

Susumu Koshimizu

Snow Departs from Snow



SUSUMU KOSHIMIZU,
Snow Departs from Snow, 2010, camphor tree, silver leaf, black silver leaf, stone, 56.6 x 120 x 59 cm.

How does an artist reveal the basic principles of subject matter, technique and concept? This is a question that Susumu Koshimizu has continued to ask over the course of his four-decade-long career as a sculptor. Born in Uwajima City, Shikoku, he entered Tama Art University in 1966 but dropped out midway to pursue his work: laborious, minimal structures in wood and other natural sources that attempt to describe the relationship between the chosen materials. He has built a career out of “Working Tables,” a series begun in the early 1970s that has been exhibited intermittently around the world since then. Koshimizu’s most recent show at Tokyo Gallery + BTAP, “Snow Departs from Snow,” continued to highlight the artist’s answer to the question above. As described by critic Yusuke Nakahara, “the [Koshimizu] table is the place to work and, at the same time, it is through working that the table itself becomes a work.” In this sense, these new pieces—low black benches embedded with river stones—seem strongly self-contained and reveal the exact nature of their “work,” or Koshimizu’s technique, only on close inspection.

In post-World War II Japan, a number of art movements attempted to discard the artistic canon based on Western modes and strove instead to find new forms of expression through performance art and “junk art.” However these new movements, Gutai and Anti-Art respectively, were still framed against the “Other” of Western art trends.

In retrospect, the members of the loosely formed group Mono-ha (“School of Things”), out of which Koshimizu began his career, took a different direction in 1968. Rejecting what they saw as the excessive international awareness of their peers, Mono-ha artists such as Lee Ufan, Nobuo Sekine, Kishio Suga and Koshimizu turned their gaze toward the natural and the local. They stressed the material

interconnectedness of objects and environment through the use of objects found in nature. These artists exposed the inherent qualities in the materials they used through minimal refinement, leaving the wood, soil or paper simply juxtaposed with the surrounding environment.

Koshimizu’s latest exhibition at Tokyo Gallery + BTAP commemorated his retirement from Kyoto University, where he taught sculpture for 30 years, with a display of old and new works. “Snow departs from snow” is a haiku motif that Koshimizu illustrates with his new working tables—picture a sunny day after a snowstorm, and the reemergence of elements of the landscape as the blanket of snow melts. Underneath the overhang of trees and rocks, small hollows are formed, creating indentations in the remaining layer of yesterday’s snow.

“Snow Departs from Snow” consists of seven knee-high tables in three rows, one by itself followed by two rows of three aligned parallel to one another diagonally across the small gallery. The natural curve of the camphor tree’s exterior provides terrain for the top surface while the wood’s natural color remains completely disguised underneath layers of silver and gold leaf turned black, red and brown through a traditional sulfuring process before being placed over a coat of white oxidized zinc paint. The river stones collected from Koshimizu’s home prefecture nestle in subtly recessed hollows in the dark surface, reminiscent of a snowmelt effect. The rows of benches stretching across the gallery floor outlined the shape of a fallen tree on the white space of the gallery floor.

Koshimizu’s “Working Tables” have developed through a number of iterations over the past 40 years, oscillating between unhewn pieces and refined, “finished” ones. Throughout the tables’ evolution, the artist expresses an intimacy with topographical and environmental elements of the natural world: the way undisturbed snow melts, the flow of a stream (as chiseled out of a tabletop) in *Waterways* (1983), or a mountain landscape (created on a hanging wooden plane by carved relief to create a three-dimensional effect of haunting depth) in *Relief* (1991–99). His most recent use of metals and materials from his home prefecture points to a new artistic direction as well as to his continued commitment to developing an understanding between art and the natural world. ●

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