



SENBAZURU
TOSHIKO
NISHIKAWA

THE VILCEK FOUNDATION

EXHIBITIONS



SENBAZURU TOSHIKO NISHIKAWA

AN INTERACTIVE EXHIBITION
OF 1,000 SUSPENDED, MIRRORED ORBS

IN
A SINGLE
IMAGE,
THE
REFLECTION
OF
MANY

The character of Toshiko Nishikawa is one of humble sensitivity. It is apparent in the artist's gentle manner and in all her artistic endeavors. This innovative exhibition, *Senbazuru*, is no exception. The concept for this deeply personal installation, a bold and mesmerizing site-specific creation - more than a year in the making - is infused with her autobiographical experiences.

Within the walls of our gallery, hanging from its ceiling, Toshiko has created a universe, a galaxy of one thousand painted mirrored spheres. Through the web of reflections woven in her imagination, this peaceful and loving artist carries out a microcosmic experiment in the concept of human connectivity, articulating her steadfast dream that cooperation and understanding are possible within our global community.

Toshiko invites viewers to participate in this installation, to be part of her creative process. They are invited to handle the orbs, and in so doing, complete the work. Dynamic and subjective, each viewer will see *Senbazuru* slightly differently, yet, the artist hopes, come away with a sense of community, of the connections she hopes we all can make in this world. (The title of the exhibition is a reference to *senbazuru*, the Japanese term for one thousand folded paper cranes, symbolizing good health and happiness.)

We at The Vilcek Foundation are proud to present this expression of peace and tranquility from an extraordinary artist, who lives every day her faith in oneness and harmony. In our ongoing efforts to spotlight the work of notable immigrant artists, whose achievements exemplify the mission of our organization, we celebrate the beauty of her creative vision and the power of her artistic skills. I hope that the transcendent quality of *Senbazuru* will bring to each of you a new understanding of yourself, and remind you of your bond to all living beings, inherent in each of us.

RICK KINSEL
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

AN INVITATION TO TOSHIKO'S INWARD / OUTWARD UNIVERSE

REIKO TAHARA



TOSHIKO NISHIKAWA

**TOSHIKO NISHIKAWA
CALLS HERSELF A MEDIUM.
SHE REPEATS IT TWICE
IN HER ARTIST STATEMENT:**

**"I WAS BORN TO BE A MEDIUM
THAT GIVES BIRTH TO ARTWORK."**

**"I AM JUST A MEDIUM,
NOT A SCIENTIST NOR A PHILOSOPHER,
SO I JUST WAIT FOR THAT MOMENT
IN TIME THAT ENERGY COMES AND
BEARS THE THINGS THAT SHOULD
BE BORN."**

One spring afternoon, Rick Kinsel, the Executive Director of the Vilcek Foundation, and Anne Schruth, its Events and Programs Assistant, told me about their upcoming exhibit at the Vilcek Gallery. They described the artist's work with words such as "gentle," "pastel," "nature," "interactive." They showed me a sample orb - a simple ball that was half shiny-silver and half transparent. With a glint of mischievous amusement in their eyes, they said the exhibit would be a crazy one, with one thousand of these orbs hanging in their gallery, reflecting the images of the visitors and creating an enchanted world.

When I went home, I did some homework about Toshiko's earlier work: First I found her two-dimensional works of dripping streaks of white and pastels in different shades, alternately covering and revealing the layers beneath. Her work recalls snow, water, and clouds. Then she developed a style in which she combined an acrylic box and canvas. By using the shadows of shapes on the acrylic box, she invites viewers to participate in the creation of artwork. "The position of light or where people stand will change the vision of my artwork dramatically, so the work cannot be completed without human imagination," she states. Agora Art Gallery's press release reads: "The ever-present motion in Nishikawa's work is quiet and calm,



TOSHIKO NISHIKAWA,
SENBAZURU. 2010.

THE VILCEK FOUNDATION GALLERY.
NEW YORK CITY.



TOSHICO NISHIHAWA HARD AT WORK IN HER STUDIO.



never frenetic. Her work explores unification, inviting viewers to intimately interact with the various languages of perception.” It all sounded terrific, and I was excited to visit her studio and meet her. But I could not imagine then the power of the “tangible spirituality” of her work, and of the presence of Toshiko herself as a medium.

Toshiko was sitting tall when I first saw her, in the midst of neatly lined half-orbs, drawing lines inside them, one by one, with clear focus. It was tranquil in her Tribeca studio. The only movement came from the small arc of her brushstrokes, which she made on the half-orb in her hand, each in one slow exhaling breath. She would repeat this to make intricate line patterns inside each half-orb, two thousand of them, to make one thousand orbs.

Toshiko explains the science, or miracle, of her art: “These lines create a small earth in the middle of the orb. Without lines, the inside of the orb is just a fuzzy space. A thick original line will reflect itself as a thinner line, then its reflection will make an even thinner line. Soon, our eyes start seeing this beautiful tiny earth in the middle of a small cosmos within the orb. If the lines are thicker or thinner than they are supposed to be, the earth will not be born.”

After creating her acrylic box series, Toshiko was not completely satisfied. She wanted to release herself and her art from any hint of two-dimensionality and sense of confinement in a box. One day in early 2009, the “vision” suddenly came to her, at 3:00 a.m., as usual for her. She saw the cosmos within an orb and started looking for a way to materialize the vision. “When I found this orb at a shop, I simply felt that this has got to be it, because the idea of the lines inside the orbs was already in my vision.” When she participated in the Toast Walk, a Tribeca-area open studio tour that spring, she presented a few test orbs. She began to wish she could make one thousand of them somewhere, somehow, no matter how outrageous it would be. Soon after that, the Vilcek Foundation serendipitously contacted Toshiko about a possible exhibit.

“Like the thousand paper cranes, which we Japanese make when we wish for peace or a cure for illness, I want to make these one thousand orbs to help people realize how beautiful they really are. In my tiny universe within an orb, I hope to invite people to see themselves in it, and realize that each of



WITH AN ARTIST'S DEDICATION TO HER VISION, TOSHICO PATIENTLY HANDPRINTS EACH OF THE 1,000 ORBS.

them is this tiny, beautiful universe. We all exist in this universe together, but it doesn't mean that we are as small as particles of dust. It means that we each exist within the universe we create together. So everyone creates their own portrait by participating in this project, and each portrait is beautiful.... If people feel that way, I will be happy.” In the exhibit, all of these orbs will be connected with lines. In Toshiko's world, when we, the viewers, touch the orbs or look at ourselves in them, we will be connected with each other in complex, reflexive, and magical ways.

“EVERYONE CREATES THEIR OWN PORTRAIT BY PARTICIPATING IN THIS PROJECT, AND EACH PORTRAIT IS BEAUTIFUL... IF PEOPLE FEEL THAT WAY, I WILL BE HAPPY.”

As I visited with and sat with her a few times over the course of several months, I kept thinking about the idea of being a “medium.” She is a medium in multidimensional ways, like the reflections of the lines she creates. Firstly, she mediates between people and nature. In the steady evolution of her artwork, various forms of nature - be it rain, clouds, snow, shadow, light, or even mitochondria - represent the way she sees the world. What is stunning is the lack of Toshiko's desire to create art as mere self-expression. In this new mixed-media orb installation, she invites us to become a tiny cell in the cosmos she creates; and while this cosmos invites us to create our own universe in our own minds, it then becomes the window that connects us to the outside universe that surrounds us. Reminiscent of Eastern philosophy, Toshiko's art incites us to exist in the micro/macro, inner/outer worlds simultaneously, as part of the universe we call nature.

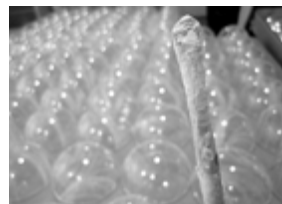
Secondly, Toshiko mediates between human beings across whatever divides us - space, time, race, nationality, gender. She says that she tries not to use color in her work because light contains all colors. She doesn't want to represent objects using the color of her choice. Instead, she wants to show the light to the viewers, to create art together. Color is only the reflection of light, and an illusion that our eyes perceive according to how the light illuminates the objects. “For colors and for races, I believe that the origin was very simple. We humans name them, categorize them, and divide them by defining national borders and ethnic groups. But I want to go back to our origins.”

Soon after she moved to Tribeca in 2004, Toshiko went to the World Trade Center site for the first time. There, she was overwhelmed by the electric energy of lost lives. "Those lives that stopped short and couldn't do what they wanted to do... their energy remained there and came into me as I visited them. The number 1,000 also signifies their hopes and dreams for peace. Therefore, in a way, it is a project that had to be born in this area."

"I DO MAKE ARTWORK, BUT THE WORKS DON'T APPEAR TO BE MY CREATION. THEY COME OUT BECAUSE THEY HAVE TO..."

Toshiko's vector carries us to the future, as well. She says that the reason for creating this work now is because she wants to prove that the pessimists' end-of-the-world view is wrong. Our descendants will be here a thousand years from now, and to share this installation art with them is the point of this work, she says. "That's why I try not to judge my work using my criteria. I create my work, wondering how my descendants in the year 3000 will judge it. Their faces reflected in the orbs might be different from what we can imagine today, but I hope the idea of these orbs will survive and reflect the people of the future. What will they think about the beautiful globe they see in the orb? I hope that my descendants will have clear and open minds and feel that it looks just like them."

Mediums are often women, not only in Japanese history but also in other Asian cultures, ancient Greece, Africa, Native American cultures, or even in *Harry Potter* (Sybil Trelawney, Divinations teacher at the Hogwarts School, who made the most important prophecy about Harry's future)! Himiko, Japan's legendary first emperor, was a woman, and a shaman. Toshiko explains the process plainly: "I do make artwork, but the works don't appear to be my creation. They come out because they have to... just like our children. Yes, I gave birth to them, but I didn't create them. From time to time, I look at them and marvel, 'Wow, this wonderful person came out of me?' Just like that, there are occasions that I get impressed with my own artwork. I can't believe they come out of me. But other times, when I get depressed and in a slump, I judge my work poorly. I forget my appreciation for the work's effort in coming out through me. I have to remind myself that my job is to bear and give birth, not to judge."



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THE SINGLE BRUSH USED TO PAINT 1,000 ORBS.



THE MYRIAD REFLECTIONS FROM A FINISHED ORB.

Behind this positive, optimistic mind-set, there have been shadows. Toshiko was born as the third daughter, and last child, to a well-established Japanese family in Yokohama, in the oil business and with traditional values. She was an unwanted girl. Her parents wanted a boy, the heir. They kept the toddler Toshiko's head shaved. She vividly remembers her first day in kindergarten, when a teacher scolded her for not taking off her beret. She didn't want to expose her shaved head. She was acutely aware that being a girl was not a desired thing; but over time, the feeling of "why is it so wrong to be a girl?" shifted to "I am Toshiko, a human, a life." She was a thoughtful child and a natural-born artist; she discovered that she could express her inner, unexplainable thoughts through her art. She won many awards at a young age and entered the prestigious Tama Art College. She studied oil painting and block printing. Soon after graduation, she got married and had two children, back to back. Being able to continue her art creation was a condition of her marriage. When their children were young, her husband's job brought the family to the United States, where she continued making art - through enormous effort and energy. She was concerned about the bad effects of oil paints on her children, and after unsuccessful attempts to use sunflower oil and other types, she eventually switched to acrylic.

Raising children was not the only hurdle. There had always been shadows over her married life. Toshiko attributes the conflict to the distortion between her and previous generations of Japanese society. Japanese women today have a difficult challenge: being educated to achieve their goals while still having to deal with society and, often, their own partners, or even themselves, who subconsciously or consciously resist the change. She forbore the hard times for her children's benefit and hoped she could help her partner avoid the now-unacceptable behaviors so that they could grow together. All the while she never stopped making art. "Agony and unimaginable pain let me know how heavy my role is. Living as a woman is so wonderful; living as an artist is so interesting. Living as a human is just an amazing experience for me," her artist statement says. Her desire to create a world of pureness and light has been cultivated through long dark nights.

When her children grew and left home in 2003, her husband was transferred back to Japan. Toshiko remained in the States and moved to New York alone, to focus on art making.

TOSHIKO IS A MEDIUM, LIGHT ITSELF, WHO BRINGS THE SUNLIGHT TO OUR MINDS. SHE WANTS TO GLOW FROM WITHIN OUR MINDS SO THAT WE CAN SEE WHAT OUR EYES MIGHT NOT RECOGNIZE.

Her second life began that day. "The density of time I had in the beginning years of my life in New York was completely different from the time I was making art with my family and children around. I thought about art night and day, even during my sleep. I never felt lonely. I felt that my art in the first half of my career was like a rehab practice for an athlete while on the disabled list!" she laughs. But thanks to that rehab period, and the years of patiently keeping her knees bent ready for a jump, the jump, when it came, was higher, and the burst incredible. During the next seven years, she had a solo show at the Agora Gallery in New York and participated in numerous group shows in Korea, Japan, Austria, Italy, and many parts of New York State. "The leap was possible only because of the piled layers of brewing emotions - that I wanted to create, do art. I haven't thought about talent much, but maybe it is sort of a talent, and possibly the most important thing for an artist that she is able to incorporate the hard times into building a stronger spring, to jump higher...." Now her children are grown, and when they are far away and sound sad on the phone, Toshiko paints through the night thinking about them, because that's the only thing she can do and that is her profession and destiny.

To Plato, the sun means goodness. He says our eye is a peculiar sensing organ that needs a medium - light - to function and recognize things. Toshiko is a medium, light itself, who brings the sunlight to our minds. She wants to glow from within our minds so that we can see what our eyes might not recognize. With her gentle, playful heart, she invites us to step into the light. Light not only brings clarity, but also bears bio-electric warmth. As we accept her invitation and come into the gallery, this special space in the Vilcek building will bear the reflective heat of healing energy that we will create together, tonight.

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THE VILCEK FOUNDATION

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THE VILCEK FOUNDATION HONORS
FOREIGN-BORN SCHOLARS AND ARTISTS LIVING
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TOSHIKO NISHIKAWA

