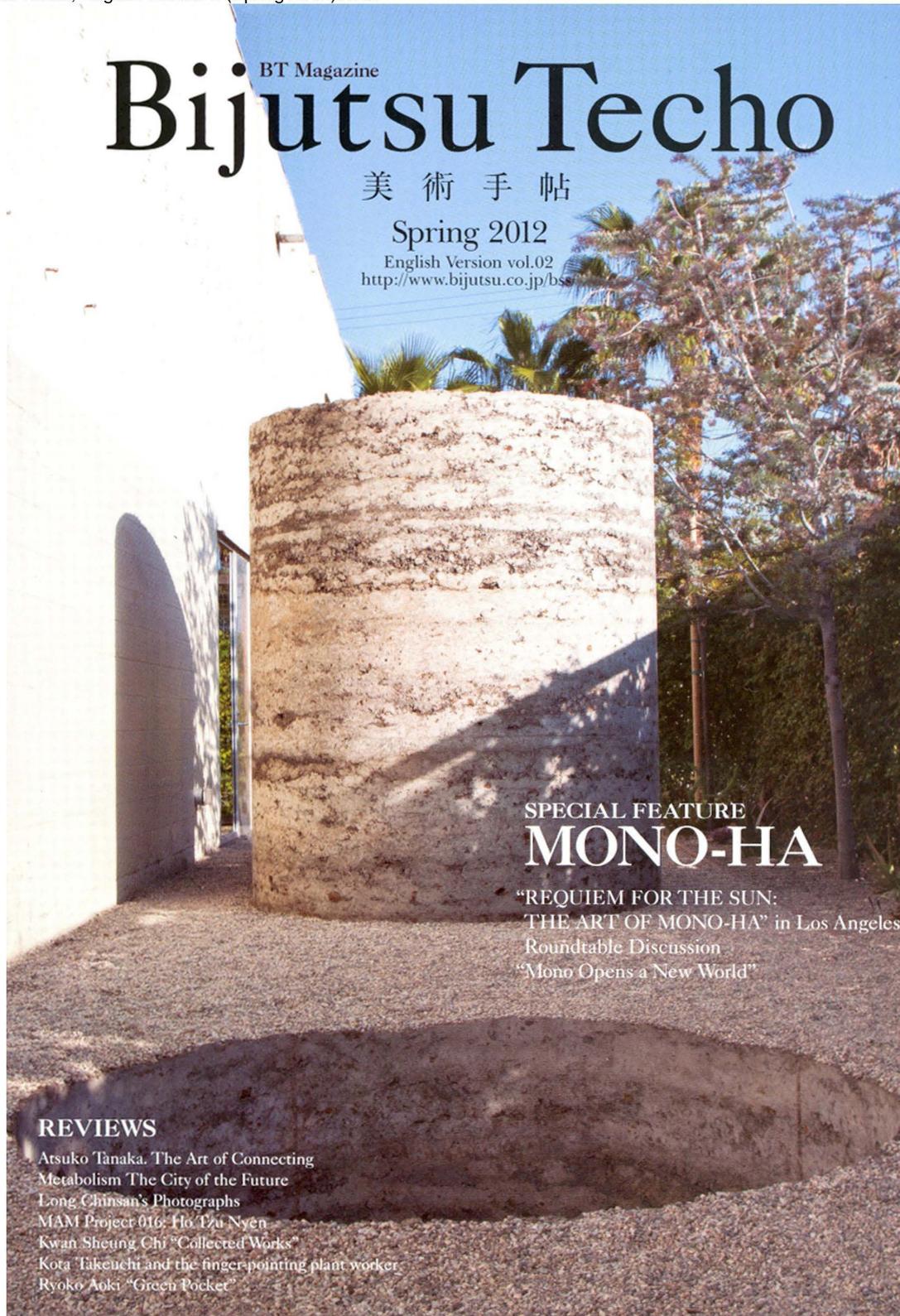
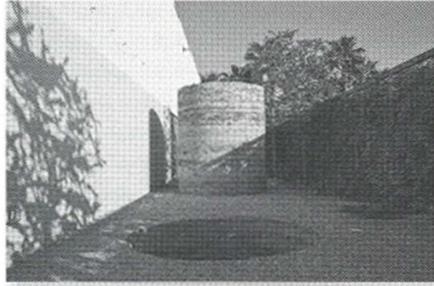


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SPECIAL FEATURE



Nobuo Sekine, *Phase-Mother Earth*, 1968/2012
Photo by Joshua White
Courtesy of the artist and Blum & Poe, Los Angeles

“REQUIEM FOR THE SUN: THE ART OF MONO-HA” in Los Angeles

Encounters with objects, Mono-
ha, and the world

By Rika Hiro

Under the LA sun

Although it is still February, the 6-meter steel beam that extends diagonally from the ground, casts a dark shadow on the asphalt pavement under the already intense LA sun (Noriyuki Haraguchi, *I-Beam and Wire Rope*, 1970). Behind Haraguchi's work, the mirrored surface of the stainless-steel pillar supporting a granite boulder is also reflecting the sunlight (Nobuo Sekine, *Phase of Nothingness*, 1970). Turning our focus to the left, the view is obstructed by the huge crack in the center of a massive stone (Susumu Koshimizu, *Crack the Stone in August '70*, 1970). The scope of its scale and its raw materiality, its uncomprehensible idiosyncrasy, and the precariously delicate balance of its arrangement elicits awe and at the same time encloses the viewers in a state of tension.

What transformed the barren parking lot of Blum and Poe are the works of Mono-ha, a Japanese art movement active from 1968 to the early 70s. One of the significant works that initiated the Mono-ha movement was Nobuo Sekine's *Phase-Mother Earth* (1968) situated in the courtyard beside the entrance. The huge hole (220x270 cm in diameter) and the excavated earth compacted into a cylinder of the same dimension towering over the earth, creates an abyss produced from the act of removing something that is already there. Astounded by this effect, Lee Ufan passionately pursued this idea, reiterated repeatedly in his discussions, which lead to the realization of the Mono-ha movement and the birth of the Mono-ha artists.

A Stunning Exhibition Space

The “REQUIEM FOR THE SUN: THE ART OF MONO-HA”, the most ambitious exhibition in terms of scale in the history of Blum and Poe, includes over 50 works by 10 Mono-ha artists including Nobuo Sekine, Susumu Koshimizu, Lee Ufan, Noriyuki Haraguchi, Jiro Takamatsu, Koji Enokura, Katsuro Yoshida, Kishio Suga, Noboru Takayama and Katsuhiko Narita. A 230-page catalogue will be published in conjunction with the showcase (*1). The exhibition title denotes the development of Mono-ha, from the loss of belief towards object-based art (once an essential component of post-war Japanese art practice) and its disintegration, followed by the isolation of the aesthetic, leading to the reconstruction of objects.

With the previously mentioned parking lot at the head of the list, the exhibition utilizes the gallery space to its fullest, creating a liberally open space from the office approach to the private area (something difficult to realize even in a museum), denoting its high standards and abundance. Mika Yoshitake, the curator of the exhibition, commented, “This was made possible because of the use of the space and the dry climate of LA.” The gallery space indeed emits a pristine atmosphere, incorporating 27,000 square feet of space and plenty of natural light. In addition, the gallerists of Blum and Poe (one of the leading pioneers which lead the gallery district in Culver City to thrive) with their qualified business skills, have made a significant contribution in arranging a scheme that made possible the reproduction and acquirement of the works into private and museum collections. Yoshitake's knowledge and passion accumulated in her 10 year research as an assistant curator at the Hirshhorn Museum in Washington DC and the relationship she fostered with the

artists also made this exhibition feasible.

In a speech made on behalf of the participating artists, Sekine commented with a content grin that this was "the best Mono-ha exhibition yet." Like Sekine, guests of the opening, such as power collectors like Howard Rachofsky and curators from major art museums such as MOMA all expressed appraisal towards the exhibition.

Shifting our focus to the inside of the gallery, which Lee was especially thrilled with ("the lighting and tranquility is outstanding" he commented): within the space encompassed in the soft light, the material, form and texture of the elements [such as the combination of cotton and steel (Yoshida), the glass and stone and its disharmony with the glass plate (Lee), the dull sheen of leather (Enokura), the oily concrete and the translucence of the paraffin wax (Suga), the tremulous movement of the water surface (Sekine)] stand out, conflicting with the background or the space that the object is placed (abandoned) as equivalent components, or simply overlap. The intensity of the South California sun gives an ever-changing expression to the sculptures, instilling a temporal movement to the works.

Various measures are taken throughout the exhibition to enable the viewer to access an alternative view to the usual viewpoint from below or at eye-level in works such as Kishio Suga's *Infinite Situation II (steps)* (1970) in which the stairwell of Blume and Poe is detached from its function by covering the steps with sand to create a sloping plane, exposing the fundamental state of the space or Susumu Koshimizu's *Perpendicular Line 1* (1969) which steers the viewers attention towards the vertical line created by the weight hanging from the ceiling.

Suga pointed out that this rare occasion (in which 5 of the existing Mono-ha artists excluding Noboru Takayama gathered to show case their works) sparked a quiet negotiation between the artists through the works, adding a certain dynamism to the exhibition. The actions and gestures unique to the movement and the ephemeral elements, juxtaposed, actively facing each other or simply entering the periphery of our vision, enables a physical perception (what Lee describes as an "encounter") of the interdependent relationship of the objects or the object and the space. To draw out this effect to its fullest, the arrangement of each work has been meticulously planned.

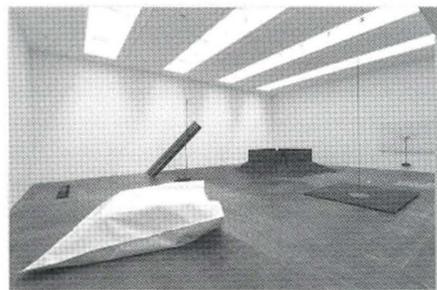
Introduction to Mono-ha

What was the Mono-ha movement in the first place?

The opening sentence of an article covering a discussion that took place during the prime of Mono-ha's success in *Bijutsu Techo* (BT), provides us with an inclusive and precise definition of the characteristic of this loosely defined artistic practice that vary in approach and method depending on each artist. According to BT, the Mono-ha movement aimed to facilitate an encounter with a world (or situation) that would allow a departure from aesthetic/linguistic ideas and speculation contingent on material "things." Through the use of everyday objects, both natural and industrial such as wood, stone, metal and glass the Mono-ha artists employed these components in their literal state and rearranged them to initiate a relationship on a new level, free of pre-existing perceptions.

Despite its seemingly simple and approachable name, Mono-ha's tenet, "anti-art=abandonment of practice" has often been criticized for its naiveness in a time of social and political upheaval. As art historian, Reiko Tomii pointed out in the panel discussion held in conjunction with the exhibition, the Mono-ha movement in itself pose numerous contradictions. For example their work is discursive and at the same ambiguous; performative, highly object-based and yet indifferent towards the objects themselves; resisted conventions and institutions and at the same time deeply committed to the art institution. However, it is also true that the ambiguities intrinsic in the movement, enables multiple interpretations from different angles preserving the movements "freshness" and its contemporary historical relevance.

Though frequently featured in exhibitions in Japan and Europe, this is the first attempt of a comprehensive Mono-



"REQUIEM FOR THE SUN:
THE ART OF MONO-HA"
Installation View, 2012 Blum & Poe, Los Angeles
Photo by Joshua White
Courtesy of the artist and Blum & Poe, Los Angeles

ha exhibition in the United States. Nonetheless, this makes us wonder why the re-evaluation of the Mono-ha movement is being carried out in a gallery in LA at this point in time. Yoshitake claims that the exhibition, apart from showcasing the works, defined as its mission the reproduction/representation of works by the artists, restoration of existing works under their supervision and the inclusion and preservation of works in appropriate collections. The process-oriented and ephemeral nature (evident in their time and location specific work) endemic to the Mono-ha works present issues of preservation and passing down the works to succeeding generations making such tasks an imperative in terms of properly archiving the movement. Such efforts brought Katsuhiko Narita's work titled Sumi (1969/1986), long forgotten in the gallery storage covered in dust and mold, back to life after undergoing careful cleaning and conservation treatment.

Re-evaluation of Mono-ha within World Art History

The Mono-ha movement is often discussed as a counterpoint to western art movements such as Minimalism, Post-Minimalism, Land Art and Arte Povera, within the recent current of re-evaluating art history and exhibitions trends during the 1960s and 70s. Thus, the contribution of the Mono-ha movement towards what James Elkins called "world art history" is easy to anticipate. While the preceding art movement Gutai is relatively well established in the western art world, Mono-ha is steadily gaining recognition as the "next Gutai."

This exhibition, as well as the catalogue published in conjunction has important implications for laying the foundations for new studies and further exhibitions of Mono-ha in English speaking regions. The panel discussion which took place at the University of Southern California (USC), prior to the opening was a success, (some of the audience had to stand to watch the discussions) which tells us of the relevance of the works and discourses of the Mono-ha movement in the present day as well as the scope of the issues it covers.

Lee Ufan, when asked about the relevance of Mono-ha in today's society, asserted that the relationship between the world and "things" that Mono-ha presents (which transgress binaries such as West/East, subject/object and nature/man made artifacts) could produce a hint for redressing the relationship between the world, nature and technology-a

notion, as Lee points out that we became compellingly aware of after the melt down of the Fukushima Daiichi Power Plant. Works such as Michael Heizer's 340-ton granite rock, which sparked public interest, receiving frequent coverage in the press upon its arrival at LACMA (in close vicinity with the Blum and Poe gallery) epitomizes the heroic and egotistical nature of Land Art, often referred to in contrast with the Mono-ha movement. Unlike the practitioners of Land Art, the Mono-ha artists simply play the role of the mediator, initiating the encounter between the work, the viewers, the site and the environment.

*1

To be published in May, 2012 from DAP/Distributed Art Publishers.

*2

"Tokushu=hasshin suru shinnjinntachi Zadannkai <mono> ga hiraku atarashii sekai" (participants=Susumu Koshimizu, Nobuo Sekine, Kishio Suga, Katsuhiko Narita, Katsuro Yoshida and Lee Ufan). *Bijutsu Techo*, February Issue, 1970, pp. 34-55. The relationship with Yoshitake and the Mono-ha artists started from this discussion.

*3

"Voices of Mono-ha Artists: Contemporary Art In Japan, Circa 1970, A Panel Discussion", February 24th, 2012, University of Southern California (USC). Presented by the USC Center for Japanese Religions and Culture in association with PoNJA-GenKon. The proceedings of the panel discussion will be included in the Jyosai University English journal "Review of Japanese Culture and Society".

"REQUIEM FOR THE SUN: THE ART OF MONO-HA"

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