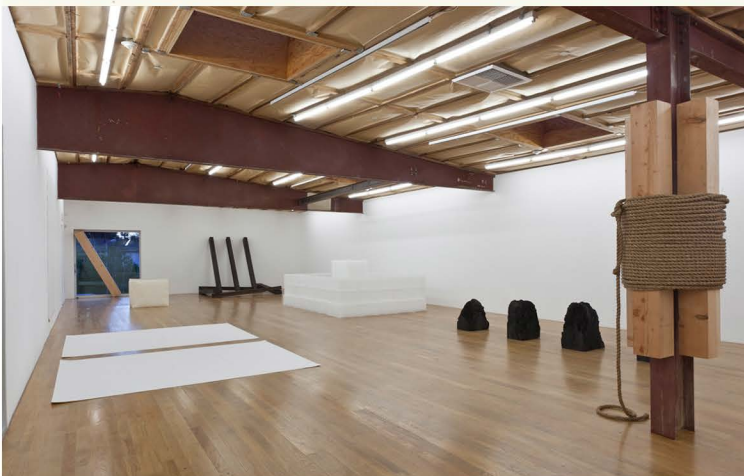


USA



REQUIEM FOR THE SUN

Blum & Poe, Los Angeles

Curators often locate the unifying idea of 1968 in artists' attacks in the tyranny of context over material, or in commodity over object; but, of course, it was equally in their postwar clawing at the chains between identity and history. The recent claim for the place of the brief Japanese movement known as Mono-ha – launched in 1968, with Nobuo Sekine's guerilla earthwork *Phase–Mother Earth* – is a testament to the latter fact. Mono-ha's chief philosopher, Lee Ufan, in an interview published in this magazine last year, repeatedly invoked a "breakdown of identity" as the catalyst for Mono-ha's revolt. Indeed, the work on view in "Requiem for the Sun: The Art of Mono-ha" – curated by Mika Yoshitake – spoke to an uneasy, if poetic, *détente* between expressive desire and the accelerating juggernaut of modernity. It seems like no coincidence that the two movements of the time most interested in the humbling of heroic humanity – Arte Povera and Mono-ha – arose in countries saddled with the ruinous legacy of fascism. Both wondered whether the proper role of a modern man (that few of these '60s movements included many female or minority members testifies to how far their ideas had yet to go) was to recuse himself from the world's stirring materiality, rather than attempt to harness it.

Mono-ha, or "School of Things" (a name originally levelled as an insult), was a loose group of mostly 20-somethings, many of whom studied together at Tokyo's Tama Art University. The Mono-ha artists refused "made" art objects, and instead arranged the rudiments of natural materials and manmade construction – dirt, wood, paper, metal, glass, wax, stone, water – into configurations that elevated a practical joker's anarchic glee into lyrical meditations of fallen philosophy.

These young men had indeed lost their sun – hence the show's title – not only in as

much as man's creations no longer seemed to rank among the objects under it, but also in that the Japanese empire's emblem had set for good, with nothing left of its life-giving radiation but the atrocious, lingering glow of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. How can individual will shed any light on such a situation? Now that the means of our technological ascendance are once again threatening apocalypse, it's no surprise that there is a resurgent interest in these artists' answers to the question.

Their response was, in effect, to pull pranks on nature, while knowing that the joke was on us, not Mother Earth. Susumu Koshimizu put heavy hunks of granite in giant handmade paper envelopes (*Paper*, 1969); Kishio Suga smoothed a perfect incline of sand over a staircase (*Infinite Situation II (steps)*, 1970); Koji Enokura photographed his body precisely aligned with the receding border of a wave on the beach (*Symptom–Sea–Body*, 1972); Lee heaved a stone awkwardly onto a large pane of glass, creating an instantaneous, stochastic record of his act (*Relatum*, 1969); and, in the outdoor space behind the gallery, Sekine dug a perfect cylinder from the earth and stood it by its menacing hole (the aforementioned *Phase–Mother Earth*). The results deliberately lack the industrial polish of Minimalism, the epic magnitude of Land Art, the performative élan of Gutai or Process Art, even the careful handcraft of Arte Povera. The scale of Mono-ha is entirely human and conditional, and its processes so short or obscure that record is conflated with event.

This was delightfully evident in the smartest curatorial choice in the show, not even a Mono-ha work *per se*, installed in the hallway by the elevators. A documentary film by Christian and Michael Blackwood entitled *Japan: The New Art* (1970) and several contact sheets from Ko Nakajima documented the artists' antics and proved that behind the monumental materiality of the work was a carefree ethic that amounted to 'fun with stuff'. Watching Sekine, in the film, wandering through a park, wrestling puckishly with large balls of clay, depositing them all over the place – including, finally, in a rubbish bin – is nearly as inspiring and instructive of the

relationship between man and material as his brilliant, grander "Phase of Nothingness" series. Watching a trio of Mono-ha artists throw rocks through a huge sheet of paper floating down a river, also in the film, reminds us that much of the best art of the movement cannot be sold at Blum & Poe.

What was left (or re-created) for this exhibition instead were manmade objects – beautiful and alive but divorced from their original spirit. Carefully curated to give a sense of each artist's individual style, the pieces now spoke less to a denial of identity and an experience of materiality than to the fact that even things-in-themselves carry a reflected subjectivity – anything moved by man, even the dumbest rock or the roughest slab of steel, retains the small arrogance of his hand. Sekine's earthen cylinder was excavated not without permission in a public park on land newly appropriated from a disgraced emperor, as the original was, but instead with big-gallery money in a tidy courtyard beside a fenced-in parking lot. Nevertheless, Mono-ha had the last laugh, because the longer you spent with these things, the more they seemed to push you away with new eyes for the ironies of the phenomenological soul and its surroundings, even in a white-cube space: is that a work of art or an enamelled fire-extinguisher cover? Is that an aesthetic intervention or merely a drywall seam? What can it possibly mean that there is a small and greasy handprint, visible only from the side, on the smoked glass of the emergency exit?

IAN CHANG

