental level this text, the messages we share with friends and loved ones, the digital videos looping in this exhibition can all be expressed as a dizzying stream of 0s and 1s. Taniguchi’s *Runaways* are inescapably three-dimensional. Walking around and through these sculptures, they are constantly reconfigured and, for a moment, may sketch out the Greek letter *phi* Φ. *Phi* is generally used in mathematics to represent the “golden ratio,” an irrational number approximately equal to 1.618. Or, in binary code something like 1.100111100011 0101001111101111100 ...

The golden ratio is reflected in the Fibonacci sequence and appears in nature, geometry, art and architecture (with varying degrees of exactitude) throughout history, including in works as varied as Leonardo da Vinci’s *Vitruvian Man*, Salvador Dali’s *The Sacrament of the Last Supper*, Le Corbusier’s Modulor system and Mies van der Rohe’s *Farnsworth House*.

^[4] My first draughting lessons as an architecture student were premised on the grid. In this context, linear perspective offered a device for rendering the illusion of depth, volume and distance – the illusion of space. Taniguchi’s “brick paintings” reject this illusion, existing simultaneously as a wall of interlocking bricks that refuses to let the viewer in and as an infinite void, a space that threatens to consume the same viewer, like a black hole, should they venture too close.

^[5] I had trouble understanding Taniguchi’s brick paintings until the artist, standing amongst her own work at the Museum of Contemporary Art and Design in Manila, shared the passing remark that the paintings are not separate. They are, in fact, all parts of a single artwork that continues to grow. Recounting her first encounter with Frank Stella’s *Wolfboro* series, Rosalind Krauss wrote: “In front of any one of them, I felt somehow that I was seeing less than the whole painting; more precisely, that I was sharing the same space with one-quarter of the full pictorial experience, the other three-quarters being elsewhere.” In the same text, another reflection on Stella reads: “The image appears to contain an afterimage from the past as the ‘ground’ against which its figuration or meaning is understood.” Perhaps singularity, pictorial representation and so many other assumptions about art are simply afterimages of the past that we can’t seem to overcome, as if we all stared too long at the sun.

Rosalind E. Krauss, “Problems of Criticism X: Pictorial Space and the Question of Documentary,” *Artforum* 10, no. 3 (1973): <https://www.artforum.com/features/problems-of-criticism-x-pictorial-space-and-the-question-of-documentary-215399/>.

the lines of 0 and 1 propose a visual rhythm, and the brick paintings encircling the space accentuate that rhythm through structures of large and small repetition, then *Mies 421*, placed near the entryway, introduces the exhibition’s tonality through sound – a simple beat of a metronome.^[6] The video shows architectural details of the Barcelona Pavilion that was designed by the German architect Ludwig Mies van der Rohe with Lilly Reich as collaborator for the 1929 International Exposition held in Barcelona. The structure used the steel and glass emblematic of modern architecture to render its interior transparent.^[7] Taniguchi’s video – made like Chris Marker’s *La Jetée* short, by editing together still images – cycles through the architecture’s surfaces, lines, materials and partial structures in time with the metronome’s quickening beat, building tension within the acceleration and repeating pulse to arrive at the figure sculpture by Georg Kolbe set in one corner of the pavilion. The modernist materials, the linear structure and the recurring rhythm recall the concise form of Taniguchi’s brick paintings^[8] – yet just as the contingent colour of the details in her paintings unsettles their restrained format, so too does the video collapse its own tension with the contrast of Kolbe’s sculpture, which depicts a female body in supple lines, mirrored in the surrounding water. What matters here is not the modern sensibility of the architecture, but rather the moment in which the order, traced through the rhythm of the video, begins to waver.

Taniguchi treats each still image of her videos as a kind of “object,” recognising the gaps between images as negative space. The newly commissioned work *A painter, if black were a place* actively foregrounds this negative space. The video is presented, like *Mies 421*, by linking still images taken by an unknown photographer,^[9] capturing cropped views of a house and a garden which belong to the artist’s mother, Cristina “Kitty” Taniguchi. Between an image of a terracotta sculpture and Kitty’s painting sit black frames that on close inspection, turn out to be black applied by the artist’s own hand.^[10] Composing a whole through fragments while at the same time depicting a process in which the whole can never be gathered into a single overview, this work is at once a record of an intimate place and an offering of a photographic moment that cannot be fully remembered – revealing the irreducibility of memory.

How is being born? How is being made? Did one come into being from a mother’s womb, perhaps from the *duhat* tree – or did one erupt from the earth, or at the base of a potter’s wheel?

In *Figure Study* (2012), two people dig the ground and gather earth in a corner of dense jungle. They shovel and fill white sacks with clay. There is no narrative event, only labour in repetition, and the irregular sounds of shovels and tools striking earth that form a counterpoint to the mechanical metronome of *Mies 421*. *Figure Study* (2018), which transitions from a red to a blue background,^[11] from still to moving image, treats the process of transforming material into something. It is as if the later work takes up what comes after the clay has been extracted in the 2012 work. Here, the artist focuses on the very act of creation. Hands, the surface of the clay and the material are held within a narrow, cropped frame. This partial visual information proposes a way of linking scenes in memory through parts. The whole is never revealed, even after something has been made. The concept of “study” that emerges here connects to Taniguchi’s memory of her time at the Philippine High School for the Arts (PHSA) that was founded in 1977 by Imelda Marcos, an institution located at the foot of Mount Makiling for talented students.

I was interested in reproducing certain conditions from my time in Makiling. I asked a group of artists to help me re-enact some simple exercises and activities – making sculptures out of pancakes, shredding newspaper in preparation for making paper mache pulp, moulding clay, arranging small branches and twigs. The activities over a few hours were documented on video and photographically, however this is not immediately evident in the video as my videos tend to be sketches and often do not elucidate a large amount of background activity leading to their making. I instead chose a sparse number of images and a short video clip to be arranged in a loop. The photos were cast in red light similar to a darkroom. The video clip was cast in blue light. It was important for me to have a feeling of nascency – things just starting to take form. I was thinking of the formation of subjectivity – my own and in general. I suppose there were some structural and pedagogical impressions as well, but to be honest these for me were not too articulated at that time.’

Her remarks, linking nascency to the act of creation, lead me to consider how the elements of her work – sculpture, video, paintings – are bound together by the continuity of a fundamental act of making, and how this continuity is tied to an attitude of questioning her own subjectivity and bearing witness to her own life.^[12] The exhibition’s title, *Afterimage* – pointing to that visual phenomenon in which an image remains even after the act of seeing has ended – is a device that does not designate anything fixed. Does the afterimage arise only after one leaves the exhibition space? Or is the exhibition we are looking at already the afterimage of something that has existed? An afterimage, meaning what has disappeared yet not entirely disappeared, might also signify a state in which past forms of art history linger like ghosts, never quite fixed in place.^[13] The reductive formats of Western Minimalism and its use of industrial materials are momentarily evoked – yet might this not be a state that neither fully follows them nor entirely severs their afterimage? Ambivalent relations and distances that neither refuse connection nor simply reproduce it arise here. Like glimpsing something that appears and disappears between water and fire, this exhibition opens moments held within the eye: how some form, some live, come into being, endure, wither, erode and return to a state of incomplection.

— * Maria Taniguchi, as quoted in Patrick Flores, “Strains,” in *Maria Taniguchi: Body of Work* (Museum of Contemporary Art and Design), forthcoming.

— Haeju Kim is senior curator and Head of Residencies at the Singapore Art Museum.

^[6]

If the grid, as a fundamental element of imposing standardisation onto both linear perspectives and orthographic projections, the metronome, like the clock, imposes a similar standardisation onto time.

^[7]

The structure in Taniguchi’s video is itself the afterimage of the original pavilion that was constructed for the 1929 exposition. Since no final architectural drawings existed, this replica was built between 1983 and 1986 by a team of Catalan architects referencing photographs and written descriptions of the original structure. Dissatisfied with aspects of the 1929 construction, Mies van der Rohe doctored images of the structure so that they would more closely align with his original vision, leading to still unresolved questions of whether the structure that stands today in Barcelona represents the original, the manipulated images or something entirely different.

^[8]

Each time I see *Mies 421*, I am reminded of *Phantom: Mies as Rendered Society* by the Spanish architect Andrés Jaque. Amongst many other objects, the faded red curtains, chipped travertine slabs and worn cushions that Jaque found in the basement of the Barcelona Pavilion (the original pavilion did not have a basement and Jaque’s project reveals the unseen labour that allows the unchanging space of the Pavilion to function day-to-day) expose the inevitability of time, the fragility of monumentality and the human bodies absent from nearly all images of the structure. More specifically, I’m reminded of a photo taken by Jaque in 2012 that captures two broken pieces of tinted glass; the chance composition of the overlapping glass panes, partially concealing the concrete walls of the basement, offers a level of subtlety akin to Taniguchi’s brick paintings. Surfaces with seemingly infinite depth.

^[9]

These heavily pixelated digital images that were found on an old hard drive with no context for their original documentation take on a new meaning in a moment of ultra-high-definition images, both documentary and artificially generated, capturing the mediation and inevitable decay of personal and collective memory in an era of constant acceleration. The pace at which we encounter images in contemporary society makes Taniguchi’s images, which remain on screen for a mere six or seven seconds, feel almost endless.

^[10]

Paradoxically, the hand-painted black transition images – on screen for only a fleeting second – are far more “information dense” in terms of their resolution than the found images that occupy the bulk of the video’s runtime.

^[11]

“I will never know how you see red and you will never know how I see it.” Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception: And Other Essays on Phenomenological Psychology, the Philosophy of Art, History and Politics* (Northwestern University Press, 1964), 17; or “What does blue mean to someone who can’t see blue? Or red to someone who can’t see red? You can give physics’ answer with numbers and formulas about waves of light, but still, the person who has never seen red will not be able to imagine it. In the same way, people cannot be understood until they have been experienced.” Paul Auster, as quoted in Beatrice Galilee, “A Colour for the Blind,” in *Andrés Jaque: PHANTOM. Mies as Rendered Society* (Fundació Mies van der Rohe, 2013), 32.

^[12]

If I may return to Deleuze in the context of Taniguchi’s *Figure Study* (2018), I’m reminded of the idea of processual creativity – a productive force, like repetition – through which the individual subject is transformed into an active participant, ultimately treating their life as a work of art.

^[13]

In his writing on phenomenology, Maurice Merleau-Ponty often uses the visual metaphor of the *afterimage* to illustrate the myriad ways in which the past “haunts” and structures our perception of the present. In talking-around the legacies of modernist painting that Taniguchi is often, if incorrectly, associated with, it seems that there is indeed a spectre haunting the gallery – the spectre of modernism.

— Duncan Bass is curator at the Singapore Art Museum.