

Mitsuyama Moto

in a line

Introduction

With a strikingly independent spirit, Kazuko Miyamoto (1942–) is an artist that has never been intimidated to eschew conventions and chart her own course. Miyamoto's expanding vision for over five decades has resulted in paintings, drawings, sculptures, photographs, and performances, as well as installation and textile works that oscillate between geometric and organic forms. Throughout her career, the presence of the artist's hand has remained a constant aesthetic sensibility, as has the use of modest, often found materials such as nails, string, umbrellas, tree branches, brown paper bags, and newspapers.

Miyamoto's distinct artistic approach recast Minimalist forms and strategies—repetition, geometry, the grid—by introducing a visual language of handmade and subtly irregular elements. Despite important affinities to the work of artists who came to be known as Minimalists, Miyamoto's art has been from its outset an idiosyncratic exploration of gestural abstraction and personal references.

Miyamoto was born in Tokyo, and has lived and worked in New York City's Lower East Side neighborhood since 1964. From 1968, the artist responded to and critiqued the innovations of Minimalism by emphasizing process, material, and performance. Her involvement as an early member of New York's A.I.R. (Artists in Residence) Gallery, the first all-female collective in the United States, and the establishment of her own Gallery Onetwentyeight in 1986, underscore the importance of feminism, collaboration, and community in her practice.

This survey—the artist's first institutional solo exhibition—brings together for the first time key bodies of Miyamoto's work, including her early paintings and drawings from 1968–1973, as well as her breakthrough string constructions, begun in 1972, and her kimono series that she initiated in 1987 and continued through the 2000s. By highlighting critical moments of experimentation, the exhibition traces the conceptual complexity and visual range of an artist who has challenged and broadened the legacy of post-1960s international art.

Gallery 1

The late 1960s and 1970s were among Miyamoto's most fertile and important periods of production. Trained as a painter, the artist graduated from the Art Students League in 1968 and quickly found her footing in Manhattan's multicultural Lower East Side, setting up her first live-work studio at 117 Hester Street. Immersed in New York's downtown avant-garde milieu, Miyamoto began to question conventional methods and values of art-making, and art's consumption, disposability, and display.

In Miyamoto's innovative string constructions (1972–1979) the artist plays with the parameters of abstraction, architecture, and scale. Undermining the rigid geometry and mechanical repetition of modernism, she instead introduces a human factor and, with it, the possibility of error, chance, and ephemerality. These dynamic spatial compositions—site-specific interventions made from industrial cotton strings systematically hand-stretched between a constellation of nails hammered into the floor and wall—were made based upon the artist's experience in a given space.

Her first pieces were bi-dimensional and featured simple lines of black string nailed along the mortar joints of her studio's brick walls. They became more complex and intricately shaped. Several important string constructions have been remade especially for this exhibition and are displayed together here for the first time, including *Male* (1974), her first three-dimensional piece; *Untitled* (1975), an early work shown at A.I.R. Gallery in one of five solo exhibitions the artist had there; and *Saill* (1979), which, until now, has not been on view since it was originally displayed at Nobe Gallery the year it was created.

Even in this early phase of her career, Miyamoto confronted the roles of intellectual versus manual labor, a question she explored in her parallel work with Sol LeWitt, whom she assisted in the execution of his early open cube sculptures and wall drawings. This idea is made evident in a nearby photo-collage, *Stunt* (1982), which documents Miyamoto performing in her studio, two in-progress LeWitt sculptures behind her, juxtaposing their strict geometry with the corporeality of the human body.

Gallery 2

During her initial years in New York, Miyamoto developed a distinctive visual language. Working within a vocabulary of Minimalism—geometry, industrial materials, seriality, monochrome color palette—yet subverting its strict economy of means and mechanical production, Miyamoto introduced an element of imprecision into her work.

In an early painting, *Untitled* (1972), seen here, Miyamoto incorporated enamel spray paint to form a dot pattern intersecting with an underlying grid of straight lines on the canvas. Her choice of spray paint as a material allows for the edges of the dots to soften and fade in a more free-form approach. The piece is reminiscent of an earlier charcoal and acrylic work, *Go* (1971). Both evoke the game of the same name, which originated in China and is popular in Japan, in a direct reference to her cultural heritage. The piece may also be read as autobiographical; as a child in Tokyo, Miyamoto's mother ran a game-house.

Around this time, and for many years subsequently, Miyamoto employed her own body as a central agent in the conceptualization of her art, imbuing it with a personal quality. In *String around a cylinder of my height* (1977), on view nearby, the height of the sculpture equals the artist's. Originally conceived as a pair, the counterpart (now lost) represented the height of Miyamoto's partner at the time. Such connections to the artist's body and past life experiences anticipate her later performative works, including her impersonations of different marginalized figures that she played out on the streets of New York, her dance rituals, and her kimono series (1987–2000s), on view in the next gallery.

Gallery 3

A large part of Miyamoto's practice since 1980 has revived the modernist readymade, infusing found materials and artifacts with autobiographical and historical moments that have shaped her world. Her kimono series (1987–2000s) is particularly notable, exploring the signification within archival traces and the pliant nature of personal identity. From a young age, Miyamoto studied traditional Japanese dance in which she wore the kimono, a garment that she also learned to construct and sew as a child in Tokyo. Considering a career in textile design, she briefly enrolled in the Fashion Institute of Technology before returning to the fine arts, which she regarded as a more liberating path.

Miyamoto often uses found objects—umbrellas, twigs, cardboard, a fur coat, a plant, her dog, a photograph of her father—as props in her performances. The kimono has been an essential and recurring motif that served to express aspects of her own history and cultural identity. *Wedding Kimono* (2004) is transcribed with love poems by renowned ninth-century Japanese female poet Ono no Komachi in the artist's handwriting. *Bowery Mission Kimono* (1990) exposes the socioeconomic inequities taking place in Miyamoto's neighborhood in the 1990s. (The year the artist made this kimono was the same year the Bowery Mission—the city's second oldest shelter—added services for women.) Others re-engage past experiences—*Photo Kimono* (late 1990s) features black-and-white photographs from the 1998 performance *Kazuko in the Snow*.

The kimono works span many forms and materials, and combine the appropriation of antique kimono and undergarments—*Wedding Kimono* (2004), *Target Kimono* (2005)—kimono passed down from the artist's parents—*Woman on a Step Ladder* (1987)—as well as ephemeral, intimate, and delicate kimono newly constructed from newspaper, silk, or gauze—*Paper Kimono* (1990), *Plant Kimono* (1991), *Pink Gauze Kimono* (1990s). To emphasize their sculptural qualities, the kimono works hang in space in the gallery, rather than against the wall, and are complemented by related works on paper as well as selections of paintings and drawings from Miyamoto's oeuvre that echo the artist's formal strategies.

Gallery 1

01 *Stunt* (181 Chrystie Street, 1981), 1982

Unique photocopy made out of approx. 44 pieces of various sizes, 63 × 41 1/8"

Courtesy of the artist and EXILE, Vienna

02 *Untitled*, 1973

Black industrial cotton string, nails, 148 × 166"

Courtesy of the artist and Take Ninagawa, Tokyo

Originally installed in Miyamoto's studio at 117 Hester — a space where other now-renowned artists lived and worked, including Adrian Piper and Sol LeWitt — this bi-dimensional string construction is also one of the artist's first attempts at creating geometry beyond simple, singular rows of lines.

03 *Ways of Fern*, 1973

Acrylic on canvas, 61 × 46"
Private collection, New York

In this early acrylic painting, *Ways of Fern* (1973), what at first appears to be a grid of sharply defined rectangles, upon closer view, reveals a somewhat loose, irregular pattern and hand-drawn line quality.

04 *Untitled*, 1978

Pencil on wood, natural industrial cotton string, nails, 104 3/4 × 96 × 14 5/8"

Courtesy of the artist and EXILE, Vienna

05 *Untitled*, 1976

Screenprint, 26 3/4 × 24 1/4",
artist's proof 3/5
Private collection, New York

06 *Female*, 1977

Black industrial cotton string, nails, 42 1/8 × 30 × 83 7/8"

Courtesy of the artist and Zürcher Gallery, New York/Paris

07 *Male*, 1974

Black industrial cotton string, nails, 62 3/8 × 62 3/8 × 24"

Courtesy of the artist and Zürcher Gallery, New York/Paris

Miyamoto's string constructions began to take on a more spatial and architectural format, as evidenced by this piece, which was the artist's first three-dimensional work of this type.

08 *Sail*, 1979

Natural industrial cotton string, nails, 133 7/8 × 133 7/8 × 133 7/8"

Courtesy of the artist; EXILE, Vienna; Take Ninagawa, Tokyo

09 *Untitled*, 1975

Pen on paper, 18 1/2 × 22 1/2"
Private collection, New York

10 *Untitled (String Construction)*, 1975

Black industrial cotton string, nails, 90 1/2 × 74 3/4 × 1/2"

Courtesy of the artist and Take Ninagawa, Tokyo

Miyamoto had a number of installations at prominent galleries and institutions within a few years of graduating from the Art Students League in 1968. Among them were a commission for the Museum of Modern Art's Members' Penthouse (1973) and inclusion in exhibitions at 55 Mercer Street Gallery (1972), John Weber Gallery (1975), The National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo and Kyoto (1977), MoMA PS1 (1978), and a total of seven solo and group installations at A.I.R. Gallery in the years 1975–1983. This string construction and its nearby drawing were part of her first exhibition at A.I.R., in 1975.

11 *Black Poppy*, 1979

Black industrial cotton string, nails, 110 1/4 × 110 1/4 × 114 1/8"

Courtesy of the artist; EXILE, Vienna; Take Ninagawa, Tokyo

One of Miyamoto's most complex string constructions, *Black Poppy* — comprised of industrial cotton string and 1,915 nails — was initially created for the artist's last exhibition at A.I.R. Gallery in 1979. In 1980, the artist turned to nature as a source of material to build her works, including twigs and branches.

12 *Trail Dinosaur*, 1978

Ink and pencil on paper, 36 × 30"
Private collection, New York

13 *Yoshiko Chuma in Kazuko Miyamoto: A Girl on Trail Dinosaur*, 1979
Video to DVD, 00:27:25 min.

Courtesy of the artist and EXILE, Vienna

Archival documentation of a 1979 performance of dancer and choreographer Yoshiko Chuma interacting with Miyamoto's *Trail Dinosaur* underscores the role of collaboration and performance that became an increasingly important medium in Miyamoto's career. One year later, in 1980, Miyamoto co-curated the group exhibition *Dialectics of Isolation: An Exhibition of Third World Women Artists of the United States* along with Ana Mendieta and Zarina Hashmi — three immigrant "artists who met in New York City in the 1970s and became [a] part of its burgeoning art and activist movements."

Sadia Shirazi, "Returning to *Dialectics of Isolation: The Non-aligned Movement, Imperial Feminism, and a Third Way*," in *Panorama: Journal of the Association of Historians of American Art* 7, no.1 (Spring 2021), doi.org/10.24926/24716839.11426

Gallery 2

14 *String around a cylinder of my height*, 1977

Nails and string around plywood cylinder painted in light yellow, 60 5/8 × 31 1/2 × 31 1/2"

Courtesy of the artist; EXILE, Vienna; Take Ninagawa, Tokyo

15 *Pillar of Life*, 1972

Colored pencil and pencil on graph paper, 12 1/2 × 10"

Private collection, New York

16 *Untitled*, 1972

Acrylic and enamel spray paint on canvas, 75 3/4 × 98 1/4"

Courtesy of the artist and EXILE, Vienna

17 *Plan for Musical Wall Piece for Ryo Watanabe's Living Room*, 1979

Ink and pencil on graph paper, 19 1/8 × 22 1/4 × 1 3/8"

Courtesy of the artist and Take Ninagawa, Tokyo

18 Musical Wall Piece for Ryo Watanabe's Living Room, 1979
Black industrial cotton string, nails,
88 × 70 × 1"
Courtesy of the artist and Take
Ninagawa, Tokyo

19 Untitled, 1971
Nails of increasing length and rubber cord on grey-painted wooden frame, 28 × 34 × 2 1/2"
Private collection, London

20 Untitled, 1971
Black industrial cotton string, nails,
32 × 24 1/2 × 2"
Courtesy of the artist and Take
Ninagawa, Tokyo

Gallery 3

21 Target Kimono, 2005
Photo transfer on Japanese silk wedding undergarment, 57 × 48"
Courtesy of the artist and Zürcher
Gallery, New York/Paris

22 Woman on the Step Ladder, 1987
Antique kimono with iron-on transfer,
48 × 48"
LeWitt Collection, Chester, CT, USA

23 Untitled, 1970
Gouache on paper, 25 1/4 × 20"
Private collection, New Jersey

24 Untitled, 1977
Acrylic on canvas, 29 × 27"
Private collection, New York

25 Untitled, 1968
Oil and charcoal on paper,
23 3/4 × 18 3/4"
Private collection, Colorado

One of Miyamoto's first paintings depicts her simultaneous grasp and subversion of a Minimalist visual language — a square within a square features an edge that seemingly melts away, and an interior defined by the variability of being filled in by hand.

26 Untitled, 1979
Pencil and colored pencil on grid paper, 11 × 8 1/2"
Courtesy of the artist and Take
Ninagawa, Tokyo

27 Numbers Decreasing, 1973
Ink on graph paper, 16 7/8 × 21 7/8"
Courtesy of the artist and Take
Ninagawa, Tokyo

28 Plant Kimono, 1991
Photo transfer on silk, 52 × 46"
Courtesy of the artist and Zürcher
Gallery, New York/Paris

29 Paper Kimono, 1990
Folded Japanese newspaper,
53 × 40"
Courtesy of the artist and Zürcher
Gallery, New York/Paris

30 Untitled, 1978
Colored pencil and pencil on vellum, 17 7/8 × 15 3/8"
Courtesy of the artist and Take
Ninagawa, Tokyo

31 Kazuko wearing Paper Kimono, undated
Two photographs, 7 × 5" each
Courtesy of the artist and Zürcher
Gallery, New York/Paris

32 Untitled, 1973
Colored pencil and pencil on vellum, 16 3/4 × 14 7/8"
Courtesy of the artist and Take
Ninagawa, Tokyo

This drawing on vellum, as well as another drawing nearby, show Miyamoto experimenting on paper with the folds of what appear to be textiles.

33 Photo Kimono, late 1990s
Black-and-white photograph collage on silk garment, 29 × 47"
Courtesy of the artist and Zürcher
Gallery, New York/Paris

34 White Thread on Grey Paper, 1999
Pencil and thread on paper,
14 × 9 1/2"
Courtesy of the artist and Take
Ninagawa, Tokyo

35 Kimono Drawing, 1993
Pencil on paper, 24 × 19"
LeWitt Collection, Chester, CT, USA

36 Untitled Kimono, 1994
Watercolor on paper,
14 3/8 × 12 3/8"
LeWitt Collection, Chester, CT, USA

37 Pink Gauze Kimono, 1990s
Gauze, aluminum cans, rope,
66 × 32"
Private collection, Paris

38 Kimono, 2009
Colored pencil on paper,
19 3/4 × 14 3/4"
Private collection, New Jersey

39 Title not known, 1994
Watercolor and pencil on paper,
wood frame, 14 3/8 × 12 3/8"
LeWitt Collection, Chester, CT, USA

Miyamoto has made drawings at various stages in her process of conceiving her sculptures, including kimono, and experimenting with textiles. A multitude of materials and techniques are explored, suggesting a continued desire to move away from the confines of any one medium in particular. Two watercolors of a red kimono — one with Japanese writing overlaid — precedes the later *Wedding Kimono* (2004) by nearly a decade.

40 Red Kimono, 1998
Ink and watercolor on paper,
15 3/4 × 11 3/4"
Private collection, Massachusetts

41 Wedding Kimono, 2004
Ink transcription of love poems (9th-century) by Ono no Komachi on silk garment, 72 × 50"
Courtesy of the artist and Zürcher
Gallery, New York/Paris

42 Kimono (1/2), 1999
Watercolor on sketchbook paper,
15 × 12"
Private collection, New Jersey

43 Kimono (2/2), 1999
Watercolor on sketchbook paper,
15 × 12"
Private collection, New Jersey

44 Vincent Corner, 1978
Ink, pencil on colored paper, 20 × 16"
Private collection, New York

45 Bowery Mission Kimono, 1990
Charcoal on cotton textile, 56 × 44"
Courtesy of the artist and Zürcher
Gallery, New York/Paris

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To perform a line

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04.29-07.24.22

Japan Society
333 E 47th Street
New York

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