

Invisible Light: The Drawings of Mariko Mori  
By Brett Littman

Mariko Mori's drawings act as a fulcrum between an early body of work from 1994 to 1998, in which Mori herself appears as the central protagonist, and her later work from 1998 to present, that explores concepts of "Oneness," deeper consciousness and invisible light.

The shift between these two periods is marked by Mori's initial investigations into her first large-scale architectural installations and sculptural works entitled the Dream Temple (1997-1999) and Enlightenment Capsule (1998). Prior to these installations, the performative and photographic works like Subway (1994), Tea Ceremony I – III (1994) and Play With Me (1994), Birth of a Star (1995) and videos (photograph) like 3D Video Nirvana (1996- 1998) all featured Mori elaborately costumed in the frame of the image. The power of these works comes from the tension created between the implicitly encoded feminist critique of male dominated Japanese society and Mori's own role-playing as a transmutable futuristic visage.

By 1998, however, Mori's aesthetic interests began to broaden. She moved away from themes of alienation, playful erotics and mass consumer culture and focused her energies on more relational, trans-historical, Buddhist and philosophically grounded works. Dream Temple, which references the history of the Yumedono in Nara, the first building specifically designed for meditation in 739 AD, finds meaning not in the image of Mori herself, but in the idea of transformation itself. Here the viewer enters the installation alone and experiences a personal utopian space "where one can liberate oneself from conflicts and worldly remains and attain the highest degree of self-contentment."

<sup>1</sup>

It is during Mori's preparation for the Dream Temple that she first embraces drawing as fundamental in her artistic output. Mori says, "The Dream Temple drawings were among the first I did and were a form of research into deeper consciousness. This process gave a formless quality to those drawings. I tried to let the drawings lead to my own deeper consciousness as a way to depict the idea."<sup>2</sup> The earliest conceptual drawings for Dream Temple were made in a sketchbook she kept in 1998. The drawings alternate between poetic statements written in Japanese calligraphy like "space between darkness" and "rising from the earth" to diagrammatic and iconic works like "axis between time – space" and "(bubbles are forming and moving upward)" to looser drawings that express changes in state. Mori is able to lay out the program for the Dream Temple in

---

<sup>1</sup> Mariko Mori: Dream Temple, Prada Foundation; 1999,

<sup>2</sup> From On Drawing, Naturally, an unpublished interview between Mariko Mori and Hans Obrist Ulrich, 20XX

this sequence of texts and drawings by illuminating the transformational steps necessary to reach the state of “non-being non-void,” which is the final statement in the sketchbook.

The Ālaya drawings (1998) also part of the Dream Temple investigation, reference the “storehouse” or “seed” state of consciousness in Buddhism that occurs before ones awakening. These are free-hand watercolor sketches that search for ways to visualize the transmigration of consciousness to a new existence. The first Ālaya drawings are frenetic and active and the emphatic gestural marks resemble flames, lotus roots and budding flowers. Eventually those forms give way to sparsely rendered mitotic cellular actions that eventually dissipate and almost disappear. Eventually this series of drawings inspired the abstract video animation 4’44” that is projected inside the Dream Temple and acts as prompt for the viewer to experience his or her own inner transcendental journey.

The cellular and seed like forms in the Ālaya drawings also reappear in the Connected World (I – VI) drawings (2000). In these drawings Mori explores her own awakening to the realities that human consciousness is deeply intertwined with nature beyond form and surface and that all human beings are connected to one another. The abstract imagery from these drawings later generated the series of C-prints entitled The Connected World (I – VI) (2002) and the installation Miracle (2001) that is made up of 8 photos, 33 glass balls, 1 crystal ball, chain, 108 glass beads, and a salt circle.

From 1999 to 2003, Mori concurrently was developing her most ambitious project to date, Wave UFO. Working with an international team of thirty-three architects, technicians, and fabricators Mori set out to develop a large-scale installation that would distill and manifest the results of her investigations into the connected world, which for Mori means a “positive communication between her own consciousness and all other individuals as part of a larger community in order to both give and receive<sup>3</sup>.” The Wave UFO, a massive 16ft x 37ft x 17ft pod, is the first truly “connective” artwork that Mori had designed. Each aesthetic experience inside of the Wave UFO is unique, as the projected computer animation, also based on the Connected World drawings, is specifically generated by the brain wave readings of the three participants who enter the installation.

After Wave UFO in 2003, Mori began to make drawings every summer in Okinawa, an island in Japan, at dawn in a studio overlooking the ocean. In these drawings she attempted to make visible the interpenetration of nature and human consciousness. Mori says about these drawings, “There is everything in the world that you see but there is a world that you don’t see, and it is this invisible world that you don’t see that I’m trying to visualize. Probably every individual living

---

<sup>3</sup> Oneness, “Connected” by Eckhard Schneider, pg 45

being has this world within them. I think that this is where we can find harmony between the natural and the humans - because everything is harmonized in nature but yet humans are somehow out of the loop. When you feel inside yourself the invisible world—things are very much connected and carry harmony between other individual living beings and nature. So therefore these drawings are my own practice to find this harmony with nature.”<sup>4</sup>

The Okinawa drawings directly relate to the new series of “connective” installations” that Mori made after Wave UFO that were either activated by viewers or by natural phenomena. Oneness (2003), a circle of alien-like figurative sculptures made of technogel, reaches its full interactive aesthetic potential only when the viewer touched its surface and its eyes light up and its heartbeat becomes visible. Transcircle 1.1 meter (2004) and Tom Na H-iu (2006), both installations that were inspired by Mori’s investigations into pre-historic monuments made of rock formations and standing stones in Japan and England, connect ancient ideas and cosmologies to contemporary life through technology. Transcircle has an interactive LED lighting system that pulses and changes color based on real-time data about our solar systems planetary movements. Tom Na H-iu, a large glass stone monolith, has an interactive LED system that communicates with the Super Kamiokande neutrino observatory operated by the Institute for Cosmic Ray Research at the University of Tokyo, and changes color when the observatory captures a neutrino.

Since 2006, Mori’s drawings and installations have been inspired by the idea of invisible light as a natural and cosmic energy force that can restore the balance between nature and man. Installations like White Hole (2010) and her most recent plans to install several large-scale site-specific public sculptures, Primal Rhythm and Sun Pillar, in Okinawa, are attempts to make visible things that cannot be seen by the naked eye.

Mariko and I have chosen for The Japan Society twelve drawings and one painting from three different series: Higher Being, 2008-2009; White Hole, 2009; and Faou, 2010 that represent her most recent explorations. All of the works are displayed in a specially designed oval structure within the main gallery space and radiate to the right and left from the centrally place painting entitled White Hole VII, 2009. We have hung these works out of chronology and series to bring to the fore a specific quality of Mori’s most recent drawings – this pre-occupation with exploring invisible light. These twelve drawings are extensions of the themes she has been exploring since 2003 and also represent a variety of mark making techniques and approaches to image making. It is our hope that each work will be encountered as a distinct inner-cosmos that braids together Mori’s personal experience of nature, light conditions, and her own state of the deep consciousness during the drawing’s origin.

---

<sup>4</sup> From On Drawing, Naturally, an unpublished interview between Mariko Mori and Hans Obrist Ulrich, 20XX