

Ainslie Murray's Architecture of Thread and Gesture at The Japan Foundation

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A UNIQUE ABILITY TO FIND BEAUTY in the incomplete, imperfect, irregular, impermanent, understated and undefined exists among the Japanese. In their richly visual culture – alongside and within the kitsch cuteness and decadent futurism – there still exists a strong strand of traditional aesthetic values that go back to the age-old notion of *wabi sabi*.

A notoriously slippery term, *wabi sabi* is related to the tolerance and affection for the ephemeral that is found within Zen Buddhism. The truth of extinction is one of the four noble truths in Buddhist teaching and entails the condition of *shogyo mujo* where nothing is fixed and all is in motion (*shogyo* means 'everything' and *mujo* means 'impermanent').

Looking at the work of Munich-based Sydney architect/artist Ainslie Murray, reflections on these Japanese aesthetic values can be traced. They are to be found in the meticulous precision; organic, simple lines; thoughtful use of light and shadow; emphasis on void spaces and silence; preoccupation with ritual and repetition, and distinct sense of graceful temporariness in her work.

In Murray's exhibition, *An Architecture of Thread and Gesture*, at the Japan Foundation Gallery, Sydney, 2008, she drew specifically on her experiences in Japan and its aesthetic values. Whilst in Kyoto with a research grant to explore alternate ways of thinking about architecture, Murray encountered a number of Japanese textile workers and become fascinated with their movements as they installed their work in a gallery space. She took photographs and videos of the process, and has since been exploring their repetitive gestures through various projects back home.

There is much to be found in Japanese culture about intricate systems and rituals of body language. The incredibly refined, subtle language of movement in the traditional tea ceremony or in Noh theatre are pinnacles, but complicated vocabularies of body gesture are also played out in daily life. Murray started out with intricate two-dimensional maps of the Japanese artists' bodies moving in space, executed in fabric and stitching (which she refers to as 'stitched paintings'). For the *Architecture of Thread and Gesture* installation she then made sculptural representations of how the body moves in space and creates its own kind of architecture, and spent weeks perforating millions of tiny holes in tyvek sheets and stitching them into translucent tunnels of complex webs.

Navigating Murray's three formations, they evoke an almost unsettling sense of silence, stillness and absence. According to the artist, it wasn't until she went trawling around temples and gardens in Kyoto that the Japanese notions of minimalism and invisibility really dawned on her. This contemplation of the unseen is easily traced in her installation; the works somehow existing as void spaces that make you feel as though they're enveloping you.

In the west we might see emptiness as indicative of something lacking, but in Japan it stands for possibility, and for the clear, silent state required for meditation. Alluding to something that may or may not exist, emptiness encourages each of us to interpret the world for ourselves. Spiritual awakening cannot be achieved if the mind is noisy

Installation views of Ainslie Murray's *An Architecture of Thread and Gesture*, Japan Foundation Gallery, Sydney, 2008. Images courtesy the artist. Photographs by Ian Hobbs.

or cluttered, and this is manifested visually by silent, empty space representing openness and creativity.

In Praise of Shadows is the title of a short essay on aesthetics (first published in 1933) by the Japanese author Jun'ichirō Tanizaki. In it, comparisons to light and darkness are used to contrast Western and Asian cultures: while the progressive West continuously strives for light and clarity, the subtle and subdued forms of oriental art and literature are seen by Tanizaki as showing a superior appreciation of mystery and shadow, and an ability to locate beauty in darkness.

He states that the Japanese 'find beauty not in the thing itself but in the pattern of shadows, the light and the darkness, that one thing against another creates', and a similar principle applies to Murray's colourless structures, which are better suited to a dimly lit interior than to broad daylight. Her materials – tyvek, carbon fibre and monofilament – were selected in large part because of how they hold, reflect and absorb light and shadows.

By way of example Tanizaki speaks of Japanese paper, and how its opaqueness makes it better suited than glass for the Japanese home. 'Western paper turns away the light, while our paper seems to take it in, to envelope it gently, like the soft surface of a first snowfall.' The sheets in Murray's installation are made of tyvek, which she says resembles Japanese paper. With the overhead lights shining through, it indeed seems to take the light in, giving the forms a subtle, warm and understated gleam.

With her background in architecture Murray is particularly interested in the transformations between two-dimensional and three-dimensional representations, examined here through textiles, where the acts of stitching and shaping fabric turn something flat into something sculptural. With highly labour-intensive needlework featured in a lot of these works, the artist has strong ideas about manual labour and the importance of working with the hands – ideas which synthesise with a distinctly Japanese ideology. She says that while architecture is often a remote practice that's distanced from the builders who do the constructing, she is interested in bridging that gap. 'One of the things that fascinated me about Japanese artists was their willingness to invest time, and to put themselves into the work.'

Murray feels we need to 'stay in touch with touch', to use our hands for the entire process of conception, design, production and installation. If we design things through a computer, however advanced the software is, we lose the relationship with touch and end up making materials do things they don't want to. She also deliberately makes things by hand because she wants to slow things down. 'Time accelerates when we use machines, and we distance ourselves from the product – but the mind opens up and we start to process things differently when we're working with our hands.' This slowing down of time and investment of oneself in one's work goes against a lot of what is promoted in contemporary culture, but relates to Zen philosophy and the practice of meditation, and imbues Murray's work with a distinct contemplative quality.

'There's a connection between my handwork and the hand gestures that inspired the installation,' she says. When we work by hand the product ends up with an intrinsic appeal; a rustic, human element that can't be achieved when objects are created by machines. In the *wabi-sabi*

worldview, transience and the process of decay are the essence of everything. It is a distinctly Japanese aesthetic that shows the vulnerability of material things and is in contrast to the Greek ideals of decadence, permanence, perfection and monumental beauty that have informed Western aesthetic values.

Compulsive repetition has long been a prevailing element in Murray's handwork, and she is interested in how doing the same thing manually over and over results in surprises. Describing the process of burning the tiny holes in the sheets of tyvek for weeks on end, she recalls suddenly seeing a resemblance of the Japanese woodblock prints that have rain in the foreground: 'It changed the way I thought of the works – I started to see them as landscapes, referencing natural phenomena even though they look so artificial.'

I was coming from the world of architecture where there's this incredible accuracy and almost paranoid precision that you have to have – because otherwise things will fall down. The sense of control was so ingrained in me but I've started to let go and allowed for more spontaneity, unpredictability and imprecision, and to let that be a part of the work.

Japanese culture is unique in its sense of the equivocal (even Japanese language is notoriously oblique), and its aesthetic is ever striving to remain open to interpretation. A certain ambiguity is visible in Murray's installations, with their allusive shadows and indefinite forms. Though they possess meticulous detail and elegant precision they appear averse to straight lines, perfect symmetry or prevailing meaning.

By occupying the margins between architecture, textiles and visual arts, Murray questions the established dichotomy of art and design/craft. In Japan such a dichotomy has not traditionally existed; before the Meiji restoration when Japan was opened up to the outside world for the first time in centuries, the best approximation of the word 'art' was *katachi*, which actually translates to 'form and design'. While art in the West attempts to differentiate itself from everydayness, the equivalent in Japan is something more synonymous with function and life.

In a similar way, Murray is not interested in creating things that are separate from life. The *Architecture of Thread and Gesture* installation makes no attempt at being monumental – the structures will quietly return to nothingness. Delicate and ephemeral configurations, they are reminiscent of the words of the 14th century Japanese monk Kenko: 'This world is a place of such uncertainty and change that what we imagine we see before our eyes really does not exist.'

Architecture of Thread and Gesture was shown at the Japan Foundation Gallery, 11 to 26 August 2008. These installations are currently on show as part of the nationally touring *Tamworth Fibre Textile Biennial* exhibition, 2009-10.

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