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Odani's mixed message

Japanese sculptor conjures phantoms in cross-media show

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Hollywood films, comedians, monsters: Judging from the topics Motohiko Odani covers in conversation, you would never guess he's an artist — least of all a sculptor.

Seeing him in photographs wouldn't help either. With leather jacket, tinted glasses, wavy hair and a tendency to strike killer poses at the sight of a camera, he looks like he'd be more familiar with a guitar and a microphone than a hammer and a chisel.

And yet, an artist he certainly is. In 2003, Odani represented Japan at the world's pre-eminent art event, the Venice Biennale, and last week he became the youngest artist ever, at the age of 38, to open a solo exhibition using the full expanse of the esteemed Mori Art Museum in Tokyo's Roppongi district.

If Odani the man is characterized by an unlikely mix of interests and a slightly perplexing appearance, then his art is even harder to pin down.

Branching into the kind of media-mixing allusion that decorates many of his explanations, Odani tells *The Japan Times*, "These days, you ask someone what's on their iPod and they'll have everything there from funk and jazz to rock and pop. I'm like that, too. If I think something is necessary for a particular artwork, then I'll bring it in."

A walk around the exhibition bears out that statement. Tracing the artist's career chronologically, the show starts with a set of five photographs titled "Phantom-Limb," from 1997. The works depict a young girl lying on her back staring up at the camera. At first it seems pleasant, until you notice that her hands, outstretched at her sides, are oddly bloodied, as though they have been mauled with a power tool. That work might have you thinking Odani is a photographer, but then the next room is filled entirely with finely wrought objects, such as a dress made from human hair, and a baby deer — a real one that's been stuffed — with hind legs that have been fitted with aluminum supports, as though they're recovering from a break.



Artist in wolf's clothing: Motohiko Odani combines unlikely elements to create oddly unsettling sculptures. "Human Lesson (Dress 01)" is a dress made from wolfskins. SATOKO KAWASAKI

Over the course of his career, Odani has shuffled, iPod-like, between almost every medium available: photography, video, drawing, installation and sculpture. For him, this tendency stems from an expanded definition of "sculpture," which is what he studied at the prestigious Tokyo University of the Arts in the 1990s.

"For me, figurative sculpture is not just about depicting a man on a horse or something. A video installation is also figurative sculpture," he says. "The goal of sculpture, I think, is to pursue and give physical expression to the deeper layers of the human mind."

Early in his career, Odani worked toward that goal by focusing on the depiction of sensations or emotions — the kinds of abstract ideas that wouldn't normally lend themselves to three-dimensional expression.

His solution was to create disconcerting juxtapositions that focus the viewer's awareness on a particular idea. The young girl's serene facial expressions coupled with her mangled hands in "Phantom-Limb," for example,

serve to concentrate viewers' awareness on their own tactile sensations, almost to the point of vicarious pain.

Likewise, by intrusively bracing the hind legs of an animal as appealing as a fawn, Odani focuses our attention on our own sense of movement.

As Odani's career progressed, his ambitions grew and he sought to give sculptural expression to ever more complex concepts. One of the highlights of the show comes toward the end. "Inferno" is an exhilarating installation consisting of an octagonal room, the eight walls of which are covered with projections of water rushing violently downward. Entering the room, which also includes a roaring soundtrack, is like standing in a waterfall — or more like floating in a waterfall, because the ceiling and floor are covered with mirrors that make it seem to continue infinitely above and below.

Like "Phantom-Limb" and the baby deer work, "Erectro (Bambi)" (1998), "Inferno" is designed to spark off a particular sensation in the mind, and it also uses juxtapositions to focus our attention. In this case, the overbearing power of the falling water is coupled with a sense of giddy weightlessness resulting from the mirror illusion.

Odani speaks forthrightly about his own work. His best creations, he says, are the ones that involve the most complex layering of ideas. "The artworks are not single layered, they don't have just one concept, but are really a complex mixture of things," he says. "So when you look at them, your emotion becomes complicated. You can't just dismiss a work as this or that, but it's all these things at once."

When "Phantom-Limb" leaves its viewers with a nagging sense of unease — Is the girl in pain, or not? Should I feel happy or sad for her? — then that, for Odani, is a sign that he has done a good job.

Branching into one of his favorite topics of conversation, film, Odani compares his exhibition to director Christopher Nolan's recent mind-bending outing, "Inception."

"In that film, they keep proceeding down deeper and deeper into dream worlds. There is a similarity in that with what I am trying to do," he says, explaining that the more levels an artwork possesses, the better it is.

Odani says it is no coincidence that an artist and a film director would be drawn to similarly complex mind-scapes. "We're all working under the same



Powerful procession: Motohiko Odani cuts a rock-starlike figure in front of one of his recent sculptures, "Hollow: What rushes through every mind," at his new solo exhibition at Tokyo's Mori Art Museum. SATOKO KAWASAKI

influences in our present-day society," he says.

Chief among those influences at the moment is the Internet. "The border between our lives and computers is now almost imperceptible," he says. "Even if we are talking like this, in my mind I might be thinking, 'I wonder if any e-mail has come for me or not.' Our brains are gradually being drawn to what is happening in the computer."

Odani thinks this is leading to a detachment from our physical bodies that will become more exacerbated in the future. "In a way we are becoming like phantoms, living but dead at the same time," he says.

One of the key artworks in the exhibition is "SP4 the specter — What wanders around in every mind" (2009), a life-size sculpture of a galloping horse complete with wraith-like rider, samurai sword in hand. Startling for its grotesque appearance, it is hard to believe the work is made by the same hand that created the fawn a few rooms previous.

Multifaceted like all of Odani's works, "SP4 the specter" is first of all a cheeky

riff on a classical Western sculptural motif: the mounted warrior. But where classical sculptures would convey a particular identity, a well-known military leader, for example, Odani's horseman is stripped of both face and identity. Exhibition curator Natsumi Araki writes that the work is a comment on the vacuous sculpture that arose when Western art forms were imported wholesale into Japan around the turn of the 19th century.

At the same time, "SP4 the specter" has pop-culture references — it is reminiscent of the mounted warrior-wraiths in "Lord of the Rings," for one thing — and it is symbolic of the same kind of mind-body detachment that Odani sees as a feature of contemporary society.

Influential art critic Noi Sawaragi explains Odani's willingness to blend various mediums and his voracious appetite for cultural quotation in terms of a broad artistic trend. In the 1990s, he says, Japanese art reached a stage where the boundary between subculture and high culture had been broken down. The

artist Takashi Murakami, Sawaragi notes, leveled the playing field irreversibly, by mixing what was at the top — painting and fine art — with what was at the bottom — manga and anime.

And the artists of Odani's generation reveled in the flattened landscape that emerged. "For Odani, . . . otaku (geek) culture, the romantic sculptural forms of Western art, horror or splatter movies and even stand-up comedy" are all part of the same "integrated whole," Sawaragi writes.

This is worth remembering as you wander through the exhibition. In these haunting sculptures that will reverberate in your mind for days after you've left the museum — like a cymbal left undampened — Odani is giving physical expression to a world that includes all of our inner sensations and emotions, all of our experiences online and offline, and all of our cultural icons both real and imagined.

"Motohiko Odani: Phantom Limb" continues at the Mori Art Museum through Feb. 27, 2011. For details, visit <http://mori.art.museum>.