

The Transforming and Evolving Body – Aesthetics of Imbalance

M O T O H I K O O D A N I

By Reiko Tsubaki

Motohiko Odani was born in 1972 in Kyoto, where he was raised, and since studying sculpture at Tokyo University of the Arts, he has been actively creating works in such diverse media as photography, video, sculpture and illustration.

As demonstrated in his works *Phantom Limb* (1997) and *Fingerspanner* (1998), a primary characteristic of Odani's practice is his focus on the motif of bodily transformation—physical modifications, the loss of body parts—as well as the mental and emotional reactions to such changes, including fear, anxiety and an unstable and dynamic state of existence. When viewers enter *Inferno* (2008–10), a video installation featuring images of a waterfall, they feel a floating sensation and lose the ability to tell whether the waterfall is flowing upward or downward. They may even feel a sense of anxiety as they begin to doubt their own perception.

Furthermore, the artist presents things that cannot be distinctly separated, such as those existing inextricably on the boundaries of materiality and immateriality, gravity and weightlessness, beauty and ugliness, life and death, sadism and masochism, as well as the animal and the human, the holy and the mundane, and the hellish and the heavenly. For example, in *Human Lesson (Dress 01)* (1996) animal and human nature is considered, whereas in the series “Malformed Noh Mask” (2007–08) it is beauty and ugliness, as well as holiness and mundaneness. In his 2013 work *A Dead Man Sleeping*, the artist uses a vivid, dual-layered screen installation to depict a form of existence that is outside the duality of “life” and “death”—specifically, that of death-row inmates locked away in prison, who are kept unaware of their execution date. However, this state of perpetual mortal uncertainty is not limited to those in prison, as every individual exists in a space between what we understand as “life” and “death.” The blood-red color of a smashed piece of glass featured in the work's video also suggests that our “spirituality” and, consequently, our “life” are born from the physical existence of our bodies.

In *Rompers* (2003) and *SP Extra: Leatherface Is Sculptor “World Is Beautiful”* (2007), Odani addresses

aesthetic dualism by appealing to our childlike, primitive sense—akin to the sensation of absordedly playing with mud—imbuing the works with kitschy, B-horror-movie-like humor.

Many of the characters appearing in Odani's works are heavenly, nymph-like beings, beautiful and grotesque creatures, beasts, chimeras, zombies and skulls. Viewing the world through such extreme beings could be seen as having the potential to change our moral values and intuition.

On the other hand, a topic that Odani has always tackled head-on is the various possibilities of the medium of sculpture. He strives for a unique expression within sculpture, which, historically born out of religious constructs, was soon established as a traditional artistic medium in the Western world as well as in Japan. The artist's admiration of *manga* and figurines, and his familiarity with Kyoto's temples, shrines and Buddhist statues, has also been significant to his oeuvre. For example, *SP4: The Specter* - “What



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HOLLOW: REVERSAL CRADLE, 2009, FRP, urethane paint, mixed media, 83.5 x 192 x 116 cm (top) and 101.5 x 192 x 115 cm (bottom). Photo by Kioku Keizo. Courtesy Mori Art Museum and Yamamoto Gendai, Tokyo.

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SP4: THE SPECTER - "WHAT WANDERS AROUND IN EVERY MIND," 2009, fiberglass, real horse hair, knife and canvas fabric, 230 x 235 x 105 cm. Courtesy the artist.

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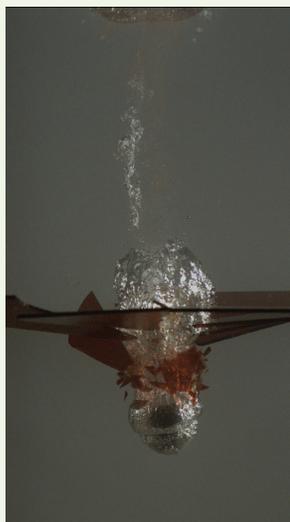
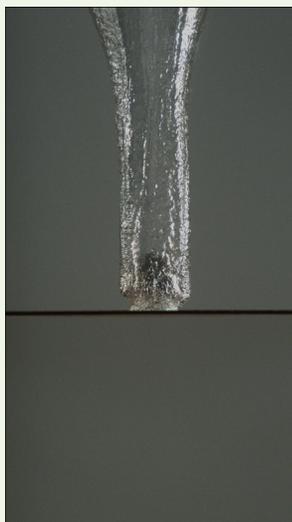
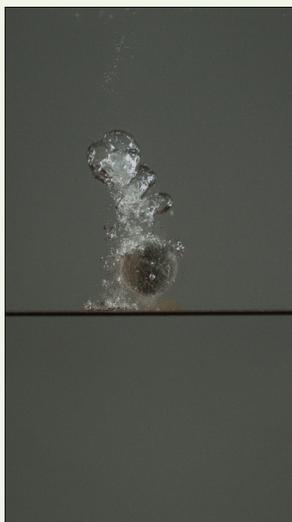
A DEAD MAN SLEEPING, 2013, stills from two-channel video installation: 27 min (falling) and 2 min (pendulum). Courtesy Albertz Benda, New York, and Yamamoto Gendai, Tokyo.



Wanders Around In Every Mind” (a part of the Burger Collection) is a powerful sculpture from 2009, depicting a zombified warrior, with his musculature exposed, spurring his horse into a run. The mounted statue was fleshed out over a replica skeletal structure of a Japanese man (the artist himself), with only its head being that of a Western man, representing the process by which Japanese people have adopted Western culture over the course of its modern history and consequently formed an aspirational bias toward Western physical traits as the ideal. This work is also a reimagining of “modern sculpture” as a living medium. Works such as *Dying Slave “Stella”* (2009–10), a huge skull created using centrifugal force, *Aero Former “The Thinking Ground”* (2013), an installation made by applying air pressure on aluminum, and the aforementioned *Inferno* are also demonstrative of his unique idea regarding the objective of sculpture; they explore how fourth-dimensional elements—movement in time—can be displayed in three dimensions. As such, while Odani’s works are conceptual, they are completely different from that of, say, Duchampian art; instead, they are psychological, as well as the product of highly accomplished and technologically driven plastic arts.

Odani’s insatiable interest in the body—a theme that also runs through the works of artists such as Bruce Nauman, Matthew Barney and Marc Quinn—and his unique form of physical expression and aesthetic sense have received high international acclaim. After participating in the Lyon Biennale (2000), the Istanbul Biennial (2001) and the Gwangju Biennale (2002), Odani was chosen to represent his country at the Japanese Pavilion of the 2003 Venice Biennale. In 2010, he had a major solo exhibition, “Phantom Limb,” at the Mori Art Museum in Tokyo, which showcased a compilation of works spanning a roughly ten-year period. The show toured within Japan and was the subject of much interest. Odani is also active abroad, having held a solo show in 2013 at the Swedish Museum of Photography in Stockholm (Fotografiska).

In early May, Odani premiered his most recent solo exhibition, “Depth of the Body,” at Albertz Benda gallery in New York. Works exhibited included videos *Terminal Impact (Featuring Mari Katayama “Tools”)* (2014)



SKELETON, 2003, fiberglass reinforced plastic and other media, 390 x 55 cm.
Photo by Kioku Keizo. Courtesy Yamamoto Gendai, Tokyo.



and *A Cosmic Traveler of Blindness* (2016) as well as sculptures *Skeleton* and *New Born* (both 2015–16).

Just as the Italian Futurists at the start of the 20th century and Marcel Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2* (1912) tried to express speed and movement by repeating and shifting motifs, Odani's *New Born*—the first work from his “SP (Sculpture Project)” series—seeks to redefine sculpture as a medium. *New Born* could be seen as an embodiment of the artist's experiment of turning sculpture into video. Animal bones have been reassembled to form imaginary fossils resembling those of ancient creatures such as trilobites—regarded as symbols of the Cambrian explosion, an evolutionary burst of life forms that took place around 550 million years ago—and ammonites from the Cretaceous Period. Though the variety of organisms greatly increased during these prehistoric eras, including bizarre creatures known as “Cambrian monsters,” these ancient life forms are now wiped from the face of the planet. Odani's collection reminds us of the evolutionary process that will no doubt continue to breed new forms of life, even after the extinction of humankind.

Odani says that *Skeleton*, featuring what appears at first glance to be a large, stalactite-like form, is “a sculpture of the tense condition of the body under gravity and its opposing forces, frozen in time.” Odani has always been interested in “gravity” as something



that constantly moves in a vertical direction. His experiments in making the invisible force of gravity visible, by opposing it with the rising force of buoyancy, are also clearly seen in his “Hollow” series (2009–10). Architecture, for example, is something made in the space between earth and sky and, while constantly being acted upon by gravity, it continues to reach upward. According to Biblical myth, the Tower of Babel was created by the Babylonians in order to get closer to Heaven and make a name for themselves. This angered God, and as punishment he caused humanity to speak different languages, making them unable to understand one another. If we consider that sculpture originally functioned as a part of architecture, and how architecture developed alongside religion, it is easy to consider sculpture as something that cannot escape “gravity.” Additionally, to live is to surely feel gravity, and the moment we cease to feel it is when we leave our bodies in this world governed by the laws of physics, becoming light and heading on to the land of the dead. In this way, *Skeleton* figuratively freezes the moment that flesh—in opposition to gravity—begins to dissolve and become one with bone, as well as the passing of time within that process.

In his newest exhibition, the works *Skeleton* and *New Born*, which both feature body parts, are displayed alongside pedestals

and objects made from spent materials from the artist’s studio. “The relationship between the body parts and the structures made using temporary, worn-out objects may seem out of place, but I feel like it’s somehow linked to the scenery that I saw after [the 2011 earthquake and tsunami that took place that year on] March 11,” says Odani. By adding weathered, practical elements into objects of pure expression—that is, into imagined structures—the works are at once unstable and yet seek an openness with their precarious state.

In the video installation *Terminal Impact*, a structure composed of artificial legs is set up like a drum kit in the center of a stage covered in bold, black and yellow stripes. A woman with artificial legs from the knees down appears on stage like a Noh performer, and stagehands conduct her performance. When she steps onto the set with her knees, the artificial legs revolve through the air. The rhythmic mechanical sounds, reminiscent of *shishi-odoshi* (a type of water fountain often found in Japanese gardens, comprising bamboo tubes filled with water that rhythmically clack when emptied) or wooden clappers, lend the whole affair an atmosphere like that of classical Japanese theater, reinforced by the presence of the stagehands dressed in black.

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TERMINAL IMPACT (FEATURING MARI KATAYAMA “TOOLS”),

2014, still from three-channel synchronized video projections with surround sound and other media, each projection: 450 x 253.1 cm; 19 min 14 sec. Courtesy Albertz Benda, New York, and Yamamoto Gendai, Tokyo.

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A COSMIC TRAVELER OF BLINDNESS, 2016, stills from three-channel synchronized video projections with sound and other media, each projection: 112.5 x 200 cm; 16 min 16 sec. Courtesy Albertz Benda, New York, and Yamamoto Gendai, Tokyo.

Here, the term “terminal impact” refers to the shock that spreads through an amputee’s body when their artificial limbs strike the ground. Our limbs are made to move by tiny electrical impulses sent from our brains through our nerves. However, for people wearing prostheses, which are theoretically a part of their bodies, the physical impact sent back through the body when walking reminds them that their prostheses are, in fact, foreign objects. This reality seems to be further examined in Odani’s “Phantom Limb” series, where the artist sheds light on the eponymous phenomenon, in which a person continues to feel the presence of a lost arm or leg that should no longer be felt—in other words, a vague perception of the human body.

Lastly, with *A Cosmic Traveler of Blindness*, a new three-screen installation made specifically for the New York exhibition, the artist posits: “Sculpture is said to be an art based on the sense of touch, but what exactly does it mean to recognize form through touch?” The video features a dark underwater set resembling the depths of the ocean, evoking the way one’s vision gradually gets lost as one descends deeper into the sea. At the “ocean floor,” where scattered body parts are spread out like the rocks of Osorezan (a caldera volcano in the center of the remote Shimokita Peninsula of Aomori Prefecture, Japan), limbs periodically let off red lights and metallic noises, like mechanical instruments attempting to cling to each other. The body parts that have fallen to the bottom of the water also seem to suggest the diminishing sharpness of our senses as we age in life. In contrast, hands with jellyfish-like tentacles attached to their fingers radiate blue lights throughout the murky depths, and the sight of some of the sunken body parts rising upward seems to represent the emergence of new cognizance relating to the sense of touch. The scene is representative of the loss of sight, followed by the hyper-awakening of touch to cover for the other lost sense. This underwater transition also recalls the evolution of eyes in the Cambrian period, in which plant-like photosynthetic genes entered into the bodies of eyeless animal ancestors and propagated, becoming the host organism’s photoreceptors and, eventually, eyes.

“Depth of the Body,” Odani’s first solo exhibition in America, is about our existence being filled with the possibility of change and evolution—to counter the notion of instability—and explores the incorporation of foreign objects as a way to compensate for our faulty original forms. The latter might grant us more freedom in our existence, as we often struggle to fit within systems of preconceived ideas.



MOTOHIKO ODANI was born and raised in Kyoto, Japan. He received an MFA from Tokyo University of the Arts in 1997, where he currently teaches. His works have been exhibited widely throughout Europe and Asia. In 2003, he was selected by curator Yuko Hasegawa to represent Japan at the 50th Venice Biennale. He has also participated in the Lyon Biennale (2000), the Istanbul Biennial (2001) and the Gwangju Biennale (2002). Major solo exhibitions include “Motohiko Odani: Hollow” (2009–10) at Maison Hermès, Tokyo, and “Phantom Limb,” a 2010–11 traveling exhibition that started at the Mori Art Museum, Tokyo, and toured to Shizuoka Prefectural Museum of Art, Shizuoka City; Takamatsu City Museum of Art, Kagawa; and Contemporary Art Museum Kumamoto. Odani’s work is included in the collections of the Asia Society Museum, New York; Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo; the National Museum of Art, Osaka; and the Mori, among others. “Depth of the Body,” at Albertz Benda, New York, is supported in conjunction with Yamamoto Gendai, Tokyo.

REIKO TSUBAKI joined the Mori Art Museum in 2002, where she is currently associate curator. Solo exhibitions of artists that she curated as part of the MAM Project series at the Mori Art Museum include: Jacob Kirkegaard (2014); Emre Hüner (2013); Ho Tzu Nyen (2012); Jules de Balincourt (2010); and Saskia Olde Wolbers (2008). At the museum, she also curated and was in charge of “Simple Forms: Contemplating the Beauty” (2015), and is currently preparing the exhibition “Art and Universe,” which is slated to open later this year. Outside of the Mori Art Museum, Tsubaki has curated “My God | Your God: What is Faith Today?” (2014) at the Seian University of Art and Design and Mii-dera Temple, both in Shiga, and Hotel Anteroom Kyoto; “Duality of Existence: Post Fukushima” (2014) at Friedman Benda Gallery, New York; “Identity IX: Return to the Wild! Humans = Animals = Aliens?” (2013) at NCA | Nichido Contemporary Art, Tokyo; and “The Cosmos as Metaphor” (2012) at Taka Ishii Gallery Kyoto and Hotel Anteroom Kyoto. She also writes and gives lectures on art on a regular basis.

“Motohiko Odani: Depth of the Body” will be on view May 5 through June 18, 2016, at Albertz Benda, New York.