

Yuken Teruya: **WE BELONG HERE**

by Martin Craciun

Yuken Teruya's (1973, Japan) first solo exhibition at Piero Atchugarry Gallery Miami can be described as a declaration of principles. Teruya combines techniques and mixes various everyday materials to reflect on contemporary society. His personal research addresses themes such as consumer culture, globalization, and the environmental crisis. While the exhibition acts as a welcoming space for active contemplation and reflection, through its title the artist also openly implicates us in his project: *WE BELONG HERE*. With absolute mastery and precision, Teruya offers us an open invitation into his world—one filled with personal outlooks and powerful statements. The exhibition features an important new body of work, alongside several recent works never before shown in the US.

WE BELONG HERE scrutinizes some of the actual forces that emanate from our globalized world. It presents a sharp look at contemporary society through Teruya's art craftsmanship dedication. Precise cuts, assemblies, miniatures, prints, and small detournements. The works on display manifest Teruya's continued investigation into the production of matter, energy, and power in the human realm. Here, thought can be considered a tool for investigating the aesthetic dimensions of artistic languages. Although his ideas often reflect and rely on his early experiences in his homeland of Okinawa, he has developed a singular voice through his experience of living for twenty years in Western countries.

The exhibition opens with a site-specific wall installation from Teruya's *Monopoly* series (2016-). Installed with delicate care, it presents meticulously dissected *Monopoly* money that have been reconstituted into a complex constellation of tiny sculptures. In the world-famous board game, players roll dice to move around the board, buying and trading properties with *Monopoly* money and developing them by adding houses and hotels. Players collect rent from their opponents, with the goal being to drive them into bankruptcy. Money is also gained or lost through drawing different cards and landing on taxation squares. Players can also end up in "jail." The game is a clear mimic of the capitalist system—as direct and cruel as daily life for most of us.

Teruya's symbolic use of *Monopoly* money as a source material for art offers a critical starting point for understanding what lies beneath. Whether representing the floor plans of institutions such as banks and famous churches or configured into abstract compositions, the *Monopoly* series is a powerful and defiant work. The Louvre Museum in Paris, Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, and Washington National Cathedral, plus several abstract compositions, come together in an exercise of pure precision, patience, and composition. Though beautiful compositions emerge, it is the work's meaningful condition that makes the most lasting impression. The piece recreating the floorplan of Paris's Notre-Dame Cathedral, which suffered a devastating fire in April 2019, upholds the idea that, even if we are not actually in the end times, who better than us, standing on the edge of our epoch, to make a change for the better? Who holds the power in contemporary culture is a central political question explored throughout Teruya's oeuvre. Our inefficient care of our world heritage and the 900 million euros donated in less than two days for Notre-Dame's restoration load the miniature piece with many thoughts and questions.¹ It is evident that art will not save the world, but what can be learned from it and how these memories of our times can be incorporated into the main narratives of our era remain open questions.

We are now living in a new geological epoch of our own making: the Anthropocene. But on geological timescales, human civilization is an event, not an epoch.² Minuscule—just like Teruya's paper cuts and incisions—humankind lives by and suffers from its arrogance. Not able to be fully comprehended in a quick glance, the tiny elements of the *Monopoly* series are an invitation to slow down, to come closer and discover, at a time when acceleration has become the measure of our times. But it is no longer about speed,

¹ Rick Noack, "Notre Dame May Have Too Much Money after Billionaires and Others Rushed to Pledge," *Washington Post*, April 25, 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2019/04/25/billionaires-rushed-save-notre-dame-amid-backlash-economists-now-say-they-may-have-pledged-more-than-needed/>.

² Peter Brannen, "The Anthropocene Is a Joke," *Atlantic*, August 13, 2019, <https://www.theatlantic.com/science/archive/2019/08/arrogance-anthropocene/595795/>.

but rather how we can increase our performance. The commands “SLOW” and “STOP” can be read on two of Teruya’s latest pieces. Created with the ancient technique of frottage, the paper works translate real road signs found in Miami. STOP and SLOW are the most direct and clear statements of the exhibition—their power permeates the exhibition space and act as a reminder with no nuances. These works also offer a clear reference to the early performative practices of the Situationists as well as Tomoharu Makabe’s “urban frottage” works: graphite-on-paper rubbings of buildings and street surfaces. A thin layer of paper becomes a mediating interface between the city and its inhabitants, an eloquent record of the city of Miami.

Elsewhere, a group of sneakers hangs from the ceiling of the gallery. These shoes were worn by the artist himself over the last 10 years, but while born of the personal, the installation is a clear reference to an urban practice found all around the Western world. “Do sneakers hanging from power lines carry a secret message?” asks an article from Snopes website.³ This urban myth connects us to a street life that has now been almost entirely lost behind shopping malls and urban parks. “Shoefiti,” or shoe tossing, has no one single meaning, and no one answer can be found for the practice. People speculate that they are memorials for lost loved ones or imprisoned ones, signposts marking the territories of gangs, or advertisements for drug dealers’ presence in the neighborhood. Slinging shoes over a power line could also merely be an invented tradition, a strange part of city culture, with people doing it because they see others doing it, and in this mimicking action it eventually becomes no longer strange but familiar.

In a close spatial relationship with *We Belong Here* (2020) sneakers installation, a group of trees lies down on the floor, *XX* (2020). These fir and pine trees were bought at Christmas, discarded by their owners weeks later, and then collected off the street by Teruya as part of the artist’s ongoing reflection on our increasingly globalized culture. Teruya’s fascination with elements of popular culture and mass culture often results in such formal exercises involving the installation of ready-made objects. These trees have lost their function in this world for the second time: first as trees, then as decoration. As decaying corpses of our intimate rituals, they will change colour, from green to yellow, from yellow to brown—a spectacle made of nature for humankind’s sake.

Near to an opposite wall, two kimonos stand still. The names “Scarlet Birds, Crimson Sky” and “Billowing” have been given to the bingata-dyed kimonos presented in this show. Bingata is a traditional Okinawan dyed cloth, made using stencils and other printing methods. Teruya has redesigned the patterns, which still follow the traditional guidelines—brightly colored prints featuring various patterns that depict natural subjects such as fish, water, and flowers. But here bingata’s aesthetic functions as a mirror of Okinawan history itself. American fighter jets and cars fly through colorful clouds, and paratroopers float among Okinawan butterflies. Okinawa’s abundant flora and fauna have for centuries provided an endless supply of images for kimono makers, and Teruya’s incorporation of contemporary and recent Okinawan history builds on this existing cultural practice in a new way. Okinawa has a long history of occupation, its resulting culture a mix of its traditional local culture with Japanese and American cultures. The artist came to realize how the traditional culture of Okinawa, his homeland, has been modified by the political pressures exerted by both the Japanese and US militaries. Following World War II, Japan underwent a drastic modernization process in an effort to catch up with the West. Here, the kimono becomes the support of a hypertext—a multidimensional expression, a postmodern reduction where stories and histories encounter one another. Teruya’s bingata-dyed kimonos are separated by two international-brand sneaker boxes, which have undergone a surgical intervention. With absolute precision, the artist has created beautiful forms with his cutouts: the flora of Okinawa. Boxes are waste materials, containers for mass-consumer products, here renewed with a symbolic function through a crafted gesture.

WE BELONG HERE is not only a balancing act but also a questioning of the various forms that Western—now global—society has generated: depictions and rituals, buildings and signs, all interlaced with and overloaded by different materials, scales, mediums, and techniques. Yuken Teruya’s survey pursues the idea that beauty and politics can help each other, and in this case, in a significant manner.

³ “Do Sneakers Hanging from Power Lines Carry a Secret Message?,” Snopes, April 12, 1999, <https://www.snopes.com/fact-check/the-secret-language-of-sneakers/>.