

ARTFORUM



LOS ANGELES

"Requiem for the Sun: The Art of Mono-ha"

BLUM & POE

Known for their canny juxtapositions of natural and industrial materials, the artists associated with Mono-ha (literally, the School of Things) have steadily gained recognition in Japan, Korea, and Europe since the group's emergence in the late 1960s. Organized by Mika Yoshitake, assistant curator at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington, DC, "Requiem for the Sun," the first substantial offering of Mono-ha works in the US, expanded upon that base. Installed in a manner best described as conscientious, the exhibition offered a well-chosen sampling of some of the group's most celebrated works, including Nobuo Sekine's *Phase—Mother Earth*, the cylinder-and-hole duo made of dirt mixed with concrete whose original enactment in 1968 is said to have triggered the formation of the movement. Although never bound by a formal association, the Mono-ha artists were nevertheless joined by a shared commitment to what several members identified as a refusal of "making," or what the group's most prolific member, Lee Ufan, famously explained as a desire to present the world "as it is," without undue interference on the part of the artist or from viewers' expectations concerning the artist's capacity for creation.

In laying out the sixty-three works on view here, Yoshitake allowed just enough space between each piece so as to faithfully convey Lee's mandate by stressing both the autonomy and the dependence of each

object vis-à-vis the others. The result yielded a number of interesting, and perhaps unintended, resonances, many of which highlighted the profound importance of scale to Mono-ha thinking. Noriyuki Haraguchi's *I-Beam and Wire Rope*, 1970/2012, an apparent response to the relentless expansion of the built environment in Tokyo after the 1964 Olympics, raises other questions about the artwork-city relationship. This is particularly true when the work is seen against the backdrop of a twenty-first-century Los Angeles parking lot, as was the case here. Likewise, *Phase—Mother Earth*—so monumental in the documentary images taken by Osamu Murai, which, though well known by Mono-ha devotees, were not included in this exhibition—seems almost domesticated in the photographs by Ko Nakajima that were hung within a trellis next to the gallery's rear entrance; Land art tamed, so to speak.

Absent from this elegantly spare exhibition was the tension between spontaneity and control, a sense of compromise that made initial Mono-ha works seem so provocative in late 1960s Japan. Even Kishio Suga's witty conflation of metal plates and poured concrete (*Soft Concepts*, 1970) was so meticulously displayed that it started to impart a singularly authorial presence, contrary to the stated intentions of Suga and his colleagues. It might have been worthwhile to have more vigorously underscored the opticality of these works—phenomenological illusionism having been something that fascinated many Mono-ha artists during the mid- to late '60s and the quality that perhaps rescued certain pieces from devolving into literal restatements of various material properties. To the show's credit, some attempt was indeed made toward this end, particularly with the inclusion of two relief paintings by Sekine that look startlingly flat when photographed but distinctly voluminous in the flesh. Also notable were works by Jirō Takamatsu, a leading representative of Anti-Art in Japan whose keen awareness of the incongruence of materials such as light and stainless steel (*Light and Shadow*, 1973/2012) made him one of Mono-ha's most important interlocutors.

Part of what first made Mono-ha so intriguing was its stark contrast to the other objects that were being celebrated as art at the time. By largely bypassing this parallel history of display, "Requiem for the Sun" focused instead on Mono-ha's continued relevance to and as contemporary art. Yet the show's steadfast refusal to prioritize any one work over another raised lingering questions about the group's internal dynamics, which were almost as crucial to the movement's discursive success as the works themselves. In this way, "Requiem for the Sun" not only made a strong case for Mono-ha as an important narrative in an ever expanding history, but—given the curator's decision to forgo any social narrative—also stood as an exemplary reminder to consider the ways in which history might be told in anticipation of the still-unformed present.

—Joan Kee