

# “Miwa Komatsu: Sense of Sacredness”

Tan Siuli (independent curator) , 2023  
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Miwa Komatsu occupies a unique position in the contemporary art world. She has been described as both “a creative artist and a pilgrim”<sup>1</sup>, a *yorishiro*<sup>2</sup>, or a conduit for divine spirits. Her artworks are less about individual artistic expression as they are portals for channeling and communicating visions of and from other realms. These manifest in compelling artworks, with vivid colour, dynamic lines and strokes of paint energetically coalescing into Komatsu’s signature imagery that combines motifs of personal significance as well as iconography drawn from different spiritual traditions that she has studied and experienced.

Komatsu’s journey has been marked by a series of encounters and revelations that shaped her conviction in dedicating her art to capturing and honoring the spiritual energies of sites, and more broadly, in expressing an interwoven universe. Born and raised in Nagano Prefecture, an area dotted with vestiges of Japan’s ancient past, Komatsu speaks of being suffused with a feeling of “instantly crossing space-time”<sup>3</sup> and how, “there is a great sense of earth energy nourishing people who live there”, a place that felt so close to the heavens that she felt she “could establish a connection with the outer space, linking Earth and Sky, cosmic forces and me”<sup>4</sup>. She often recounts how, during her childhood, a guardian animal spirit in the form of a wolf would guide her home and to safety. Encountering a pair of guardian lion-dog hybrids at a shrine later on, Komatsu recognized the presence of divine animal spirits, which she would go on to depict with vivid intensity in her artworks.

Other spiritual experiences shaped Komatsu's otherworldly visions. In 2013, during a pilgrimage to Izumo-taisha, one of Japan's most important Shinto shrines, Komatsu witnessed rainbow-coloured rays of light beaming up into the clouds from below. The artist recounts feeling the purity of collective prayer at the site<sup>5</sup>, and the manifestation of the rainbow served as a powerful metaphor for a bridge or connection between heaven and earth, with "the rainbow-colored prayers of people ascending to Heaven."<sup>6</sup> Reflecting on that "big turning point in [my] career"<sup>7</sup>, Komatsu began to incorporate colour into her work, which had been predominantly monochromatic up till then<sup>8</sup>, as a means to connect people with the divine realm. Komatsu also dedicated an artwork to Izumo-taisha in 2014, and continued this practice of making art as a votive offering with her dedications to other temples in Japan<sup>9</sup>. She began studying and practicing meditation in earnest, and during one session in a cave in Thailand, came face to face with "spirits and entities" whose gazes penetrated her soul. Komatsu was told by the priest guiding her that this signified the opening of her 'third eye', a heightened sense of consciousness that expanded her perspective on painting as well as life<sup>10</sup>.

Much of this may account for the imagery we encounter in Komatsu's works. Her canvases are populated by otherworldly beings, many of them drawn from Japanese myth and folklore. Beast-spirits such as the yamainu and komainu, referenced so often in Komatsu's accounts of her childhood, appear frequently, as guardians of and guides to the spiritual realm. So too the dragon-like creature that winds its way across many of her canvases, a reference to the shinshi (神使, or divine messenger) of Shinto shrines such as Izumo-taisha, and conceivably a distant relative of the Southeast Asian naga, a powerful dragon-snake guardian often depicted sheltering the meditating Buddha. In Komatsu's works, these divine beasts often regard viewers with intense gazes. At times, the epicentre of the artwork is d

ominated by a pair of eyes, or a singular eye. These searing gazes seem to penetrate flesh and bone, divining the true essence or spirit that resides within all of us. The single, all-seeing eye also reminds us of divine omnipresence, while signifying at the same time the ‘opening’ of the ‘third eye’, symbolic of a higher state of consciousness in many cultures.

Many may find these visions harrowing, in contrast to the benign nature of these divine entities as professed by the artist, as well as pre-existing conceptions of spirituality as something serene and soothing in nature. There is however a long tradition of representing spiritual guides and guardians as ferocious beings, notably in the lineage of Esoteric Buddhism. Komatsu would undoubtedly have had some knowledge of or exposure to its art forms, since she cites as one of her major artistic influences the Japanese monk, poet and calligrapher Kūkai, commonly acknowledged as the founder of the Shingon branch of Esoteric Buddhism in Japan. A work that Komatsu created for Toji temple in Kyoto, titled *Next Mandala – The Great Harmonization* (2022), is also modeled after the two iconic mandalas of Shingon Buddhism – the Diamond and Womb-World mandalas.

Within this branch of Buddhism there is a history of representing guardians and deities as fearsome and forceful in appearance<sup>11</sup>. This convention, however, predates Buddhism, and art historians have traced the iconographic lineage of the ‘wrathful’ figure to chthonic figures such as the yaksha, who often also took on a guardian role. Certain physical attributes, such as a fearsome or grotesque appearance, bulging eyes, and a substantial physique, hark back to these origins and are befitting of gatekeepers and protectors who need to convey a sense of intimidation<sup>12</sup>. As such, spiritual guides and guardians are often invested with such qualities to invoke a sense of awe and power, in order to vanquish evil and weaknesses -- “Fearful am I to fear itself”<sup>13</sup>. In considering the visual impact of these fierc

e divine forms, it may be helpful to turn to the concept of *mysterium tremendum*: an experience of the numinous that is enrapturing and completely outside the norm of ordinary experience while simultaneously comprising elements of awe, a sort of profound unease, a sense of overpowering-ness (which inspires a feeling of humility), and energy (creating an impression of immense vigour)<sup>14</sup>.

These qualities may be found in Komatsu's vivid, animated forms. They pulse and throb with visceral intensity, lines, dots and dashes quivering as they delineate shapeshifting forms and energy fields, conveying an overwhelming sensation of an otherworldly encounter or vision. The exhibition at Whitestone Gallery Singapore, encompassing both Komatsu's earlier and recent work, offers an opportunity to observe how the artist's depictions of these other worlds has evolved. Her earlier etchings already demonstrated her interest in capturing numinous beast-like and hybrid forms, or expressing a certain psychological states through the conjuring of surreal landscapes. In these early works, her linework is immaculate and precise, with each entity clearly contained within its own force-field. A turn to painting and colour later on however, gives rise to looser and freer brushwork; this is when forms start to tremble, to pulse and vibrate, and to come to life, giving her work its unmistakeable power, and the sense that the fabric of the universe or of our perception is being rended.

Apart from presenting us these glimpses of another realm, Komatsu also offers us another vision through her work, one she terms the 'Great Harmonization' where the artist envisions the interconnectedness of all beings and all worlds. These are expressed through works that incorporate mandalic forms, notably *Next Mandala* which may be read as Komatsu's mapping of the cosmos. As author Stewart Brand notes, "the Mandala particularly is good at combining a whole lot of things: being big and simple and yet also very complex...you're honouring all the com

plicated detail that the world is made of”<sup>15</sup>. Another medium for Komatsu to express this is through the medium of obsidian, a glossy black volcanic rock that, for the artist, symbolises the harmony that once existed between humanity and nature, for it was this rock that the earliest inhabitants of the Japanese archipelago used to create their tools. For the exhibition at Whitestone Gallery Singapore, Komatsu has included a few obsidian pieces, each traced with forms of mythical beasts and other enigmatic symbols, conferring on them the quality of mysterious relics from a time long past. Rendered on a smaller scale than her mandalas, they nonetheless express the same spirit: that of worlds reconciled.

To conclude this text, I would like to consider the context of Komatsu’s work being presented in Southeast Asia. The region’s spiritual traditions and practices have much in common with those that have informed Komatsu’s works. Historically, across Asia, “(a)rchitecture, sculpture and painting were…the hallmark of transcendental belief systems”<sup>16</sup>, and in many societies in this region, spiritual practices coexist with modernity. Perhaps due to a postcolonial recuperation, there appears to be fewer misgivings about engaging with such practices that would once have been seen as ‘backward’, ‘irrational’ and hence ‘uncivilised’. Of late there has been a decided interest on the part of both artists and curators alike to explore the role of the spiritual and its attendant rituals in contemporary art-making. Artists such as Korakrit Arunanondchai (Thailand) and Zarina Muhammad (Singapore) come to mind, while international surveys such as *Haunted Thresholds: Spirituality in Contemporary Southeast Asia* (Kunstverein Göttingen, 2014) demonstrate a desire to parse the semiotics of the spiritual as articulated by artists from this part of the world, where ghosts and supernatural beings are often employed as spectres for unresolved historical or social trauma, or as metaphors for marginalised bodies and identities. While Komatsu’s art may be considered part of t

his larger stream, what sets her apart is perhaps her disavowal of any critique or commentary in her work. Instead, she dedicates herself to “the work of converting immaterial energy into material”<sup>17</sup>, on being a conduit between realms.

I am reminded of the title and theme of the upcoming 2023 Thailand Biennale, set to unfold over Chiang Rai and Chiang Saen in Northern Thailand, home to some of the country’s most important ancient sites. Helmed by Artistic Directors Rirkirt Tirvanija and Gridthiya Gaweewong, this edition of the Biennale is titled *The Open World*, in reference to an iconic Buddha image enshrined at the Wat Pa Sak historical park. In this image, the Buddha descends from heaven to open up the three worlds – that of the gods, of humans, and the underworld – so that all the beings of the universe may see each other. It is a moment of revelation, and of understanding the interconnectedness of all things. Perhaps Komatsu’s art seeks to do the same, to offer us glimpses or portals to other realms that are closer than we imagine.

<sup>1</sup>Sinéad Vilbar, “Komatsu Miwa and the Visuality of Contemporary Spirituality” in Miwa Komatsu. *Transparent Chaos: Spirituality and Mandala*. Exhibition catalogue, Taro Okamoto Museum, Kawasaki, Japan (25 June – 28 August 2022). Pg. 219.

<sup>2</sup>Meiji Hijikata, “Miwa Komatsu: Transparent Chaos”, *ibid.*, pg. 189.

<sup>3</sup>*ibid.*, pg. 127.

<sup>4</sup>Nina Mdivani, “Connecting Mythology with Environment: Interview with Miwa Komatsu”, *XIBT Magazine*, August 2021.

<https://www.xibtmagazine.com/2021/08/connecting-mythology-with-environment-interview-with-miwa-komatsu/>

5HYAKKEI, “Exclusive interview with Miwa Komatsu. Part2 - Approaching Miwa Komatsu as an artist, production of the Shin-Fudoki Part2, and “prayer” at the origin of her creation”. 3 June 2021.

<https://hyakkei.style/en/art/miwakomatsu-interview2-en/>

6Alan Gleason, “The Eyes Have It: The Spirit-Visions of Miwa Komatsu”, Artscape Japan, August 2022.

<https://artscape.jp/artscape/eng/ht/2208.html>

7Mdivani, op. cit.

8Perhaps not surprising, given her background in etching

9Hidenori Ukai, “Dedicating Contemporary Art to Gods & Buddha – The Significance of Miwa Komatsu’s Dedication”, in Miwa Komatsu. *Transparent Chaos: Spirituality and Mandala*.pg. 215.

10Gleason, op. cit.

11See Sinéad Vilbar, “Kings of Brightness in Japanese Esoteric Buddhist Art”, in *Helibrunn Timeline of Art History*, New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000 --.

[http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/kibr/hd\\_kibr.htm](http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/kibr/hd_kibr.htm) (October 2013)

12 See: Robert N. Linrothe, *Ruthless Compassion: Wrathful Deities in Early Indo-Tibetan Esoteric Buddhist Art*, 1999. Serindia: London.

13David L. Snellgrove, *The Hevajra Tantra: A Critical Study*, 1959. Oxford University Press: London pg. 110.

14John C. Durham, "Rudolf Otto's Idea of the Holy: Summary", 2001 – 2003. <http://www.bytrentsacred.co.uk/index.php/rudolf-otto/the-idea-of-the-holy-1-summary>

15Miwa Komatsu. *Transparent Chaos: Spirituality and Mandala*, pg. 100.

16Shireen Naziree, *Spiritual Spaces*, exhibition catalogue. 16 Feb – 16 Mar 2008, Thavibu Gallery, Bangkok. Pg. 4.

17 Miwa Komatsu. *Transparent Chaos: Spirituality and Mandala*. Pg. 98.