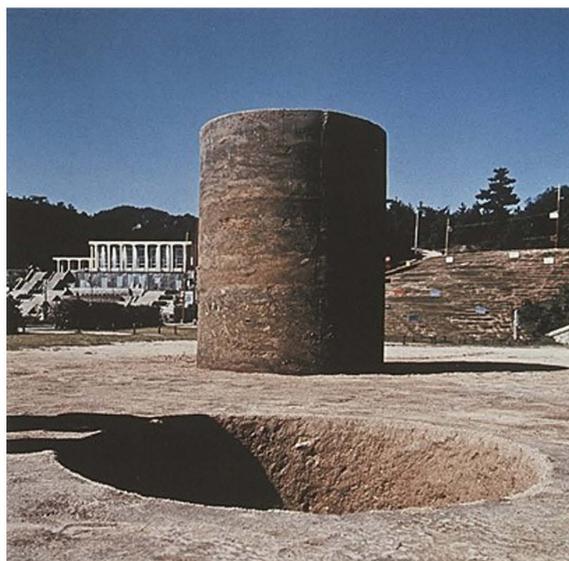




## Mono-ha in LA

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Gallerists Blum and Poe are using the full scope of their extraordinary Los Angeles art gallery to put on a stunning museum-scale show of the legendary late 60s Japanese art movement of Mono-ha. The show, which opened on Friday, has been put together by the US-based curator Mika Yoshitake and runs to April 14th, with a catalogue to be published in May.

Mono-ha (school of things) is a highly intellectualised form of abstract sculpture that often uses raw, untreated and natural or industrial materials such as clay, oil, glass, water, stone, steel, wire, light bulbs, leather and cotton, arranged on the floor or in outdoor space, to make points about perception, space, and the "in-between" of subject and object. A lot of the work was location and time specific, focusing on process and production: there is thus an interesting relationship with its documentation and archiving, which involved important photographers such as Shigeo Anzai. While Mono-ha has been strongly recognised in Asia and Europe, it has had only very rare exposure in North America. The Blum and Poe show is very likely to be the first step in a comprehensive re-evaluation of the place of Mono-ha in world art history.

The title *Requiem for the Sun* refers to the aesthetic detachment and focus on materials that these young artists in the late 60s felt as a result of the loss of belief in object based art in Japanese postwar art practice at that time. The exhibition includes works by Koji Enokura

(1942–1995), Noriyuki Haraguchi (1946– ), Susumu Koshimizu (1944– ), Katsuhiko Narita (1944–1991), Nobuo Sekine (1942– ), Kishio Suga (1944– ), Jiro Takamatsu (1936–1998), Noboru Takayama (1944– ), Lee Ufan (1936– ), and Katsuro Yoshida (1943–1999). Included in the show are recreations of Nobuo Sekine's *Phase–Mother Earth* (1968), where a huge cylinder of earth is dug out of the ground and positioned as a shadow next to the hole; Lee Ufan's (1969) rock-breaking-glass *Relatum (Phenomena and Perception B)*; Susumu Koshimizu's *Paper* (1969), a massive granite boulder inside a fragile paper bag; and Kishio Suga's (1970) *Infinite Situation 2*, in which the triangular spaces in a staircase are filled solid with sand.

The overall effect of the show is breathtaking in its scope, and the assertion it makes about how Mono-ha was at the global forefront of transformations in art and art practice in the 1960s is convincing. Unlike minimalism and other schools of abstract sculpture, the Mono-ha artists were concerned not to create new art objects or transform the meaning of matter, but rather use found material and represent it as it is: most of the works were time and location specific, and therefore ephemeral. The emphasis was not on contemplation but on eliciting a momentary affective response: the shock of the object-in-itself; the frisson of the happening; the vertiginous shift in consciousness as perception shifts. And yet, as art historian Reiko Tomii points out, their work also had contradictory elements of object-based, discursive and institutional art: one of the reasons that despite its anti-art and ephemeral origins, Mono-ha works as objects show up very well in many leading contemporary art museums in Europe, such as Louisiana in Copenhagen.

The opening was preceded by a quite remarkable symposium at USC which brought together six of the surviving Mono-ha artists, together with leading North American Japanese art historians. What was striking about the discussion was how articulate and reflective these artists were in philosophical terms, even as their work suggests a much more non-verbal, physical relation in its intentions and visualisation. Formulating their ideas in terms of phenomenology and "being-in-the-world", their thoughts are close to traditions of what was named in the West "existentialism", a philosophy itself via Heidegger influenced by the Kyoto school of Kitaro Nishida. The proceedings of this symposium will be published by the *Review of Japanese Culture and Society* next year.

The opening also provoked questions about the unusual blurring of art world domains at stake in the show. Why wasn't this show at LACMA or MOCA, for example? Why are the major museums moving so slowly to recognise the importance of this work? Far-thinking commercial gallerists, such as Tim Blum, clearly see their role in an expanded way: as curators as much as dealers, willing to support work which may not always have commercial value and which has huge historical importance but needs advocates. At the same time, several pieces apparently had been sold lucratively to LA collectors: there is a business at

work here. Viewed from the other (museum) side, the blurring is becoming a familiar part of high art internationally. At the recent spectacular David Hockney show at the prestigious Royal Academy in London, it was obvious that a lot of the big artist consigned works on show were using this venerable location as a showroom for future sales once the exhibition is over.

The opening and the symposium were a who's who of Japanese contemporary art. Gallerist Tomio Koyama, Artist Koki Tanaka, BT editor Teiya Iwabuchi, and MOMA curator Doryun Chong attended the symposium, which was packed. Koyama and SCAI The Bathhouse's Masami Shiraishi were also at the opening, Alexandra Munroe had flown in from the Guggenheim in New York, and Takashi Murakami -- with whom Yoshitake worked on the ©MURAKAMI Los Angeles show of 2008 -- also made an appearance.

At the opening, it was a little bizarre to see the spacey and contemplative Mono-ha works overwhelmed by wisecracking LA hipsters and über rich, plastic surgery enhanced stock holders from the Hollywood hills, all out on an early evening art aperitivo before dinner in Culver City. But it was fun listening to their clueless comments: "Wo! This art makes me scared!"; "Hey -- these guys were really extreme". Some of us were not sure that a parking lot with bouncers was the best place to see Sekine's and Haraguchi's most spectacular works. On all these scores, a real museum showing might be a more appropriate location. But nevertheless, Blum and Poe, Yoshitake and the organisers of the USC symposium all deserve a huge round of applause for these important and comprehensive events.

