

## *Mika Tajima: Super Natural*

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If I have come “outside myself,” then I am no longer localized, and this tells me something new about who I am, my relation to space in particular. I am not a fully or exclusively bounded sort of being, since whatever I am, I have the capacity to appear elsewhere. I am a kind of being who is here and there, apparently at once. I can, as it were, face myself, and this involves a certain measure of self-loss (“I have become other to myself”); it also entails a surprising recurrence of myself at a spatial distance from where I thought I was.

—Judith Butler<sup>1</sup>

Through her work, Mika Tajima makes us aware of the invisible structures of communal existence through our ever-evolving relationship with technology and the built environment. The title of this exhibition, *Super Natural*, draws on the notion of an order of existence that exceeds the laws of nature and stretches beyond the observable universe. Inside the cultural economies of heightened technological efficiency and optimization, the boundaries between our authentic and digital identities have become blurred to the point of unrecognizability. In the artist’s words, “Under the regime of techno-capitalism, we are the subject of contactless forces from within and beyond. In my practice, I’m transmediating between the invisible and the material to represent and understand the agency of being uncontainable, unreachable, and not yet knowable.” That is, our individual and communal agencies, which so often are vulnerable and contingent, are subjects of deep inquiry as transitory agents at the threshold between familiarity and otherness.

*Super Natural* presents a selection of Tajima’s latest bodies of work, from her *Negative Entropy* monumental textile wall pieces to her *Pranayama* milled walnut and rose quartz

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<sup>1</sup> Catherine Malabou and Judith Butler, “You Be My Body for Me: Body, Shape, and Plasticity in Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*,” in *A Companion to Hegel*, ed. Stephen Houlgate and Michael Baur (Hoboken, NJ: Blackwell, 2011), 625.

monoliths, *Anima* and *Mirror* blown glass sculptures, *Ulterior* trompe l'oeil gold-foil air-jet wallpaper, and *Art d'Ameublement* thermoformed paintings. The show takes visitors through a journey of somatic energy that is in continuous transmigration, dispersing and coming together through the space of the Hill Art Foundation.

At the center of the exhibition is *Negative Entropy*, a monumental woven textile representing a spectrogram, or a visualization of sound frequencies, derived from a communal sound bath. Its mural-size scale, vibrant texture, and striking colors—violet sound waves punctured by vertical fluorescent lime and horizontal yellow bands—offers a dynamic visualization that the viewer experiences first from afar, then intimately by walking the massive width of the piece. Similar to the release of energy through pressure points in acupuncture, sound baths clear discordant energy fields through principles of quantum physics and sacred geometry, leading to inner visionary experiences. In past iterations, these textile acoustic portraits have referenced the Jacquard loom (recording as they do the postindustrial conditions of its own obsolescence), meditations in temples, and fusion explosion tests of a compact reactor developed to produce clean power. The three *Negative Entropy* works on view, while formally a nod to the modernist sublime, also reference energy generated directly from sound-wave brain stimulations, breathing exercises, and sound baths—all invisible energy fields that, when released, induce well-being and a state of harmony. Tajima states, “I try to heighten the awareness of this immaterial economy and its production in my work through the images, material, and spatialities it conjures.”

Perceived energy fields flow through the gallery spaces from the *Ulterior* trompe l'oeil gold air jets, which are positioned on the walls based on pressure points of an acupuncture diagram. These energy flows also reference the Ayurvedic practice of controlling breath, and thus life force. The *Pranayama* sculptures are perforated with bronze jet nozzles and made out of milled walnut, carved like ancient monoliths to conform to the shape of a body that inhales and exhales flows of air and spiritual life. The monoliths convey a controlled form of relaxation through their ergonomic design and aim toward productivity. The rose quartz *Pranayama (Monolith, Rose Quartz)* stones reflect pressure points from the head, which is often mapped as a microcosm of the body. Rose quartz is significant for its natural

capacities to generate electricity and regulate timekeeping. These works integrate the ancient practice of acupuncture with the technology of electromagnetic energy to penetrate the psyche and augment one's mental state through the body.

The *Anima* blown-glass sculptures give shape to the flows of air and energy implied in the *Pranayama* sculptures. These transparent forms are amalgams of prosthetics, internal organs, robotics, and body braces, but they also conjure something alien. Counteracting the fragility and ephemeral flow of air, Tajima's dark *Mirror* series conjures control, regulation, and power through the black, curved exteriors that conceal the air nozzles. The very notion of breath—vital to many species' existence since time immemorial—took on a renewed significance with the global COVID-19 pandemic, anti-Asian hate crimes, and George Floyd's murder and the momentum of Black Lives Matter movement. *Anima* and *Mirror* remind us that under circumstances of physical and psychological lockdown, survival against racial injustice exacerbated by a global health crisis has become ever more urgent.

Finally, the *Art d'Ameublement* paintings continue Tajima's long-standing interest in the potentiality of a place's existence in the mind's eye, and subconscious references that arise from a certain vibrant color gradient or mood palette that dissipate into thin air as soon as that memory coalesces. To make them, paint particles were sprayed onto thermoformed plastic to suggest the ghostly emergence of an invisible form. The notion of plastic and plasticity, according to philosopher Catherine Malabou, conveys the dual meanings of being “capable of shaping itself (of bestowing form on itself) and of receiving the very shape that it gives to itself as if it came from outside. . . . That is why shaping one's own body always amounts to disavowing this very operation, as if this shaping were somebody else's operation.”<sup>2</sup>

The potentiality for formation and annihilation is akin to the topological notion of permutation, which centers on the concept of geometric transformation, in which space and shape can be expanded, contracted, distorted, and twisted while the structure of the object

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<sup>2</sup> Malabou and Butler, “You Be My Body for Me,” 623.

remains constant. A turn away from the fixed structures of Euclidean geometry and empiricism, topological properties as applied in art include connection via a breakdown of boundaries, the use of open structures, and cross-pollination of disciplines that question systems of knowledge. Through its dual conditions, Tajima's physical and conceptual use of plastic thus activates space and the structures that reveal its spatial emergence and disappearance.

Tajima visualizes the various states in which we hover between and among the many relational spaces outside ourselves. Taking a cue from Judith Butler, this is certainly a mode of self-loss in the traditional sense of not being bounded and localized, but also a form of self-making at a spatial distance. According to the artist, "We exist in two states —our physical self and our digital self—a composite of abstractions in tension between the immaterial, the intangible, and the physical. Each work contends with containment or capture, escape or concealment, formation or dissolution, our identities and being in a state of transformation and becoming." The exhibition interrogates the location of agency in our somatic experience of the world, which is increasingly abounding in artificial intelligence, by reminding us that life still has physicality through the invisible and the unknowable.