

# **“Miwa Komatsu: Healing the Heart and Soul through Art — Exploring the Mysterious and Unfamiliar World of Spiritual Harmony”**

Hong Kyoung-han (art critic) , 2023  
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## **1.**

The works of the Japanese artist Miwa Komatsu (1984~), born in Nagano Prefecture, possess a pluralistic attribute that fuses traditional Japanese culture and art. Like the argument of the French philosopher Maurice Merleau Ponty, she also acknowledges that all knowledge we possess is perceived from the world surrounding us, and the world serves as the source of not only aesthetic but also social and political relationships. Art is not an escape from the world; rather, it is an integral part of the world.

She grew up surrounded by mountains and the *Chikumagawa* Valley until she was around 18 years old. In an interview, she mentioned, "I felt the energy that supplies nutrients to the Earth from a place closer to the sky." She added, "During my childhood, when I got lost and felt scared in the forest, Yamainu-san appeared and guided me back home."

These extraordinary experiences and unique sensibility became the background for shaping the artist's artistic perspective. It served as a catalyst to establish a deep connection with the external world beyond the boundaries of reality and laid the foundation for the artist's growth. The mother's active support in visiting

art museums also contributed significantly to the artist's development as an artist.

Komatsu attended the Joshibi University of Arts and Design in Tokyo, which was established in 1900 as Japan's first art school for female students and offer a progressive curriculum as the oldest private art school.

The turning point in the artist's life came with her venture into printmaking, which was partly fueled by her fascination with the illustrations in picture books. However, above all, the significant impact was the death of her grandfather, which she witnessed at the age of 19. She mentioned to have seen her grandfather's soul leaving his body at the moment of his passing. This profound experience played a crucial role in solidifying the artist's potential, leading to the creation of her notable work, "The 49th Day after Death" (2005).

Komatsu's copper engraving prints<sup>[1]</sup>, with varying shades according to the etching process, intricately connect various motifs such as animals, plants, and architectural elements in curved lines, creating a grotesque visual appearance reminiscent of the physical fears and desires tormenting the psyche. However, beneath the surface, there lies the artist's aspiration (referred to by the artist as the "Great Harmonization") towards a harmonious life where all living beings form an equal and parallel world, recognizing and acknowledging each other. Even in "49 Day," the animals that lead the story are without hierarchy, striking a balance between the mythical and the realistic elements.

Unlike the vibrant colors and intense energy that abound in the present, Komatsu's copper engraving prints are mostly monochromatic or black-and-

white, yet they possess a density that is difficult to fathom (as evident in the work 'Birth Canal' (2007)). The exquisitely depicted animals in various attractive colors, along with delicately rendered natural and man-made objects using tools like needles or scrapers, and other primitive images, all seem vaguely familiar yet exude a profound sense of imagination and weighty tranquility.

In Komatsu's works, there are no boundaries. She does not place any restrictions on visualizing the 'spiritual' world that encompasses 'life and death.' In the diverse fields she explores, it is evident. This includes numerous drawings like '*Shin-Fudoki*' (2014), as well as paintings[2] such as 'Three Guardians Gatekeeping the Heat and Cold' (2021), where three guardians with three eyes each seem to roar fiercely. It also encompasses sculptures where animals are engraved on obsidian like celestial bodies, as seen in works like 'Obsidian-Transparent Chaos' (2022). Moreover, it includes printmaking, pottery, VR (digital), and even live painting while wearing the traditional Japanese garment called '*hakama*'.

In the meaningless distinction between academic genres, Komatsu's work cannot escape the essence of contemporaneity, a fundamental pillar of contemporary art. Her works embody contemporaneity in addressing themes of peace and happiness that humanity should pursue, as well as raising awareness about issues such as socio-economic disparities, environmental concerns (species extinction, loss of natural habitats), and the presence of wars in our times. The contemporaneity ingrained in her art cannot be disregarded.

Furthermore, Komatsu's diverse cultural experiences constantly trigger a historical transformation into a cultural state that reveals new approaches in the context of contemporary living, whether on an individual or collective level. This aspect cannot be overlooked as it is closely related to "discourse" in the context of cultural dynamics.[5]

Among them, some of her live paintings primarily depict the products of spirits and other entities. However, within the context of contemporary art, these works follow the concept of "discussion" and "relation"[6] rather than being objects to be revered. An exemplary case of this can be seen in the work "TED x *Shinshu* University" created in 2017. In the face of her passionate act, the audience did not merely remain at the level of seeing something, but actively participated in the creative process of the artwork, becoming part of the process of co-creating the artwork with the artist on a horizontal level.[7]

Of course, there are many solo programs, such as the live painting at *Tomioka Hachimangu* Shrine in 2020[8] and the performance at Okamoto Taro Art Museum in 2022[9]. Nevertheless, it is undeniable that the artist has shown interest in promoting an art that deals with the artist's subjectivity and subjectivity, while fostering an equal relationship between the audience and the artwork and fostering an unbiased relationship among the audience through the artwork.

Komatsu's live painting is closer to a form of meditation and prayer rather than a performance. Her actions incorporate gestures of rejecting art colonialism and patriarchal structures that marginalize or subordinate the artist, as well as the

power, privilege, and hierarchy reserved only for artists. This tendency is also evident in media that have no fixed boundaries.

For instance, she determines the medium based on the concept. She believes that each medium has its own unique history and inherent power. Currently, she is working with acrylic, which allows her to achieve immediate dynamism.

Despite being a Western material, her use of color evokes a sense of invitation to someone's emotions and creates an atmosphere of the supernatural (her colors possess the function of symbols).

For example, in the artwork "Next Mandala-Home of the Soul (2021)," which features geometric shapes such as circles and triangles with eight flower petals and twenty animals engraved on them, the five colors used - white, blue, yellow, red, and green - represent the five elements that compose the universe (in Eastern thought, typically referring to earth, water, fire, air, and space, aspiring to harmonize heaven, earth, and humanity). The cyclical nature of the "circle" symbolizes eternity, and the fully bloomed[11] flowers serve as a device to display the most vibrant, beautiful, and benevolent influence to the world. The vigorous and free brush strokes capture the distinctive essence of Komatsu's art.

The figures in her paintings are often reminiscent of the mythical guardian dogs called "*Komainu*"[12], which are commonly found in most Shinto shrines in Japan. They are considered the type of "*Yamainu*"[13], the mountain dogs believed to protect humans from evil and impurity. These creatures, existing in a blend of reality and mythology, appear individually or in groups of two or three, creating an erotic and eerie atmosphere. (In addition to that, in works like "*Shin-*

*Fudoki*" (2014), giant eyes dominate the screen, and legendary creatures such as dragons and enigmatic birds are also frequently depicted.)

They are referred to as '*Shinju*' (sacred animals)[15], resembling dogs. The '*Shinju*' are vast spiritual guardians and guides, as mentioned before, and one of these mythical creatures appeared to the artist when she was young, guiding[16] her home when she got lost in the forest. This experience, along with the death of her grandfather and the knowledge she gained from her travels around the world, became symbols[17] of wisdom. Even today, the artist continues to repeatedly depict these *Shinju*.

While they may initially appear to have a somewhat scary expression (though upon closer inspection, they can be quite cute), these spirits are not primarily aesthetic objects. Instead, they strongly serve as a "mind's eye" that gazes into the human soul, revealing our vulnerabilities and enabling us to perceive the universe as it truly is—a third eye beyond our physical sight. For the artist, the symbolic meaning of these guardians lies in providing humanity, living in an era of transitional crisis, with the right way of life and guiding us towards a desirable path.

### 3.

In Japanese culture, the relationship between the Japanese people and the gods (神) is an inseparable and integral part of daily life. Offering worship to the deities at famous shrines on the first day of the New Year, known as "*Hatsumōde*"[18], is considered a routine aspect of daily life. From the perspective of

Koreans, Japanese shrines may evoke an "uncomfortable truth," but for most Japanese, these shrines are akin to "forests" or "woods"—in other words, they represent the sacred realm of the gods.

To the artist, shrines are not only a cultural and spiritual foundation but also deeply intertwined with the issues of life. They serve as a catalyst for her to reveal the unseen through art. In fact, Komatsu has traveled to shrines and temples throughout Japan, not just during the *Shikinen Sengu*[19] period, and created paintings on-site, dedicating the outcomes as offerings.

For Komatsu, there have been several mentors. These mentors not only guided the young Komatsu to explore the world beyond painting but also provided her with diverse artistic foundations. They enabled her to approach the universal truth where European and Japanese art are not separated, and access all aspects of the spiritual realm in the world.

Confronting spiritual elements enriches her life as she leaves the school and travels the world. This period appears to be a complete departure from the ideal model pursued by art academies. Her art becomes more subjective, poetic, and introspective, marking a time when it departs from a fixed trajectory.

The uniqueness found in Komatsu's art history lies in the path she has taken since her student days, guided by various masters and eminent figures such as *Kukai*, exploring Buddhism and its historical traces at locations like *Koyasan*, *Toji*, *Izumo Taisha*, and other shrines in Japan, as well as delving into the country's prehistoric culture and various myths. Additionally, in 2015, after

practicing meditation[23] in a cave in Thailand[22], she gained insight into the mind's eye, which lies behind the retina (or gained a deeper understanding). This experience is also an essential part of her art journey.

Afterwards, Komatsu's artistic world repeatedly expanded beyond the physical boundaries and borders of the Earth. Naturally, this unique connection with the exceptional has been deemed highly valuable in shaping the artist's distinctive visual language.

Among these, what stands out is the seeing again *Kukai's* calligraphy while visiting *Koyasan*, the first monastery founded by *Kukai* over 1200 years ago. Just as *Kukai* was guided to *Koyasan*, Komatsu spent time meditating and praying there, exploring the roots of *Kukai's* artistic creations. Inspired by this experience and the significance of *Koyasan* and the sacred temple of *Toji* in Kyoto, she created a series of mandalas that provide a path to enlightenment for all living beings. The term "mandala"[24] originates from the Sanskrit language, meaning "complete world" or "a circle with healing power."

An intriguing aspect is that through meditation, Komatsu realized that an artist's work can continue to exist and create ripples in future generations even after they have departed from this world. The various sacred places imbued with different deities and myths served as an opportunity for him to rediscover his Japanese roots.

Komatsu introduces a particular episode that took place at three of Japan's prominent Shinto shrines: *Ise Jingu*[23] in Mie Prefecture, which is one of the three major shrines in Japan, and *Izumo Taisha* in Shimane Prefecture, which



venerates the deity responsible for forging human connections. In this narrative, she witnessed a rainbow rising above the sacred shrines, and through the rays of light and the spiritual presence emitted by these sacred beings, the artist became aware of a realm beyond the realm of physical representation—a realm transcending the materialization of the immaterial[24].

Although not fully understood, these experiences seem to have served as significant guiding lights for Komatsu in understanding the meaningful role and responsibility she holds as an artist.

Komatsu's journey through various cultural legacies, legends, and prayers from different parts of the world has led her to deeply appreciate spiritual purity and harmony[25]. This pursuit has been directed towards humanity's quest for peace and fulfillment of her own artistic achievements. Looking back, Buddhism has been one of her guiding principles, and her works indeed carry a strong Buddhist influence in their colors and themes. However, Buddhism merely serves as a reference point in her art because the artist delved into the ancient "*Jomon* Culture"[26] that dominated Japan for approximately 14,000 years. Through extensive research and contemplation, she gained insights into animism, the belief in the worship of objects and nature spirits, which reveals her understanding of this spiritual perspective.

As a child, Komatsu's curiosity about the unseen world led her to find her own aesthetics within the mythical, religious, and cultural environments presented by nature and history. Meditation, contemplation, and prayers became her brush to paint her artistry. She relies on meditative experiences rather than planned or calculated works, translating and interpreting moments of stillness in her mind

and spirit into art and symbols. Her journeys, including her visits to places like Naoshima, the holy site of Japanese art, served as elements that connected her with people worldwide, instilling the belief in the potential for connection beyond borders.

Furthermore, her philosophy on life and death served as the foundation for the development of her unique perspective as an artist. All these elements ultimately led her to be convinced that every living soul is created equally, transcending boundaries to connect disconnection, transforming inequality into equality, and turning conflicts into harmony through the power of Komatsu's art.

#### **4.**

Through bold and dynamic works influenced by Japanese mythology and personal experiences, Komatsu addresses contemporary issues such as life, death, existence, the environment[27], and the future. She navigates an era where the line between what is considered art and what is not is blurred. Grounded in a communion with nature symbolized by spirits, she employs personal and traditional symbols to showcase her distinctive aesthetics.

This reflects the understanding that art is not merely about satisfying the retina, but rather a social intermediary and a means that can be put into practice in daily life. Similarly, Komatsu acknowledges that art should contribute to society, touch people's hearts, and serve as a conduit for conveying positive messages.

In Komatsu's art, one key point to highlight is its ability to transcend the mundane and connect with the spiritual realm. It allows both the creator and the

audience to transcend the limitations of the physical world and journey into different realms, offering a "gap" that leads to something greater and profound.

Furthermore, for her, spiritual art can be cathartic, intertwined with the purification of the soul. Audiences can find solace, inspiration, or a sense of purpose within the messages she presents, while for the artist, the artworks also serve as a means for spiritual exploration and personal healing.

Komatsu's art is also connected to a sense of community consciousness. In East Asia and many other cultures, art has played a central role in religious or spiritual awareness. The same holds true for Komatsu. She delves into the depths of the spiritual, using her creative abilities to share what she discovers with others. In doing so, she strengthens the bonds of community, instills faith, and commemorates shared experiences.

According to the analysis conducted by the author, Komatsu sheds light on the pursuit of truth, the essence of life, and an understanding of the mysteries of existence. Through art, she continues to infuse ancient wisdom and spiritual teachings into contemporary society. This is akin to guiding individuals to strive for higher ideals, cultivate virtues, and live more meaningful lives, like a 'light' that illuminates the way. Such timeless teachings lend authority to her artworks. Like many other artists, Komatsu's use of her life for a 'good resonance' with the public is a noble and grand endeavor.

For Komatsu, the realm of the soul serves as not only the wellspring of inspiration but also the very root of art. Naturally, at the end of this root lie life

and death, embodied by fierce and enigmatic creatures like animals[28] overseeing existence and the myriad spirits. They promote interconnectedness and diversity, fostering unity among individuals with varying spiritual backgrounds. To achieve this, she places introspection and contemplation at the forefront. Through such a process, she liberates the suffering self, encouraging us on a spiritual journey that might not be easily accessible.

With her unique and captivating artworks, the artist has vividly and diversely projected her own worldview. Her fantastical creations are more than just images within a frame. To her, myths, religions, and legends aren't confined to the past; they remain living entities even in the present. For Komatsu, these otherworldly beings aren't simply historical remnants; they're entities that exist beyond the constraints of space and time, interwoven like the net of Indra, supporting the principles of yin and yang, and becoming one with the universe. Their resilience and unwavering spirit in the face of challenges represent both the present and the future.

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<sup>[1]</sup> Life and Death(2005) etc.

<sup>[2]</sup> The author considers among her many paintings, the monumental works 'Guardian Deity Anthem, *Ganju Sakkora Hojo Sansa*,' spanning an impressive 7 meters, and '5th Dimension,' measuring 5 meters, as representative masterpieces. They are overwhelmingly grand in their scale, storytelling, and composition.

<sup>[3]</sup> Her virtual reality artwork "Inori (Prayer)" from her digital works received praise when it was showcased at the 76th Venice International Film Festival in 2019, within the VR

section. Directed by Miwa Komatsu and produced by Christine Chiang and Megumi Hoshihara, this 17-minute video takes viewers on a spiritual journey into a world teeming with mystical creatures. The same artwork was also presented under the same title at the "BEYOND REALITY" exhibition at Incheon International Airport Transportation Center in South Korea in 2020. At the entrance of the exhibition space, a sign read, "A mysterious experience through the virtual beings created by artist Miwa Komatsu." Komatsu has even showcased this artwork as a live painting performance.

<sup>[4]</sup> *"Hakama"* is a traditional Japanese garment.

<sup>[5]</sup> For Komatsu, contemporaneity is a subjective, objective, individual, and shared experience. As a result, her works also correspond to the context and interconnectedness created by global trends within the realm of art. To her, contemporaneity serves as both a question about how to live in the present and a way to construct a suitable modernity within the contemporary environment.

<sup>[6]</sup> The relationship aims to interpret the changing world and present art to humanity as a means of suggesting better ways of living.

<sup>[7]</sup> Artworks serve as a platform that stimulates discussions around social issues. The completion of an artwork doesn't solely depend on the moment the creator deems it finished, but rather when the artwork is placed in a context where the audience engages with it, coexisting within the piece.

<sup>[8]</sup> Her works are not infrequently performed on gold leaf or similar-colored backgrounds. At times, unlike her past works, she uses a combination of gold leaf and black ink, similar to what can be seen in mandalas.

[9] Komatsu has presented performance art in various spaces, including art galleries. For him, space is restored as a venue for artistic practice, and even without direct intervention, the context of interactivity, a characteristic of contemporary art, remains consistent.

[10] The fact that Mandala is a kind of secret image is consistent with the series of works she has created, the process of inquiring about the essence of existence. This is especially true when considering Mandala's realization that "the entire world exists within oneself." This is because 'manda' is essence, and 'la' is possession.

[11] To express the pinnacle of an era when it could announce the most splendid, beautiful, and positive influence to the world, her flower is always in full bloom.

[12] "*Komainu*" are commonly placed around shrines, symbolizing guardian dogs or guardian beasts. They take on a similar form to the mythical creature *Haechi*, which is imagined to possess the ability to discern right from wrong.

[13] In Korea, it became well-known through the Japanese animation "The Princess Mononoke" (2003). It was scripted by Miyazaki Hayao and the music was composed by Hisaishi Joe. Along with "The Spiriting Away Of Sen And Chihiro" (2002), it is regarded as one of Studio Ghibli's two major masterpieces.

[14] The "eye" is the author's gaze toward the world and the eye of the heart that connects the world. It's akin to the commonly mentioned "third eye" when discussing Komatsu's work.

[15] '*Shinju*' is also a theme of an exhibition that took place in 2019 at Hong Kong's Whitestone Gallery.

<sup>[16]</sup> 'Guiding' refers to the act of guiding to a certain place and space, and at the same time, it also functions to connect the before and after of a process. In addition, 'guiding' encompasses the meaning of bridging reality and unreality, consciousness and unconsciousness, earth and universe, and person and person, serving as a messenger to connect these aspects.

<sup>[17]</sup> The artist had been drawing animals for a long time, but it wasn't until they turned 18 that they began to depict sacred animals. In the beginning, although she was aware of their desire to express life, death, and the soul through their art, she didn't know how to shape all of that.

<sup>[18]</sup> *Kawasaki-daishi*(川崎大師), *Meiji-jingu*(明治神宮), *Naritasan-shinshoji*(成田山新勝寺).

<sup>[19]</sup> Once every 20 years, a ceremony is held to rebuild the shrine, during which the divine essence (神體) of the shrine is transferred to the new structure. Despite the potential hassle, this is done to place significance on 'regeneration'. In other words, it is a belief that the deities become younger and capable of stronger protection.

<sup>[20]</sup> Through meditation training in Thailand, she once again confirms the existence of the soul. Meditation serves as the background that instills the conviction that the world is interconnected through spiritual exchange. The experience of gaining insight not with intellect but with the eye of the heart becomes a pivotal moment in broadening her perspective on life and art. From that time onwards, Komatsu's work gains expansiveness. The use of vibrant colors and collaboration with Arita ceramic artists lead to the creation of Yama-inu and Koma-inu pottery works. "Heaven and Earth Komainu" was presented at the Chelsea Flower Show in 2015, then collected as a permanent collection at the British Museum in London.

[21] Meditation, for her, is the starting point of creation that allows her to transcend self-awareness or the conceptual ego, enabling her to see the world through various perspectives under the umbrella of pure consciousness.

[22] "Next Mandala - The Great Harmonization" (2022) and others. The term "mandala" not only signifies the cosmic trinity but also symbolizes the flow of consciousness within the human mind. It also encapsulates the artist's intention to approach the eternity and essence of existence that defies the concept of time and space.

[23] This is a shrine dedicated to the goddess *Amaterasu Ōmikami*, the sun deity, from the Japanese creation myth.

[24] In 2013, she visited *Izumo Taisha* Shrine. Regarding this, Komatsu mentioned in an interview, "The light that I saw stretched straight from the main shrine towards Mount Yakumo, as if ascending to the heavens. It was different from sunlight. It looked like a rainbow overflowing with rich colors. Within this intense light, every color seemed to be contained. I felt as if it was a gathering of people's prayers and the energy of the earth. The old shrine, which has been revered since the beginning of Japan's history, must surely be gathering countless prayers. That's why it becomes this rainbow-like energy. When I saw the moment when the rainbow-colored prayers ascended to the heavens, I immediately thought, "I definitely need to use colors!"

[25] Among Komatsu's works, there is "Obsidian - Transparent Chaos." This glossy black rock symbolizes the harmony that once existed between humans and nature.

[26] This is representative of Japan's prehistoric era culture. It's a culture from the Neolithic period characterized by gathering and hunting activities, marking the beginning of communal living.



<sup>[27]</sup> Her concern for the environment is well recognized to the extent that she was appointed as a goodwill ambassador for environmental issues in Japan in 2021.

<sup>[28]</sup> The eerie and ominous-looking animals in Komatsu's works serve as tools to express abstract thoughts that might be difficult to convey directly through material and certain words. Furthermore, her symbolic and metaphorical elements in her paintings serve as powerful means to communicate aspects that cannot be explained in the realm of spirituality.