

SEANKELLY

Sauer, Jennifer. "Mariko Mori's Art Goes Beyond Time and Space." CR Fashion Book. May 1, 2020.

CR



ESOTERIC COSMOS (PURE LAND), 1996–1998 BY MARIKO MORI. © MARIKO MORI / ARTIST RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS), NEW YORK

Mariko Mori's artwork is never quite what it seems. Beneath its surfaces—whether minimal and sculptural or carefully choreographed images—layers of nuance and meaning are at the heart of her approach. The artist explores ideas of philosophy and existence—often inspired by spontaneous creative visions—weaving history with a contemporary touch into her conceptual pieces. Fusing her Eastern heritage and Western experiences, Mori creates with a timeless alchemy that connects readily across cultures. "There are fundamental ideas that link the East and West from the remote past to the present," she tells CR. "There are some things we cannot and should not forget, and that we shall pass on to future generations. This is one of the greater missions that artists can contribute to fulfilling."

A spirit of creativity has surrounded the Tokyo-born artist (b. 1967) from her youth—her mother is a European Art historian and her father is an inventor. Mori's own design interest led her to study fashion and work as a model in Japan before studying art at London's Chelsea College of Art and Design. Her next destination was New York City, where she participated in the Whitney Museum of American Art's Independent Study Program. In the years since, she has travelled the world in a quest to inspire her artwork.

SEANKELLY



PETER MACDIARMID GETTY IMAGES

It was Mori's early photographs that first gained art world attention. As the images' designer, costumer, and star of these futuristic scenes, her superheroine characters ranged from cybergeisha to pop star to sci-fi goddess. Part kitsch, part cultural comment, the fantasy-scapes playfully touch on traditional Japanese culture and personas, leaving perception ever to the eye of the beholder. Later, the artist expanded her practice into sculpture, video, installation, and performance, often centered on the idea of transcendence. One of the groundbreaking works to confirm Mori's place on the international art map was her cosmic, Buddhism-inspired installation, "Wave UFO" in 2003. This interactive sculpture—which projects colorful, graphic illustrations of viewers' brave waves—was later featured in her second turn at the Venice Biennale in 2005, as well as the traveling survey of her work "Oneness," a spiritual take on technology and human connectedness.

SEAN KELLY



"KUMANO" BY MARIKO MORI, 1997-1998 COURTESY: THE ARTIST AND SEAN KELLY, NEW YORK

In recent years, Mori's practice has focused on spirituality within nature. Her ecological art initiative, the Faou Foundation launched in 2010 with "Primal Rhythm," a two-part installation in Japan's Seven Light Bay symbolizing rebirth through connection. Then her sophomore project, "Ring: One with Nature" suspended a permanent, luminous ring above Brazil's Veu da Noiva waterfall. This art piece was unveiled as part of the Celebra Cultural Program for the 2016 Rio Olympic Games. Here, CR speaks with the visionary artist about how Eastern and Western mythologies come together in her work, the deeply intertwined relationship between nature and humanity, and why reaching to the past provides a path to our future.



BEGINNING OF THE END, GIZA, EGYPT, TRIPTYCH" BY MARIKO MORI, 2000 COURTESY: THE ARTIST AND SEAN KELLY, NEW YORK

SEANKELLY

How has your heritage and experience of Japanese culture informed your art?

“When I lived in Tokyo, I looked more towards the West. Then when I moved to London in 1988, I started to become interested in my traditional culture. After I moved to New York in 1992, that was when I began to research the East even more. I studied tea ceremonies and Buddhism, and I began to appreciate the uniqueness of Eastern culture. I also became more aware of the differences and the similarities between the East and the West. The noble Zen Buddhist monk Daisetsu Suzuki, who explains the power of Buddhism through universal ideas that exist between cultures, has been a great influence on me since the beginning.”

"I QUESTION MYSELF TO IDENTIFY WHAT IS MOST RELEVANT ACROSS DIFFERENT TIMES AND PLACES. I TRY TO FIND THE CORE IDEAS THAT CORRESPOND TO THE PAST AND THE FUTURE."—MARIKO MORI

How do you fuse together Eastern and Western ideas in your artworks?

“It begins with what I value and what I have found essential and reflected in traditional culture. I have also become interested in science, technology, and different concepts of the universe. There is the idea of an endless universe, which is a new vision but it is quite similar to the Buddhist idea of reincarnation and the Celtic idea of nature’s rebirth. I question myself to identify what is most relevant across different times and places. I try to find the core ideas that correspond to the past and the future.”

SEANKELLY



"DREAM TEMPLE" BY MARIKO MORI, 1997-1999 COURTESY: THE ARTIST AND SEAN KELLY, NEW YORK

What is the place of fashion in your art, particularly in your photographs embodying ultramodern characters?

"When I was little, I loved Osamu Tezuka's [TV animation series] Astro Boy. I think all the kids of my generation watched the show. The '60s was quite an era for futuristic design and the look of that futurism becomes embedded in your thoughts in a way. I also really like artifacts from 100,000 B.C. through 1,000 B.C.—things that can transcend time and space. Objects from the past can speak to us today and in the future, too. It is not about sophistication, it represents a primal aesthetic. Perhaps because of the experience and my popular culture background, this helped me to visualize something that could be transcendent. At the time, I used my own body to portray the images and there was an iconography in the series, where a costume or dress was one of the tools to create the images. I enjoyed making and designing these looks, but the true purpose behind it was to share the ideas. [My] 'Esoteric Cosmos' artworks visualize Esoteric Buddhism but the images utilize modern language. In 'Kumano,' I used calligraphy from the 5th century and it was photographed at the site of a well-known Shinto Shrine. 'Empty Dream' is in an artificial reality, which is another dimension of a reality to be able to share."

SEANKELLY



"EMPTY DREAM" BY MARIKO MORI, 1995 COURTESY: THE ARTIST AND SEAN KELLY, NEW YORK

Much of your artwork combines spirituality and futurism. What does this aspect of your art reflect about our culture?

"I started to travel around the world in 1996, taking pictures for my photographic work in places like the Painted Desert, Gobi Desert, and the Dead Sea. When I was traveling, what really moved me was the nature. Humanity is so small compared to the scale of vast landscapes. When I was in the rainforest in Rio de Janeiro installing my artwork ['Ring: One with Nature'], it was a mind-opening experience. We are nature itself, and the ability to be spiritual came to me when I was surrounded by pristine nature."

Ecology and the environment have become central to your recent work. How did this interest develop into the Faou Foundation?

"I founded the Faou Foundation in 2010, but the vision first came to me in 2007. I coined the word 'faou,' which means creative force, because I wanted to reenergize the idea of embracing and honoring nature through art installation. My first project was a site-specific, permanent installation based on the symbolic idea of nature's rebirth. This work was aligned with the winter solstice and it was inspired by prehistorical, archaeological remains, including the stone circle and standing stone, a symbol rooted in the European and Japanese Neolithic. That was the beginning and I installed the first sculpture in 2011, which was the year of tsunami. Then I completed another project, 'Ring: One with Nature,' in Rio de Janeiro at the Véu da Noiva waterfall in 2016. Each artwork honors nature in its unique ecological setting. I believe that art installations also help protect and preserve the environment around them by sharing awareness."

SEANKELLY



"RING: ONE WITH NATURE" BY MARIKO MORI, 2016 FAOU FOUNDATION, NEW YORK

Your artwork has explored a range of themes from life and death to technology and reality. Where is your practice focused now and where is it headed?

"I often find out the true meaning of a work after it is made. It is conceptualized, produced, and installed, but it may be after the process, even a few years later, when I learn more about the work that I created. I had a vision in 2015 and I have been working for five years to realize it, and it may even take another five years to complete it. When I conceive a vision, I like to treasure it in my mind, to nurture it well, and then deliver it at the right time. For the future, I hope to continue to imagine and realize these visions."