

**Kaori Ukaji**

b. 1964, Tokyo, Japan, lives in Pahoehoe, Hawai'i

exhibited in *Biennial V*

*left to right*

*Pneuma Box*, 2011

dyed artist's skin, color dye, wood, paint

*Skin #3*, 2011

colored paper, thread

breath in, breath out

things are coming, things are going

I was born, I will be gone

just like that, nothing changes

breath in, breath out

in the moment.

## KAORI UKAJI

*Born in 1964 in Tokyo, Japan  
Lives in Hilo on Hawai'i*

Black, not-black—the color of graphite is somehow like a Zen *koan*, incisive and elusive, lean, yet layered with resonance. With radically spare means, Kaori Ukaji creates an expanded environment within which to meditate on fundamental questions of existence.

Ukaji grew up an only child, developing an inner life enriched through reading, and with opportunities to study music and dance. Early encouragement from family and teachers for her artwork laid a foundation for later thinking about her professional life. A youthful interest in interior design signaled a predilection for color and shape rather than traditional drawing. Ukaji received formal training at the Junior College of Art and Design at Musashino Art University, where she also pursued post-graduate studies in graphic design in 1987, and served as a research associate in design and printmaking from 1988 to 1994. Initial professional training also included work as a graphic designer for two department stores in Tokyo. Though Ukaji experienced early success as a designer, she felt an increasing interest in working in the fine arts, free of a commercial context.

In the period from 1986 to 1994, Ukaji's work clearly manifested some of the qualities which would develop strength in her later work. Early screenprints such as

*Rain* (1986) showed an interest in the overall articulation of surface, while others like *Flower* (1986) or *Man* (1989) began to point toward a vocabulary of elemental, abstract but biomorphic shapes alluding to the gestalt of being. These forms, developed more purely in such works as *Shape of the Day* or *Shape of Red* (both from 1992), provided evidence of Ukaji's interest in issues of figure-and-ground, a kind of visual equivalent to the philosophical conundrum of being/not-being. In 1993-94, using that same format but in substantially expanded scale, Ukaji developed a series entitled *Tsuti Yori Ue No Mono* (*Object on the Earth*) in which silhouette shapes—a large rectangle, a man in an overcoat, a leaf or podlike element—were created by stenciling coal tar on tall vertical panels of heavy paper. The year 1994 also saw significant experimentation with installation, in several works entitled *Man from Earth*, in which now-typical shapes appeared. The artist's interest in installation may be linked to some extent with a very early sensibility about the aesthetic of cultivated spaces which are the hallmarks of Japanese architecture and landscape design.

In 1995, wanting to take some time off to sort out what was emerging as an important choice in terms of her personal and professional life, Ukaji decided to take a one-year vacation, traveling around the world with one backpack—and slides of her own artwork. With those in hand, she hoped to gain other perspectives and commentary on her work, and perhaps other venues in which to exhibit. Leaving Japan, Ukaji went first to Hong Kong and Australia, before arriving in Honolulu. After a brief week in the city, Ukaji flew to Hilo, and felt she had somehow come back, come home. Save for short return visits back to Japan to reconnect with family, Ukaji is now transplanted into the coastal community of East Hawai'i.

Since 1995, Ukaji has been a strong and increasingly visible presence in group exhibitions in both Hilo and Honolulu. Her work has come to center on a single defining concept, existence, and a single material/process, graphite on paper, for which, in retrospect, the coal tar drawings seem a telling precursor. *Existence* as a title and as a generic category or family of work, was first used for a work included in an invitational exhibition at The Contemporary Museum's Honolulu Advertiser Gallery in 1996. Here, Ukaji used the earlier figure-ground format to create *Existence I*, a large

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## UKAJI *(continued)*

red circle drawn in crayon-pencil on panels of canvas suspended from the ceiling—curiously reminiscent of the Japanese flag.

Within a new conceptual rubric, this transitional work reiterated the concerns for scale and environment. Ukaji has expressed concern about the arbitrariness of categories—process, product, two-dimensional, three-dimensional—preferring rather to create a kind of space which allows the viewer to become engaged with, even embedded in the artwork, a space in which both artwork and viewer are given space to breathe.

At this time, Ukaji also exhibited large-scale works in graphite on paper. The combination of these works suggested a shift from the finite perimeter of shapes to the infinite potential of the visual field. Soon, means and meaning would become more closely joined, culminating in such works as *Existence* (1999), one configuration of which is included in this biennial exhibition. In this work, scrolls of paper with densely worked surfaces flow across the surface of the gallery floor, creating a material metaphor for the continuity of states of being.

Related works which show the development of Ukaji's thought and visual exploration include *Flowing Solid 1995* (1995) and *Existence* (1997), both single panels, and

*Flowing Solid 1999* (1999), a double panel, all of which begin mounted on the wall and descend onto the adjoining floor. Ukaji has also employed the medium of graphite as a means of transforming several smaller-scale forms, including book-like structures (*Existence 4*, 1998; *In Between*, 1998; *Intrinsic*, 1999) and a scroll-like form, *Intrinsic—A Sheet of Paper I* (2000). Some recent experimentations have included manipulation of the substrate itself, including the wrinkling of the paper in order to alter the way in which it receives and reflects the graphite laid upon it. Most recently, the artist has in a sense come full circle, returning to printmaking in a series of etchings which engage some of the same dense mark-making process as is visible in her other works on paper.

Inevitably, though the artist herself wants us to return to a sense of seamless experience, one must think about the process by which these works are created, for it provides important insight into both the artist's persona and the awareness of existence, the being-in-itself, she seeks to invoke. Imagine being confronted with many feet of blank surface, then slowly covering it, inch by inch, with multiple layers of a dense, dark yet luminous substance. In some cases, traces of individual marks might remain visible; in others, they are subsumed within an

unfathomable field. Imagine too the kind of physical and psychic energy which is brought to bear on a process, a discipline that seems to require both patience and obsession. As much as we want to believe that this is meditative process, we must also be attentive to the artist's own insight, noting the kind of struggle and catharsis which also pertains. As fellow artist Stephen Freedman has written of her work, "The artist, immersed in private ritual action, repetitive minimal motion, rhythmic sound or archetypal form, opens the door to trance." In a sense, Ukaji's work is both an intensely personal visual narrative of existence, and, in its own exquisite presence, an affirmation of existence itself. The artist herself provides an eloquent voice:

*...I can't say what it is in the words  
but I feel it, I can almost see it*

*That's why I draw  
I draw because I can not lose my way  
or life*

*That is my drawing  
I do in my drawing what I do in my  
heart*

*my process of drawing is my process of  
getting rid of the outer part and finding  
the most inner part of me.*