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SPACE INVADER: MIKA TAJIMA

Artist Mika Tajima's work questions space and the infrastructures that surround us – using light, sound and sometimes gold.

By Jodi Bartle



Japanese-American artist Mika Tajima was born in LA and grew up in a household of scientists. 'At first, I was rebellious towards that, and then I started to see that my investigatory way of making art was influenced very heavily by my upbringing.' Tajima makes work born of big ideas rigorously investigated and then transformed into often monumental objects that seem self-contained until you look a little closer. The beauty of her light explorations, weavings, architectural spaces, sound works and hot tub installations are really the entry point to a much bigger story of the process and transformation of ideas.

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Though her work is multi-disciplinary, she sees herself as a sculptor first. 'My work contends with space and the technical infrastructures that shape us – more importantly the urgency to escape it'. Industrial and information production and the literal body at work is a constant theme and the pieces are solid, prosaic and unsentimental until she uses light, sound, mist and colour to reframe them. 'Light and sound, which are both immaterial, fill a room in a way that an object cannot — they have a lot of volume. I like that when you come into an exhibition space you can have a visceral experience, drawing your attention to a feeling of voluminous presence.' Her works are often mediated through machine processes, going through various transmutations to arrive at something completely different from the origin. 'The work speaks to the process of translation and what is lost, revealed or still hidden.'



**Tell me about your water vapour piece Meridian (Gold) in New York last summer.**

Last year, on the edge of a park overlooking Manhattan, I designed and installed a public sculpture that looked like a hot pink jacuzzi or Japanese onsen. It produced a column of water vapour

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illuminated by LED lights connected to a programme that controlled the colour according to the fluctuating global price of gold in real time. There was a ferry landing there that would take you across to Midtown and it became this site where people would gather around enjoying the view and the playing in the cooling mist. The idea was that people could bathe in the changing sentiment for gold, which is used as reflection for the market outlook of the world.

## Why gold?

Gold is a peculiar because its value goes beyond its basic material. It relies heavily on its aesthetic qualities and what it symbolises – like art in many ways. It is often considered a crisis commodity which means its price indicates how people actually feel in the world because gold commodity is a refuge investment in difficult times. The price increases when there is a bombing in Istanbul or new uncertainty in the world. When I had the piece up, it was right when Brexit had just happened and the coloured lights were changing so erratically because it was such a time of turmoil. It was also before the US elections and so everyone was unsure about how the future would be and this uncertainty got translated into a constantly changing billowing fog that was different gradients of pink to blue to purple.

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**Your work is beautiful, all colours and languid forms, yet the core of the work seems to be not the object itself but the process that led you to it. What is your starting point?**

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A very important aspect of the work is what draws you to it - including things that really hit your senses. I use technologies that shape our experience in the world, which might be bodily or emotional. I am trying to interrogate the infrastructure, whether this is physical or architectural or the various technologies that try to shape our lives and our bodies in this world. My work began by looking at how literal spaces form our activities and bodies - furniture and objects and it has expanded from there to devices of control that affect our experience (light and colour) or predict our lives (algorithms).

For instance, lighting isn't really something one first thinks about in the foreground when you enter a space but it can completely determine how you feel or understand a space. Think about the difference between entering a hospital as opposed to entering a museum or a church or an H&M - there are all these different ways in which the architecture is led by the way it is lit. It makes you understand what kind of a space we are in. That thinking expanded my inquiry to technologies that seek to understand, effect and control us, beyond actual tangible concrete things in the world. In my work, everything is beyond the surface. The colour of the lights, the woven surfaces or the mists might draw you there but the work itself is just beyond.

**Some of your work explores ideas of bodies in relation to physical labour, assembly lines and factories. What are you trying to investigate here?**

I am really interested in how an environment shapes a body or our activities, including work and recreation. I have made empty hot tub forms where the body is inscribed into the shape of the object; the tub is a social space, an environment and an object. The idea of ergonomics is to maximise a body's potential through design, of making it work well for the body, but the flip side is that ergonomics seeks to get the body to work harder and longer as a machine for a task. I like that double-edged reading and see the factory line as a metaphor of the way we are conditioned to live now and how we seek to escape.



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**Technology features heavily in your recent work: it is both an enabler of it, but it is also a kind of sinister thing.**

I see the contradictions - the beauty and the horror of it. In the Palais De Tokyo exhibition "Sous Le Regard De Machines Pleines D'Amour Et Grace", the light installation deals with how computational technology predicts our future expressions. We have a sense now how these algorithms shape our decisions by offering us our future desires and even anxieties. This predictive aspect is a huge thing right now in information technology - everyone wants to harness the future sentiment - what will you buy next? Search next? Does this lead us to act or to desires we didn't know we wanted? If the future is already written, is it preemptive or creating the problem or desire?

The installation is illuminated by smart LED lights controlled by a custom programme that is connected to an internet feed. I work with a computational linguistic programmer and we've created a program that scrapes and analyses thousands and thousand of tweets from the Paris region, everything from the news of the day to the mundane such as how good your morning coffee is. Then using statistical data analysis, the programme tries to predict the mood to come, producing future Tweets and the light colour reflects this future feeling.

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We used statistical analysis to predict what people's feeling would be through Twitter and the programme then wrote future tweets which were written in a slightly garbled way, just like tweets often are. It seemed like automatic poetry and you see beauty in that but also the horror. I think a lot about if it's possible to be accurately captured and in turn if one can escape being captured, escape being quantified.



## **What kind of work have you done with sound?**

I do a series of woven paintings called the Negative Entropy series - jacquard weavings that are a result of recordings of different types of production sites or of people involved with the making of things. I see them as a kind of portrait of an active moment, as an audio fingerprint. I record audio which is very unique to a place that is then translated into a spectrogram becoming visual, which is then made material.

## **What do you want your viewer to feel?**

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I want to draw attention to the way our lives are shaped by an infrastructure that surrounds us that is often invisible. By giving it some kind of form, I hope to create a sense for it and an urgency to become in a way unpredictable and free, maybe to be more in the shadows and ungraspable like smoke.

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