

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**Media Contacts:**Allison Rodman, Japan Society
arodman@japansociety.org, 212-715-1205**JAPAN SOCIETY PRESENTS****IMPROVISATION IN WOOD: KAWAMATA X MUNAKATA**Celebrating the 50th Anniversary of Japan Society's Landmark Building, Designed by Junzo Yoshimura
A Cross-Generational Dialogue That Reinterprets These Artistic Legacies Anew**September 30, 2021 – January 16, 2022**Images (L-R): Shikō Munakata, *Eulogy to Flower Hunting*, 1954, Japan Society Collection; Tadashi Kawamata, *Project on Roosevelt Island*, 1992.

New York, May 26, 2021—Japan Society presents **Improvisation in Wood: Kawamata x Munakata**, an ambitious exhibition of major artworks by two preeminent Japanese artists from different generations: **Tadashi Kawamata** (1953–) and **Shikō Munakata** (1903–1975). Each artist made significant contributions to their respective media with unconventional and individualistic approaches to working with wood. The new installation features pointed juxtapositions of artworks and archival material by Kawamata and Munakata that raise questions and foster dialogue, revealing the ways in which the presentation of art and history are shaped by context and perspective.

The exhibition celebrates the occasion of Japan Society's 50th anniversary of its landmark building, completed in 1971. Designed by **Junzo Yoshimura**, it was the first permanent New York City structure completed by a Japanese citizen. For this exhibition, contemporary artist Kawamata pays homage to Japan Society's building as well as to Munakata's legacy through a newly commissioned installation that engages works by the prominent 20th-century woodblock artist. These prints form the core of Japan Society's collection and were donated in 1971 by the artist and by Mrs. Blanche Hooker Rockefeller. Kawamata's site-specific installation—made with Munakata's signature materials of wood, paper, and ink—draws inspiration from prints by Munakata, and sets up a dialogue between the artists to explore traditions and innovations in employing wood as an expressive material.

Known for his architectural interventions on public spaces and carefully constructed scaffoldings of reclaimed wood, Kawamata reexamines and renegotiates the history and memory of a specific place in time. Kawamata was the first Asian artist-in-residence in 1984 at MoMA PS1, New York City, where he fostered his early career with a dynamic scale of projects, including his seminal *Project on Roosevelt Island* (1992). Munakata, an internationally renowned artist associated with the *sosaku hanga* (creative print) movement and recognized by leaders of the *mingei* (folk craft) movement, revolutionized the concept of the woodblock print, shifting its understanding as a traditional craft to neo-traditionalism. Having won several print awards, including first prize at the 1955 São Paulo Biennial and the Grand Prix at the 1956 Venice Biennale, Munakata was essential to redefining postwar Japanese cultural identity.

Like Kawamata, New York City also held particular significance for Munakata. He first traveled to the United States in 1959 at the invitation of Japan Society through its fellowship program, which invited artists—including Munakata and Yayoi Kusama—to build an international dialogue and exchange cultural ideas. This relationship between Munakata and Japan Society has an enduring legacy through Japan Society's collection of Munakata prints, including a complete set of his noteworthy series, *The Two Bodhisattvas and Ten Great Disciples of Buddha* (1939/1948), and *Tōkaidō Munakata Hanga* (1964), among other works. For the first time in the United States, Munakata's masterfully carved woodblocks will be on display in this exhibition.

For both artists, wood acts as the conduit for communicating ideas, and is a material with history and time embedded in its raw form. This two-person exhibition aims to reexamine their achievements, and to reevaluate their improvisational practices working in wood within a global context. The resiliency of their practices particularly resonates today. Munakata resumed artmaking after the devastation of World War II when nearly all his woodcuts were lost in an air raid. Kawamata's early practice began during the AIDS crisis. Both artists turned limited opportunities and materials into creative inspiration.

"This exhibition is an attempt to create a platform bridging two artists, Kawamata and Munakata, who are active in two different generations. It aims to broaden their sphere of activities globally, and to demonstrate their unique artistic practices in wood even though they never met. New York was the crucial place that fostered their ambitious attempts in each of their careers. Their major material, wood, often represents Japanese culture, however the two transcend the conventional notions of cultural representation," says **Yukie Kamiya**, Director of Japan Society Gallery.

The accompanying catalogue interprets the exhibition's central themes and provides scholarly research in an exuberant celebration of the connections and diversions between the two artist's practices. It features essays by **Yoriko Ishii**, a scholar and Munakata's granddaughter; Yukie Kamiya, Japan Society; and an interview between Tadashi Kawamata and **Claudia Gould**, Director of The Jewish Museum, New York and curator of Kawamata's *Project on Roosevelt Island* (1992).

Improvisation in Wood: Kawamata x Munakata is curated by Yukie Kamiya, Gallery Director, with Tiffany Lambert, Assistant Curator, and organized by Japan Society.

ABOUT SHIKŌ MUNAKATA



Photo of Munakata, 1967: © Laura Beaujon

Born in Aomori prefecture in 1903, Shikō Munakata was an internationally known woodcut master best known for his black and white prints and his expressive, sketch-like line. Beginning his career in oil painting as a self-taught artist, he changed course in 1926 upon

seeing a woodblock print by Sumio Kawakami and became active in the woodblock printing community. Munakata was celebrated by the leading members of the *mingei* (folk craft) movement and was associated with the *sosaku hanga* (creative print) movement. From 1937, Munakata's work began to heavily feature Buddhist imagery. He continued printmaking throughout WWII and was awarded prizes in international exhibitions and biennials held in Lugano (1952), São Paulo (1955), and Venice (1956). Visiting the United States in 1959 at the invitation of Japan Society as part of its Print Artists Program, Munakata spent 10 months lecturing and exhibiting his work throughout the country. Munakata's accolades continued, including the Medal of Honor (1963), the Asahi Shimbun Prize (1964), and the Order of Culture, Japan's highest honor in the arts (1970).

ABOUT TADASHI KAWAMATA



Born in Hokkaido in 1953, Tadashi Kawamata graduated in oil painting from Tokyo University of Arts before earning a doctoral degree from the same institution. Since the Venice Biennale in 1982, he has participated in international exhibitions and group exhibitions around the world including documenta in 1987 and 1992. Many of his works are large-scale, site-specific installations constructed of mass-produced and found materials, such as wooden pallets and reclaimed wood. Engaging with ideas of shelter, community, and social contexts, Kawamata often creates installations in public spaces. In 1984, he lived in New York and was the first Asian artist to participate in the MoMA PS1 residency program. He realized one of his most important and ambitious projects in New York in 1992 on Roosevelt Island at the abandoned site of a former smallpox hospital. The artist collected timber waste from around the city and recycled it into his installation, using the leftover material to evoke the history and memory of the location. Recent major projects include *Under the Water*, Centre Pompidou-Metz, France (2016); *Over Flow*, MAAT, Lisbon, Portugal (2018); *Construção*, Japan House, São Paulo (2020); *Project Toulon*, France (2021); and *Lighthouse*, Helsinki Biennale (2021). In 2013, he was granted Japan's Art Encouragement Prize for fine arts by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology. He was a general director at the Yokohama Triennale in 2005.

About Japan Society Gallery

Since 1971, Japan Society Gallery continues to be the premier institution in the United States for the display and interpretation of Japanese art and culture in a global context. Through groundbreaking exhibitions and related programs, the Gallery cultivates a broader understanding and appreciation of Japan's contributions to global artistic heritage; explores the artistic interconnections Japan shares with its Asian neighbors, the U.S., Latin America, and Europe; and celebrates the diversity of Japanese visual expression from prehistoric times to the present day.

About Japan Society

Japan Society is the premier organization connecting Japanese arts, culture, business, and society with audiences in New York and around the world. At Japan Society, we are inspired by the Japanese concept of *kizuna* (絆)—forging deep connections to bind people together. We are committed to telling the story of Japan while strengthening connections within New York City and building new bridges beyond. In over 100 years of work, we've inspired generations by establishing ourselves as pioneers in supporting international exchanges in arts and culture, business and policy, as well as education between Japan and the U.S. We strive to convene important conversations on topics that bind our two countries together, champion the next generation of innovative creators, promote mutual understanding, and serve as a trusted guide for people everywhere who seek to more fully appreciate the rich complexities and abundance of Japan. From our New York headquarters, a landmark building designed by architect Junzo Yoshimura that opened to the public in 1971, we look forward to the years ahead, which will be defined by our digital and ideational impact through the *kizuna* that we build. Our future can only be enhanced by learning from our peers and engaging with our audiences, both near and afar.

This year, Japan Society is celebrating our heritage through the 50th anniversary of our landmark building with the launch of a new distinct modern logo and visual identity. The "JS" monogram is created via overlapping, interconnected lines and shapes, reinforcing the idea of *kizuna* and that Japan Society acts as a platform that connects across, cultures, people, and time.

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DIRECTIONS:

Japan Society is located at 333 East 47th Street between First and Second Avenues (accessible by the 4/5/6 and 7 subway lines at Grand Central or the E and M subway lines at 53rd St. and Lexington Ave.).

HOURS:

Exhibition schedule to be announced.

ADMISSION:

\$12/\$10 students and seniors | FREE for Japan Society members and children under 16.

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