



Note to the reader:

This is a transcription of an audio tour for the online exhibition Miho Dohi.

These remarks were prepared by Karsten Lund, curator, and posted alongside the audio on April 30, 2020. Beneath each image is its corresponding text.

MIHO DOHI VIRTUAL WALK-THROUGH

Introduction

I'm Karsten Lund, Curator at the Renaissance Society. It's been my pleasure to work on this exhibition with Solveig Øvstebø, the Ren's former director, and Dan Byers, from the Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts at Harvard.

Miho Dohi is an artist living in Kanagawa prefecture in Japan, which is part of the greater Tokyo area. Since 2008, she has made been making small sculptures using materials like yarn, fabric, wire, pieces of metal, and paint. She calls her works *buttai*, which is a Japanese word that I'll say more about in the next entry in the audio tour.

As Dohi describes, in each of her works she sets out to create something she hasn't seen before. Her process in the studio is an open-ended one, which involves experimenting with her materials to see what new forms might take shape and evolve as she works.

Even in images online, you can get a strong sense of the internal dynamics of her work. Every sculpture features a mix of different qualities that play off each other: there are soft and hard materials, shiny and matte surfaces, flat shapes and protrusions, smooth and rough textures, and muted and vivid colors. These are just a handful of the different characteristics that bring a kind of energy and life to her work.

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This is Miho Dohi's first solo museum exhibition in the U.S. and it brings together a wide variety of recent works. Some of them are meant to sit on pedestals or tables, others hang on the wall or from the ceiling. For each one, Dohi finds a unique set of terms that emerge unscripted during the making of the work. In the following entries in this audio tour, I'll highlight a few individual sculptures and also reflect on some of the undercurrents in the exhibition.

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BUTTAI 74, 2019

Of Miho Dohi's sculptures, *buttai 74* might be one of my favorites. It's a bundle of different shapes, as if the pieces had been gathered up separately and combined. Looking closer, you can start to make out a variety of materials which are treated in different ways – there are three tubes carved out of wood and painted black on the ends; sheets of white fabric that make up this flimsy middle, and metal strips propping up a disk the color of an eggplant. The unlikely combination of the various elements make this work fascinating to look at as each piece pushes and pulls against the others.

Miho Dohi refers to her works as *buttai*. This word becomes the title of each work, along with a number. The word *buttai* in Japanese is usually translated to mean “object”.

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To call something an object might suggest an ordinary quality, as much as anything, rather than a set of more elevated connotations. In this respect, Dohi's work has roots in the realm of everyday life. In a way, the choice to call the works *buttai* might remind that sculptures still share certain things with all the other objects in our lives.

At the same time, in Japanese, the word "buttai" has some wonderful subtleties to it. It is comprised of two Kanji characters, one that means "thing" and another that means "body." Dohi is drawn to this duality, how this single word can encompass both of these meanings: thing and body.

In English, the word "thing" is a very general word. It's sort of a catch-all to describe an unspecified object – or even can refer to an action or a thought. And to think about a body, of course, is to recognize a kind of life and the potential for movement and physical activity.

In her sculptures, Dohi explores how objects like these can be accepted as both things and bodies. In this light, they don't just evoke static objects, they could also be a wild plant or a familiar creature, as the artist has beautifully put it.

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BUTTAI 23, 2013

Miho Dohi started making her *buttai* works in 2008. As she continues to make them, one by one, this category of unusual objects continues to grow. That recurring title, *buttai*, suggests that all these works have a shared identity in a way, but within that family each one has its own unique qualities, almost its own idiosyncratic character.

In her earlier works, like this one from 2013, Dohi often uses just one or two materials. Here, the pieces is made mostly of thin sheets of copper, cut into irregular shapes. As she makes a work like this, it takes her some time to get the total shape of it. At the point she may add color to the material to bring out a new aspect of the shape, or create a kind of rhythm, or bring the whole thing together.

In this one, the metal pieces are fastened together to give the *buttai* its structure. But the way she uses these flat sheets of metal also lets the work hide and reveal different moments from the viewer. Certain flashes of color are only visible from certain angles, as you can see in

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these two images. Metal is used to create a strong armature within the work, but the same material is also folded up into accordion shapes that become surprise features that are tucked away in certain spots.

Dohi looks back to her time as an art student at university in Japan and describes how she had to work from human models. Through this experience she learned to pay attention to certain things like mass, linear shape, movement, or a form's axis, and these continue to be important aspects of her works.

Her recent sculptures aren't depictions of people but they still carry forward some of these early lessons about bodily movement and physicality. In various ways, they bring these kinds of considerations to the new abstract forms that she's making.

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BUTTAI 22, 2013

Earlier in her practice, Miho Dohi used her materials to make shapes that she could already picture in her mind. She began to think about how difficult it is to reach outside of her imagination, but in her *buttai* works that's what she set out to do – to create things that she had never seen before. You might think about her trying to create objects that don't have an obvious reference point in the world. To find ways to do this, she gradually expanded the number of materials she used and developed methods that allowed new forms to take shape more unpredictably.

Dohi spends a lot of time with the materials she is working with, whether that's metal or fabric or something else. This allows different paths for the work to appear. She talks about making progress with a work while flipping it over in different directions and observing its

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shape. Through various techniques, the qualities of a material can be transformed. Certain elements might twist together or collapse. It's an organic process that allows for sudden discoveries.

Dohi has said that “just when it seems to become clear what is inside and what is outside, they turn completely upside down, and all of a sudden, an object appears quite naturally out of that chaos.”

You can see how this kind of process might lead to work like this one, *buttai 22*, from 2013. It includes a chaotic tangle of lines in space, but the whole thing holds together with a kind of unified energy. Wires and small strips of cloth come to constitute a larger, dynamic whole.

Paint plays a role here too, adding to the work's fun confusion, almost like camouflage. Dohi has added green, brown, and grey paint to the cloth parts. The round metal loops aren't painted, but their natural surface is somewhat similar in color to the brown paint that appears elsewhere.

For me, this work also underlines a touch of humor that runs through Dohi's work. There's something almost funny about these wire loops, which look a bit like bent coat hangers. This work even hangs on the wall from another wire. It is undeniably a sculpture, but it also consists almost entirely of lines, like a drawing—almost testing out different widths, thicknesses, and colors.

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BUTTAI 54, 2019

It's increasingly common to look at art as images online. A way to experience things we can't go see in person. And for the moment at least, as we stay at home during the coronavirus pandemic, online viewing is the only choice we have.

When we're looking at sculptures, there are certain things we lose in this format of course. For example, your ability to walk around a sculpture and see it from all sides. It's also more difficult to have an immediate impression of the size of an object. Miho Doh's works *do* beg to be seen from different angles. In some cases they even have an element of surprise, as you look at them from a different position, or discover certain small details in the work.

We can remedy this to a degree by including multiple images of a work, like we've done here. Some aspects of a sculpture *can't* be easily translated in photographs, but other things might become more evident when we view work like this online. It can become a way to focus attention, to bring an object into the frame and almost zoom in on it. ... Looking at one or two views of work can also crystallize

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certain dynamics in a work, or let you directly compare the effects of seeing it from different viewpoints.

This work, *buttai 54*, is an example I love. These two photos almost enact a big reveal. In one view, the work seems to hug in on itself. It looks dense or compressed. In the other image, the work seems to expand, taking on a different lightness. All it takes for the sculpture to create these impressions is a slight tilt on its base and a slender pillar.

The second view almost resembles an architectural model: maybe a modern building with foundation, roof, and cantilevered patio. From the other angle though, this vision disappears and instead it makes me focus more on the work's material qualities: the contrast of light and dark, how each surface responds to the light: the brightness of white paper, the shininess of metal, the absorbing quality of the black painted base.

In both views though, there is the beautiful simplicity of the colors: cold white, warm brass, deep black. This work feels refined and precise, but all the surfaces also have this nice irregularity. Look at the undulating wires, the crinkled paper, the paintwork. Everything still shows the artist's touch.

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BUTTAI 57, 2019

For Miho Dohi's work, it's worth lingering over their details and observing both the total effect and how the different elements relate to each other. *Buttai 57*, for one, feels compact and cohesive, but it has a lot of internal variation. It has a kind of internal logic too, that isn't immediately obvious. I want to say it plays a game of pairs. Two flattened orange spheres are pressed together, side by side. Two almost identical wood slabs become V. There are also two aluminum strips, one scrunched up, and one shaped into a smooth cylinder. There are even two brass loops, one within the other.

Color also plays a major role in this sculpture, like it does in a lot of Dohi's work. Turquoise and orange are a punchy combo. There are echoes between the shades of the wood and the brass. The aluminum resembles the white paint as the light hits it in certain ways. You can start to see how Dohi introduces new colors into the composition but also responds to the natural colors of things like metal.

Sometimes this might create a sort of comedic mis-recognition. Based on their size, shape and color, the orange parts might look like two tangerines at first. Looking closer though, there is gold mottling on the

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orange surfaces, which might make them look more like strange eggs or rocks instead.

Dohi pointed out how the Japanese word *buttai* contains the Kanji characters for both “thing” and “body”—a hint of a body in every object. This might also make us think about our own human bodies in relation to these objects. This is an aspect of the work that doesn’t translate easily to images online, but you might imagine yourself standing beside this sculpture. Each *buttai* is fairly small compared to our own bodies: something you could pick up with two hands or carry in your arms. This scale is crucial feature of the works as well.

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BUTTAI 72, 2019

Buttai 72, is made of these different waves of wood and metal, with shiny and matte surfaces, and featuring both solid shapes and lines. Its pivot point is this bright red ball, that props the whole thing up but also throws it off balance. At first glance, this could almost be some handheld device without a clear purpose.

But as I think about the small size and their modest materials of Miho Dohi's *buttai*, certain other words start coming to mind too. There is something very intimate about these works. These works seem to communicate almost on an individual basis, a thing-body talking to a human-body: they are intended for whoever is standing beside them at a given moment.

Whether they sit on a table, like this work, or hang from a wire, there is a relational quality to Miho Dohi's sculptures. On a foundational

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level there is a relationship between all the *buttai*, as she calls them. But there is also an implied relationship with people, whether that's the viewer encountering them for the first time or the artist who made them by hand in her studio.

The sculptures in this exhibition were all made in the past seven years, between 2013 and 2019. But the show has opened during the coronavirus pandemic—for now, it's only viewable online. It's an interesting exhibition to be thinking about in this moment. For me at least, certain qualities of Dohi's work feel especially meaningful or resonant right now in our current circumstances.

Works like these might speak to us differently in this moment. For now, our lives are all unavoidably more intimate in scale and our orbits are suddenly much smaller. these sculptures resonate with me, not just their modest size but also their sense of self-contained energy and movement, or even their search for internal possibilities.

For many years, museums and galleries had been getting larger. In turn, a lot of artwork being made has been getting larger too, and more expensive to make. This tendency towards growth and expansion has been paused momentarily, and this might highlight other potential paths for art. Miho Dohi's work is a reminder that all along there have also been artists who choose to work on a small scale and with modest materials. Maybe more than ever, there is even something meaningful and empowering in that.

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