Japanese view of the natural world

Sensing Nature: Rethinking the Japanese Perception of Nature
Mori Art Museum, Tokyo
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T. KURIBAYASHI/PHOTO BY O. WATANABE/COURTESY OF MORI ART MUSEUM

Takashi Kuribayashi's *Wald aus Wald (Forest from Forest)* lets visitors view a woodland scene from above and below — a perspective shift that he hopes might improve Japanese attitudes to the environment.

According to Japanese Shinto tradition, divine spiritual power infuses animate and inanimate objects, from humans and trees to rivers and rocks. Every pocket of spirit should be celebrated. Scientists carry out memorial services for experimental animals killed that year. Assembly-line workers give family names to their machines. Even broken sewing needles are commemorated.

The Japanese perception of the natural world is now the subject of a thought-provoking exhibition at Tokyo's Mori Art Museum. In *Sensing Nature,* ten room-sized installations by three internationally acclaimed Japanese artists explore how animistic views of the world affect attitudes to the environment and technology. The artists suggest that a resurgence of traditional ideas about interconnectivity could help the country to address its environmental problems. But fixes demand more than empathy with nature.

A resolve to note and then destroy borders between humans, nature and artefact powers the show. Taro Shinoda's video trilogy, *Reverberation*, invites us to appreciate mundane Tokyo scenes — homeless people huddled under umbrellas, cars entering and leaving a parking garage, rubbish being piled at a dump site — with the same consideration we might give to watching gazelles on the savannah. "Humans are not separate from nature," Shinoda remarks.

In *Snow*, Tokujin Yoshioka fills a room with a blizzard of goose feathers. Two floor fans blow 300 kilograms of down into the air for a chaotic minute; as the wind subsides, the feathers swirl before coming to rest. Says Yoshioka: "Nature is the beauty of chance."

Takashi Kuribayashi draws attention to our biased perspectives of Earth. Highlighting the arbitrary form of the continents in *Island*, a glass plate bisects a 7-metre-high mountain of black soil, pumice stone and resin. In *Wald aus Wald (Forest from Forest)*, visitors bend and twist beneath an undulating 'ground' of paper and pulp, popping their heads out of holes to observe a forest of thin trees. "If you look at one level, you see a certain reality," Kuribayashi notes. "But there is more above and below."

"An accepting approach might have slowed the development of an environmental consciousness in Japan."

The artists suggest that Japanese people today have lost their sense of proximity to nature that struck a better balance with the environment. "If we got back our original way of viewing nature, we could solve our environmental problems quickly," says Kuribayashi.

The merging of nature and human activity harks back to earlier Japanese tradition, according to art historian Toshio Watanabe of the University of the Arts in London, who is lecturing at the gallery. The famed woodblock landscapes of Japan usually depict human endeavour coexisting with nature — unlike Western art, in which nature is an awesome, sublime force that often excludes or overpowers humans. Even in Hokusai's famous 1832 painting *The Great Wave off Kanagawa*, Watanabe explains, the people don't look panicked and no boats are overturned: "The picture is as much about the energy of the boatmen as the waves."

But removing mental boundaries between humans, nature and technology does not ensure environmental protection. Lab animals will be killed, ceremonies notwithstanding. And industry — and the pollution it creates — may be accepted as simply another part of nature. Watanabe laughs about the time in the 1960s when the Japanese embassy in London gave him a promotional photo of Mount Fuji to use in a talk. In the foreground was a factory that was notorious for dumping waste into the ocean. Perhaps the Japanese perspective gives "a more rounded approach to necessary evil", he quips.

Such an accepting approach might have slowed the development of an environmental consciousness in Japan, argues environmental scientist Kiyotaka Sakaida of Tohoku University in Sendai: "People often say metaphorically, 'let the river wash it away', but that's exactly what they do." Even major environmental disasters, such as the mercury poisoning discovered in Minamata Bay in 1956, remained local problems rather than stirring a large-scale environmental movement in Japan.

Attention to pollution and other environmental problems has improved over the past two decades. And Japanese environmentalism might have found its niche in the Satoyama Initiative, a project to promote and support 'socio-ecological production landscapes' by protecting villages, farmland and adjacent woods and grasslands that have been formed and maintained through long-term human influence. This scheme aims to protect nature in the places we live and work, build and create. As the human sprawl inevitably creeps into isolated nature, the perspectives captured in this exhibition might come in handy. ■

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