



## *Mono-ha*, the Japanese "School of Things," at Blum & Poe



Down on La Cienega Boulevard, things hang in the balance. Held aloft by a single wire, a 14-foot metal I-beam stands delicately balanced on its corner. A giant granite stone nearby perches atop a steel tower. Things are melting and oozing, stacked and cracked, stretched taut and left to dry in a balance so delicate your breath could make it shiver.

Blum & Poe in [Culver City](#), already one of the city's blue-chip galleries, has installed its most ambitious exhibition, the first major historical survey in the U.S. of the Japanese avant-garde movement known as *Mono-ha*, which translates as "School of Things." There are definitely things on view at the gallery, in the most fundamental, concrete sense of the word.

"Things," alongside "stuff," of course, is one of those beautiful vague words that can catch all gaps in a weak vocabulary. Theorists can drift into heady philosophical territory by delving into how one defines "thing-ness," like [Viktor Shklovsky's](#) dictum from 1929 that art must "make the stone stoney," but in this case "School of Things" began as a rather snide dismissal by a critic and the name stuck. Oh yeah, those guys with the "things."

But now it feels appropriate rather than pejorative. In the late '60s and early '70s, rejecting Western forms of representation, the 10 artists on view who made up the loose *Mono-ha* grouping chose to gracefully return to a language of literal things, both natural and man-made, with many of the works marking the tension of these two concepts coming together.

Lee Ufan dropped a single stone onto a plate of glass. Susumu Koshimizu wrapped boulders in large sheaths of paper. Nobuo Sekine filled two black, steel containers over the brim with water. Because of the blackness of the interiors, it takes a moment to realize it's water. A step closer, though, and it trembles with the vibrations of each footfall. Look carefully, and tiny moats of dust emerge, collecting along the surface, the whole experience making you aware of the essential, beautiful qualities of water.

its re-creation here), considered the first work of *Mono-ha*. In the relatively peaceful sculpture garden at Blum & Poe, laid with pea-stone gravel and careful landscaping to screen off the back parking lot, a giant, cylindrical hole has been carved out of the earth, some 8 feet deep, and a perfect, cylindrical column of the excavated earth stands next to it around 8 feet high, compacted to look as if it has been sucked out of the earth in a single piece.

The experience of it is a little disconcerting. Very little of the material has actually been changed, it's just been moved, and not even that far. Staring at the strata in the column and measuring the depth at the edge of the steep hole, the sculpture forces an awareness of the substance, this earth, its dirty layers, its secrets, its sheer weight. It is a gentle epiphany of this ginormous thing unseen or simply unacknowledged.

Industrially milled wood, a wholly natural material cut to shape by machinery, is used by many artists in the exhibition, to precarious effect. Noburu Takayama patterns railroad ties, those horizontal wooden slats that support the steel rails, into rhythmic stacks. Katsuhiko Narita's four blocks of wood have been burned black into charcoal, the final form of the work decided by fire and not necessarily by the artist.

The lists of materials for each work in the exhibition have a beautiful, raw simplicity, reading as a collection of timeless objects: "Douglas Fir"; "Wood, rope, stone"; "Glass, stone"; "Earth, cement, molds." The last list comes from a work by Sekine, *Phase-Mother Earth, 1968/2012* (the second date coming from



Much of the work in the exhibition does something similarly elemental and revealing, each artist combining a natural element with an unnatural artifact that reveals properties of both, together questioning not only what materials art can be made of but also, importantly, what the role of the artist is in crafting the effects we call "art."

*Mono-ha* did not come into being in a vacuum. Ufan, a kind of spokesman for the movement, has said in interviews that *Mono-ha* was a part of the cultural upheavals of the late 1960s, sharing affinities and inspiration with both Italian Arte Povera (characterized by its use of "poor," i.e., cheap and widely available materials) and minimalism and land art in the United States. But while minimalism and land art seemed so much a channeling of heavy industry and the ego of imposing a vision onto a landscape, *Mono-ha* feels refreshingly ego-free, or at least ego-lite.

Though some works in the exhibition feel muscularly American (in particular [Noriyuki Haraguchi's](#) steel I-beam), much of the exhibition feels more elemental and less about arrogance, less about some butch ego (think [Michael Heizer](#) and his big, stupid, 456-foot-long, 340-ton rock currently being lugged across L.A. County) and more about simple effects, a sense of a material that is the evidence of something that has just happened or where something feels precariously about to happen. The tension between those two is incredible.

Recently discovered by the West, the *Mono-ha* movement begs a reconsideration of art made during the period. Ufan in recent years has been widely embraced outside of [Japan](#), evidenced by a recent retrospective at the [Guggenheim Museum](#) in New York and a solo show at Blum & Poe in 2010.

Realized by curator Mika Yoshitake in collaboration with the gallery, the sheer scope and commitment of the exhibition and the works themselves make a very strong case for this grouping of artists and their contemporary historical relevance. Almost every available space of Blum & Poe's large building has been given over to the survey; walking through them all, one can't help but admire how weirdly magical the bringing together of things can be.

The show's most powerful work is perhaps the simplest. [Kishio Suga's](#) five sculptures and interventions feel in their own way consuming, precarious and poetic. For instance, he filled in every step of Blum & Poe's back stairwell with wet sand, creating a smooth, sloping plane, a

radical but gentle transformation of this normally ignored interstitial space achieved with an incredible economy of means. But his most affecting work consists of a single beam of Douglas fir stuck into the window frame. Before you mutter how stupid that sounds, take a glance at the list of its materials: "Douglas Fir, window, landscape." The stick is just an excuse, a simple trick that bends into the window in a weird way, which can, with a little time and patience, bring about that awareness of the world seen through the window, where you're standing, and maybe yourself. It doesn't ask you to change your religion, to believe in capitalism or socialism or Japan or America; it simply asks you to take some time, look a little deeper, be more aware.

Something [Archimedes](#) said seems so fitting here: "Give me a lever long enough and a fulcrum on which to place it, and I shall move the world."

They may be just things. But here is the lever — this sculpture, this show — and with you as the fulcrum, it might just be possible for such a simple thing to move the world.