

YUKO MOHRI

Sweet to Tongue and Sound to Eye

8 October – 2 December 2023

And new buds with new dayⁱ

One of the remarkable aspects of Yuko Mohri's practice, and there are many, is the capacity to elegantly side-foot the snares of probability: detaching culturally 'burdened' objects of, or from, common parlance and alchemically transmuting their purpose into something majestically *other*. Yet Mohri's blue-sky artistic confidence allows her 'modified' (in a sense of corrected/improved) object and conceptual combinations to collectively manage their physical presenceⁱⁱ, as if to ask; why no-one had thought of such (a preposterous proposition) before, yet, while still being surprising, delivering them with the sculptural clarity and intellectual confidence to make it look like they have just always been there. The *poster* image for the showⁱⁱⁱ being a perfect example: a small, dark, treacle-varnished *Queen Anne* 'style' side table – out of fashion and long-since loved – pregnant with a Tannoy^{iv} speaker hooked-up via electrode probes to a Carmen Miranda^v style garnish of commonly available fruits and vegetables, all of which create 'music' (who would have thought fruit made sound?^{vi}). Such acts of cultural upcycling are not as easy as Yuko Mohri makes them look, the work being so crisply conceived that it all seems fiendishly simple. Which is perhaps just *one* reason why Yuko Mohri is the choice to represent Japan at the forthcoming Biennale di Venezia, 2024.

The relationship between 'market' and environment has long been a fascination within Mohri's work. More specifically the human impact upon the Anthropocene that becomes increasingly familiar as we witness the knock-on deterioration of the earth's intertwined and fragile eco-structures. Mohri's exhibition for the Japanese Pavilion, 2024, for which *Sweet to Tongue and Sound to Eye*, is a form of mini-precursor, intends reference to the self-inflicted wounds of Covid-19 pandemic, the recent worsening of floods in Venice, triggered by climate change, and the perilous balancing act of the necessity of a tourism industry to (market) survival, which with full consequential awareness, poses a resultant extinction-level threat to the ancient water-born city. Living means dying. Like the sisters in Christina Rossetti's sexually suggestive narrative poem, *Goblin Market*, we do things because we cannot help ourselves and despite their consequences, which when said and done, we then must use all our wiles, guile, invention and creativity to resolve or at least slow. Another remarkable aspect of Mohri's work is that life-affirmingly she seeks humour in dark places.

Similarly obscure to the 'Queen Anne' *treacle table*, Mohri's choice of a far-from-fashionable Christina Rossetti poem as a loading metaphor for her London exhibition, suggests her capacity to lightly tread the boards of European and Asian cultural references. Mohri cites a legacy of influence from Erik Satie, Marcel Duchamp, John Cage, but is equally impelled by Japanese culture; Buddhist temples and rituals, formal gardens to the makeshift workshops and fabricators of backstreet Tokyo. Against a European symbolist like Rossetti, she posits the unapologetic Japanese Buddhist art form of Kusôzu, which for over five hundred years has bothered itself with graphic 'illustrations' of the passage (in nine gory stages) from life to complete existence-ending-decomposition – bones picked clean and returned to earth, *et al.* Where Mohri lands with such competing and compelling ideas, epitomises her uniquely adamant (anti)logic, simultaneously funnily serious and seriously funny.

The exhibition title, *Sweet to Tongue and Sound to Eye*, borrowed from the opening paragraph of Rossetti's *Goblin Market*, concludes a seductive list of market fruits^{vii} which the protagonist sisters Lizzie and Laura desire. They make trades, firstly a lock of hair and then a silver coin

to satisfy their 'needs', but upon consumption of said groceries, Laura deteriorates and nearly dies. The poem, unwieldy and out-of-step as it may now seem, has long been interpreted as a metaphor for the forbidden sexual desires of women, and concludes with the two sisters telling their tale in warning, yet miraculously recovering and giving birth to children... Laura's offering of her lock of hair to the merchants is the catalyst for her body's deterioration; likewise, Venice's offering of itself to shops, visitors, cruise liners, has set the city into cycle of submergence into surrounding water pitted against the perpetuation of need to invent, re-invent to literally stay afloat.

In a broader sense Mohri's practice has engaged with closed system of invention-to-destruction scenarios, doing-to-undoing, repairing and re-inventing. Works from the photographic series *Moré Moré Tokyo (Leaky Tokyo)*, included in the show to contextualise the new *Decomposition* sculptures, document Tokyo subway workers' brilliantly inventive solutions, like Mohri employing everyday objects; umbrellas, buckets, bottles, tubing and tape, to divert leaks away from sensitive electoral systems and computers alike. Behind these sculptural balancing acts (literally), lies the irrepressible human drive to "make do" and employ objects to transform our relationships to environment/s. Ever since the Fukushima nuclear disaster, created by 2007 Tsunami (big time water and electrics), Japan's infrastructure has groaned and creaked, with power and water grids under continual pressure – electric lights flicker, gaskets leak. Ultimately the respondent cycles and controlled chaos within Mohri's sculptures and photographs optimistically demonstrate human capacity to adapt to a landscape in decline.

ⁱ Christina Rossetti, *Goblin Market*, first published 1862. A narrative poem that tells a story of sisters, Laura and Lizzie who are tempted with fruit by goblin merchants. Slightly X-rated in Rossetti's intent and not intended for children.

ⁱⁱ Things "…left to their own devices…" as the artist has noted.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Decomposition*, 2023

^{iv} Tannoy is employed as a generic term for public address speakers specifically the speaker employed is a TOA.

^v (you have to be of a certain vintage to associate with the reference – even before *my* time, as it goes, but I recall the "Tutti-Frutti" hats as part of the cultural lexicon of parents and grandparents) Carmen Miranda: Maria do Carmo Miranda da Cunha (1909-1955), a Portugese-born Brazilian singer, most remembered for her extravagantly fruit-bedecked hats in Hollywood musicals. No electrodes, just singing and dancing.

^{vi} Sound is generated by electrodes attached to slowly decomposing fruit: The sounds change as the fruits' internal structures alters, generating endlessly evolving musical compositions, as Mohri 'sees' it as indicative cyclical renewal. Again cf. the Japanese traditional form of Kusôzu.

^{vii} *Our grapes fresh from the vine,
Pomegranates full and fine,
Dates and sharp bullaces,
Rare pears and greengages,
Damsons and bilberries,
Taste them and try:
Currants and gooseberries,
Bright-fire-like barberries,
Figs to fill your mouth,
Citrons from the South,
Sweet to tongue and sound to eye;
Come buy, come buy*