

Research Notes on MOTOMIYA Kaoru

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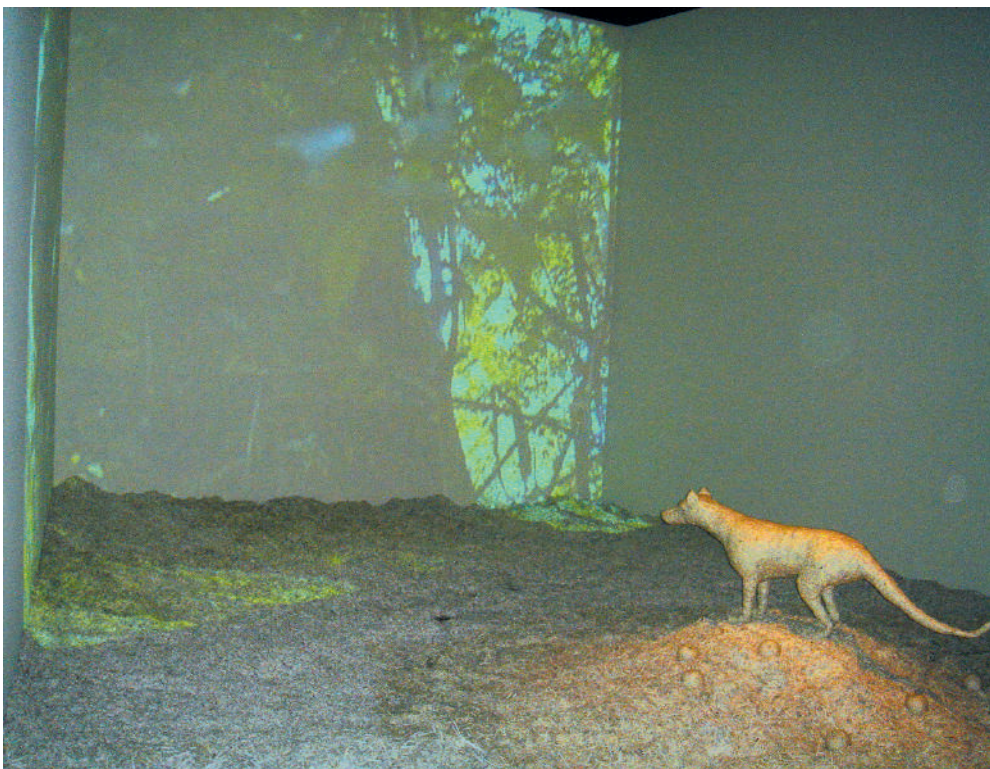
After the sudden passing of MOTOMIYA Kaoru at the end of 2022, those close to her began sorting through the works and materials she left behind. Through this process, I came to recognize both the extraordinary breadth of her interests and the remarkable diversity of her artistic practice.

With the exception of a number of early objects that exist as independent works, many of her artworks were conceived as components of larger installations. Signs of deterioration were also evident throughout the surviving works, including malfunctioning motors and the alteration of modified readymade materials. Any attempt to restore or reconstruct these works requires careful examination of documentary photographs and testimonies in order to determine, for example, how motors originally operated or how individual elements were arranged within a space. Ultimately, however, the final decisions inevitably involve interpretation and imagination on the part of others. The artist's intentions can no longer be fully realized—even if detailed instructions had survived. The process brings into focus what it means to lose an artist forever.

The period during which MOTOMIYA actively produced and exhibited what we conventionally call works of art spans roughly twenty years, from the 1990s to around 2010. Her interests and fields of expertise extended far beyond art itself, encompassing graphic design, the histories of medicine and anatomy, the tea ceremony, and ikebana. This breadth of knowledge is closely connected to the diversity of concepts and forms found throughout her artistic practice.

This essay relies primarily on portfolios compiled by MOTOMIYA herself in order to establish an overview of her artistic activities. However, several versions survive, and traces of subsequent revisions can be observed throughout them; the portfolios are themselves multifaceted documents. Although I have verified facts as thoroughly as possible using other sources, many branching details remain insufficiently examined. This text is therefore intended as research notes, written with the expectation that future studies of MOTOMIYA Kaoru will continue to develop and eventually supersede the present account.

MOTOMIYA began to devote herself seriously to artistic production and exhibition activities during the 1990s. Regarding her earlier activities, an interview published in *Creators' Cafe File* in 1997 provides valuable information.¹ According to the interview, she had become disillusioned with the state of contemporary art while she was still a university student. At the same time, increasing graphic design commissions led her away from art for nearly a decade. After working as an assistant to editorial and graphic designer HARATA Heikichi, she established herself as a graphic designer in the late 1980s. Examples of her designs for magazines, book covers, and record jackets survive.²



At the end of 1989, MOTOMIYA met artist NAKAZAWA Hideki.³ In October of that year, NAKAZAWA published *A Textbook of Modern Art History*,⁴ and the following year he left his medical career to devote himself to illustration before eventually moving into contemporary art in the late 1990s. During the early 1990s, MOTOMIYA and NAKAZAWA collaborated under the name “Aloalo Fusai,” presenting performances and exhibitions together.

An object dated 1990 and assembled from readymade materials may be regarded as MOTOMIYA's earliest artwork.⁵ A lidded box was transformed into a structure resembling a miniature shrine, inside which driftwood and fragments of various objects were arranged. Dedicated to her father, who died at a young age, the work possesses a deeply introspective atmosphere.

The *Rabbit Project*, which began with her first solo exhibition in 1995, marked a shift in her attention toward the outside world. In 1996, she held the solo exhibition *Rabbit Project* at Digitalogue Gallery in Shibuya, Tokyo.⁶ The “Rabbion” series presented there consisted of rabbit plush toys made of white faux fur into which motors and model components had been incorporated. Openings in the furry bodies allowed viewers to insert their hands and feel warmth or vibration. Artificial objects acquired life-like heat and movement, producing a startling reversal by exposing what would normally remain hidden inside.

Items conventionally associated with “cuteness,” such as ribbons and handbags, are often culturally coded as feminine, while machines (motors) and science may be contrasted as markers of masculinity. Her unreserved incorporation of contemporary customs reflects the spirit of the 1990s, a period during which the boundaries of art were rapidly expanding. At the same time, her awareness of gender likely emerged from an attempt to define the self through its relationship to society. By borrowing the body—or rather, the model—of a rabbit, MOTOMIYA questioned the boundary between her own body and the external world.

In 1997, *Rabbit Project* developed into a series of exhibitions held at three galleries in Osaka and Tokyo.⁷ An event was also staged in which the artist and her acquaintances took turns wearing a rabbit costume and transporting *Rabbion No. 3* in a baby carriage between the exhibition venues in Osaka and Tokyo. Performances presented during the exhibition period also appear to have been broadcast over the Internet. These activities may be understood from multiple perspectives: narratives of transformation from human to animal, interventions into urban space, and an interest in information networks made possible by emerging technologies.

Through these activities, MOTOMIYA gained recognition within the art scene of the late 1990s. At the same time, her exploration of bodily boundaries developed alongside research into the histories of medicine and anatomy under the theme of “changing conceptions of the body.” During this period, she contributed to academic journals, created anatomical specimens, and designed exhibitions. For the special exhibition *Plastination – The leading technique of making specimens* – at The University Museum, The University of Tokyo in 1997, she was responsible for both the exhibition design and the catalogue texts.⁸ Plastination, a method for preserving biological specimens, was attracting considerable attention at the time.

Her investigations into bodily boundaries and their extension into the surrounding environment culminated in works such as *Inner Quilt*, *Inner Dress*, and a series inspired by plastination. These works were presented in 2000 in the solo exhibition *Trace the Skin* at Mizuma Art Gallery, then located in Aoyama, Tokyo.⁹



In *Inner Quilt and Inner Dress*, marshmallows and fowling nets were used to visualize the surface area of human internal organs. Draped over beds and pillows—or over a human body, as depicted in the exhibition invitation—they dynamically reversed the relationship between the body's interior and its surrounding environment. The plastination-related works, meanwhile, consisted of cross-sectional representations of body parts such as arms, hair, and fingernails displayed like anatomical specimens. Self-portraits depicting corresponding parts of the artist's own body were also produced.

By the early 2000s, MOTOMIYA had begun to expand her activities internationally. According to her portfolio, the first work she developed through an artist residency was *California Lemon Sings A Song* (2000).¹⁰

Artist residencies generally invite artists to stay in a particular place for a certain period and to produce work in response to their surroundings. MOTOMIYA approached this framework critically, allowing the specific conditions of a place to determine the form of the artwork itself. In San Francisco, she selected lemons as a source of electricity, connecting them with copper wires to create a sound installation powered by the fruit's acidity. The lemons were arranged in the shape of missiles, referencing the fact that the residency site had once served as a missile base during the Cold War.

At the same time, lemons are globally circulated commodities, exported around the world, including to Japan. Through her use of lemons—and through the artist residency system itself, which requires artists to move across national borders—MOTOMIYA engaged critically with the global circulation of people, materials, and commodities.

Already at this stage, her interest had shifted from the relationship between the body and its immediate surroundings toward larger systems of global interconnectedness.

A similar perspective can be found in *T. T. T. (Telling Tasmanian Tales)*, a project that examined the relationship between Australia and Japan. Developed following an artist residency in Tasmania in 2002, the project was first presented that year at Mizuma Art Gallery in Nakameguro, Tokyo,¹¹ and was later included in *Living Together is Easy*, an exchange exhibition between Japan and Australia.¹²

The project originated in the circulation of wood chips between the two countries. MOTOMIYA obtained shredded recycled paper containing Tasmanian timber from the Tokyo Metropolitan Government and used it to construct a papier-mâché Tasmanian tiger. The Tasmanian tiger, of course, is an extinct species. Alongside this work, she displayed seven rolls of toilet paper—the average monthly consumption per resident of Tokyo—and, through these materials, superimposed the forests of Tasmania onto the everyday systems through which timber becomes paper and paper, through recycling, is transformed yet again.

The concerns that had initially centered on bodily boundaries now expanded to encompass ecological systems involving people, resources, and the environment itself.

From 2000 to 2001, MOTOMIYA stayed in New York with support from the Asian Cultural Council (ACC), and from 2002 to 2003 she returned there as an overseas research fellow sponsored by Japan's Agency for Cultural Affairs. During this period, she became frustrated by the poor condition of the studio floor and attempted to repair it. This experience would later contribute to the development of *Restoration Regeneration*.¹³

The project drew upon *kintsugi*, the Japanese technique of repairing broken ceramics with lacquer and gold. Yet MOTOMIYA expanded its application far beyond ceramics. Rather than merely restoring damaged objects, she transformed acts of repair into artistic interventions that generated new relationships between objects, living beings, and their environments. The project was subsequently presented in her 2005 solo exhibition at Mizuma Art Gallery and later in *Shelter x Survival* at Hiroshima City Museum of Contemporary Art, among other venues.¹⁴

Although *kintsugi* has become widely known internationally in recent years, MOTOMIYA's approach was distinctive in extending its logic to furniture, floors, walls, and even living organisms such as snail shells and turtle carapaces. In doing so, she was not simply repairing damaged things; rather, she sought to activate the regenerative forces already inherent within them.

Seen from a distance of twenty years, these works emerged during a period marked globally by the aftermath of September 11 and, within Japan, by prolonged economic stagnation. Against this backdrop, her attempts to reconnect damaged objects, disrupted environments, and fractured relationships resonate strongly with contemporary concerns today. Many other activities also deserve closer attention. These include *Babywalk*, first presented in her 1997 solo exhibition and repeatedly exhibited thereafter; *Canon on the Table*, first shown at ICC, Tokyo in 2002; a residency project in Thailand in 2005 that involved collaborative production with local children; and exhibitions in Europe during the late 2000s. As these activities are examined in greater detail in the future, new understandings of MOTOMIYA Kaoru will undoubtedly emerge.

The discussion above has traced the trajectory of MOTOMIYA's artistic practice while identifying several recurring concerns that run throughout it. During the 1990s, drawing upon perspectives derived from the histories of medicine and anatomy, she explored bodily boundaries through their relationship to the surrounding environment. Her reflexive incorporation of contemporary customs and social phenomena, together with her inquiries into identity, strongly resonate with the artistic vocabulary of the 1990s.

After 2000, her attention shifted toward local environments encountered through artist residencies and, from there, toward larger systems of global interconnectedness. Under the overarching theme of *Restoration Regeneration*, acts of repair came to encompass damaged objects, living beings, and environments alike. The resulting works continue to resonate with contemporary concerns more than twenty years later.

What becomes increasingly apparent is the extraordinary breadth of her interests and her ability to move fluidly across disciplinary boundaries. Graphic design, medicine, anatomy, the tea ceremony, ikebana, ecology, and contemporary art were never treated as separate fields of knowledge. Rather, they intersected and informed one another, generating an artistic practice that constantly moved between different systems of thought.

How we ultimately assess the significance of this interdisciplinarity will become one of the central tasks of future studies on MOTOMIYA Kaoru. At the same time, it is important to remember that this essay is only a provisional account. As additional materials are discovered and new interpretations emerge, the image of MOTOMIYA Kaoru will undoubtedly continue to evolve.

It is precisely for this reason that these pages should be understood as research notes: a point of departure for future scholarship rather than a definitive conclusion.

[Notes]

1. "No. 15: MOTOMIYA Kaoru: Etcetera Related to Rabbits," in *Creators' Cafe File*, BNN, 1997, pp. 98–99.
2. For a detailed chronology of MOTOMIYA Kaoru, see the timeline compiled by NAKAZAWA Hideki.
3. Based on an interview with NAKAZAWA Hideki.
4. NAKAZAWA Hideki, *A Textbook of Modern Art History: From Impressionism to Post-Heta-Uma Illustration, Tom's Box*, 1989.
5. *Lost Treasure*, 1990, mixed media.
6. *Rabbit Project*, Digitalogue Gallery, Tokyo, 1996. It should be noted that, although many of the exhibited works overlapped with those shown in the 1995 exhibition, the term "Rabbit Project" had not yet been used at that time.
7. *Rabbit Project Tour '97: The View of the Invisible*, SAI Gallery, Osaka; Panasonic Digital Art Square, Osaka; and Digitalogue Gallery, Tokyo, 1997.
8. *Plastination - The leading technique of making specimens -*, Special Exhibition, Museum of Natural History, College of Arts and Sciences, The University of Tokyo, and other venues, 1997. A 24-page exhibition booklet was published in conjunction with the exhibition.
9. *Trace the Skin*, Mizuma Art Gallery, Tokyo, 2000. According to the list included in the artist's portfolio, the exhibition featured *Inner Quilt*, *Inner Dress*, six works based on anatomical models resembling plastination specimens, two objects, and a nine-part series of self-portrait photographs.
10. *California Lemon Sings A Song* was first presented at Headlands Center for the Arts, California, in 2000.
11. *metabolism*, Mizuma Art Gallery, Tokyo, 2002.
12. *Living Together is Easy*, Contemporary Art Gallery, Art Tower Mito, Ibaraki, 2004; and *Living Together is Easy*, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, 2004.
13. Based on an interview with NAKAZAWA Hideki. According to NAKAZAWA, the action resembled "applying bandages to the floor in order to heal it."
14. *MOTOMIYA KAORU 2005*, Mizuma Art Gallery, Tokyo, 2005. For a review of the exhibition, see MAEDA Kyoji, "MOTOMIYA Kaoru: Attempting 'Restoration and Regeneration' through Kintsugi," *Yomiuri Shimbun* (evening edition), October 13, 2005. See also *Shelter x Survival*, Hiroshima City Museum of Contemporary Art, 2008.