

Asia shapes two art shows at the AU Museum

By Mark Jenkins April 26



"Yoake (Dawn)" is one of Miya Ando's many atmospheric works – they look like paintings, but this one was made using pigments on aluminum – that come together in a Buddhist-industrial style. (Paul Terrie/Miya Ando)

East and West converge in different ways in the work of Miya Ando and Jiha Moon, two Asia-rooted female artists who have shows in adjacent galleries at the American University Museum. While Moon's art includes some conspicuous American ingredients, Ando's work might seem to be purely Asian.

Unlike Moon, Ando is a lifelong American citizen. She was born in Los Angeles to a Japanese mother and an American father of Russian Jewish heritage. Moon was born and educated in South Korea before earning an M.A. in Iowa, moving to Washington and then settling in Atlanta.

Yet Ando, who now has a studio in New York, spent part of her childhood at the Buddhist temple her grandfather oversaw in Okayama, midway between Osaka and Hiroshima. And all the pieces in her AU show — and the show itself, “Kumo” — are titled in Japanese.

“Kumo” means cloud, and much of the artist’s minimalist work depicts transient atmospheric phenomena. Ando may contemplate the sky merely for its subtle beauty. But ephemeral mist and light might also represent Buddhist teachings about eternal change and life’s impermanence.

Unlike some artists influenced by Buddhism, Ando doesn’t work with materials that are themselves fragile or fleeting. The cloudlike forms of “Kumo” are etched by laser into large blocks of optical glass, placed here in front of black backdrops that both set off and reflect the wispy images. Some of Ando’s more paintinglike works are made with metallic pigments and other industrial substances on wood, steel or aluminum panels. The imagery is soft, and colors shift among silver, gold, red and gray as the viewer’s perspective changes. But the pieces themselves are hard-edged.

There’s a Japanese reason for that, too. The artist is a distant descendant of one of the samurai-swordsmiths for which the Okayama area was known in centuries past. But Ando’s sleek, glimmering surfaces also suggest something recent and closer to her birthplace: the work of California’s “finish fetish” artists, who were inspired by the shapes and shines of surfboards and sports cars.

This isn’t an affinity the artist just happened to develop while living in L.A. Her father had a garage where he sanded and welded car parts. “I loved metal shops. I felt comfortable around muscle cars,” recalled Ando in a 2011 interview with a Buddhist publication.

That’s the American chassis of Ando’s starkly lovely depictions of dawn, dusk and clouds. The artworks are named in Japanese and Buddhist-inspired, but there’s a little vroom vroom in them as well.



"Most Everyone's Mad Here," a 2015 work by Jiha Moon, whose dominant motifs are more explicitly Asian but have pop art elements, too. (Jiha Moon)

No muscle cars are evident in Jiha Moon's "Double Welcome, Most Everyone's Mad Here," but there are many other American things. Smiley faces, video-game characters and Pennsylvania Dutch folk symbols jostle in the artist's busy collage-paintings, alongside Asian-style birds, tigers, dragons and flowers. Peaches represent fecundity in Asia, as well as Moon's now-home of Georgia. "I am a cartographer of cultures," she writes in her artist's statement.

The balance is tipped more toward East than West, in part because many of the pieces are painted on fan-shaped pieces of Korean-made mulberry paper. The dominant visual motifs are usually Asian, although acrylic paint is paired with ink, and shards of text employ the Latin

alphabet as well as Korean and Chinese writing systems.

The second phrase in the show's title is derived from "Alice's Adventures in Wonderland" as "filtered through" the 1951 Disney cartoon adaptation, according to art critic Lilly Wei's notes on the show. Walt Disney, whose legacy in East Asia is immense, may well be a bigger influence on Moon's idiosyncratic brand of pop art than Andy Warhol or Jasper Johns.

The specifically Korean elements in Moon's work are often also specifically female. Some of the paintings are framed by quilted fabric borders, and there's an array of variations on traditional women's ornaments, their colorful tassels hanging against a white gallery wall.

(These charms, like the Pennsylvania Dutch emblems that Moon incorporates, are supposed to convey good luck.)



"Domestic ceramic goods in Moon's exhibition feature a Òhipster mustache" and fortune cookie shapes. (Jiha Moon)

A low table set with the artist's ceramics is a further expression of her interest in domestic crafts often associated with women. Included are pieces in the shape of fortune cookies, another cross-cultural perplexity. They're widely considered Chinese but actually originated in Japan.

If Ando's Buddhist-industrial style emulates nature — detached and pristine — Moon's is more urban and internationalist. The bustling, bright-hued art in "Double Welcome, Most Everyone's Mad Here" is as lively as a stroll through Seoul or Hong Kong, keeping one eye on Lancaster County, Pa., and the artist's current home town. Moon's work is Asian and American, the boundaries deliberately blurred.

IF YOU GO

Miya Ando: Kumo

Jiha Moon: Double Welcome, Most Everyone's Mad Here

American University Museum at the Katzen Arts Center, 4400 Massachusetts

Ave. NW. 202-885-1300. american.edu/museum.

Dates: Through May 27.

Admission: Free.