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Article originally appeared in the Winter 2008 - 09 issue (#113) of

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The Door Left Ajar

Naomi Shioya's poetic interpretations of everyday life engage our longings and invite us to revisit our dreams.

BY TOMOKO AOKI





OPPOSITE
The Entrance to Wonderland,
2008. Cast glass. H 20 1/2,
W 20, D 4 1/2 in.

COURTESY: THE ARTIST

THIS PAGE, ABOVE
*Ikoku no Tsuki (The Moon
in a Foreign Country)*, 1993.
Cast glass. H 25 1/2, W 9,
D 3 1/2 in.

COLLECTION: C.L.R.N.A.
COURTESY: THE ARTIST

THIS PAGE, TOP RIGHT
Five Nights, 2001. Cast
glass. H 13 1/2, W 27,
D 6 1/2 in.

COLLECTION: HOKKAIDO MUSEUM OF
MODERN ART

THIS PAGE, BOTTOM RIGHT
Night Repeating, 2002. Cast
glass. H 5, W 20 1/2, D 18 in.

COLLECTION: PRIVATE
COURTESY: THE ARTIST



Naomi Shioya's translucent cast-glass sculptures—quintessentially Japanese in their pure forms and sandblasted surfaces that soften light—could be seen as a high-art version of a “glass blog” in their deceptive and disarming simplicity. With subject matter often drawn from events in everyday life—such as the television news, environmental concerns, the experience of the day's weather, or listening to her son's voice—Shioya elevates her observations by transforming universal experience into powerful visual poetry. In fact, writing actual poems is sometimes a part of Shioya's process, as she composes verses in Japanese as a path to discovering the sculptural form that best expresses her ideas. Other times, the sculptural form comes to her mind directly.

In their simplicity, Shioya's works resemble traditional Japanese tanka or haiku. Tanka, with 31 Japanese syllables, and haiku, with only 17, describe scenery, emotions, and thoughts that have resonance far beyond their abbreviated forms. Shioya's work is also informed by a very different literary genre: Japanese comic strips and animated films, which distill the strongest characteristics of this unique culture. In this age of information overload, simplicity and conciseness are important considerations when you wish to convey a message.

Japanese society doesn't encourage purely individualistic self-expression. Its art often reflects this fact. Unlike Western cultures, Japanese society is a group-oriented society, and an individual is expected to be highly attuned to the social environment, with pressure to always understand where one is. “KY” (*kuki yomenai*), which means “unable to understand the atmosphere,” was a trendy term during the financial turmoil that battered the Japanese economy and identity. But Shioya's work is informed not only by her identity as a Japanese citizen, but also by her travels and engagement with the wider world, which showed her those areas of universal experience that transcend cultural limitations.

Shioya studied at Tama Art University for six years, starting in 1980. At that time, Tama was the only university with a glass program, which was started by Prof. Makoto Ito in 1978. The program was in the 3-D design department, and Osamu Noda, now the director of the Nijima Glass Art Center, and Yoshihiko Takahashi, a prominent Japanese glass artist, were her seniors. Shioya recalls that all the students were concerned with how they could have their own studio and make their living through glass. Soon after she graduated, she built her own studio with a furnace in the garage of her father's small company in Tokyo. In her studio she created one-of-a-kind and production work. During the middle of the 1980s,



THIS PAGE

Ring of Moon, 2007. Cast glass. H 21, W 21, D 2 1/4 in.
COURTESY: CHAPPELL GALLERY

OPPOSITE, TOP

Dancing Moon, 2000. Cast glass. H 15 1/4, W 23 1/2, D 4 1/2 in.
COLLECTION: MUSEUM OF MODERN ART
COURTESY: THE ARTIST

OPPOSITE, BOTTOM

Sky with Moon, 2000. H 15 1/4, W 29 1/2, D 4 in.
COURTESY: THE ARTIST

Japan had a bubble economy, and the objects Shioya made sold without much effort. In 1990 she married Fumiaki Uzawa, a glassblower, and moved to Shiga prefecture next to Kyoto, where she continued to work with glass in the same style.

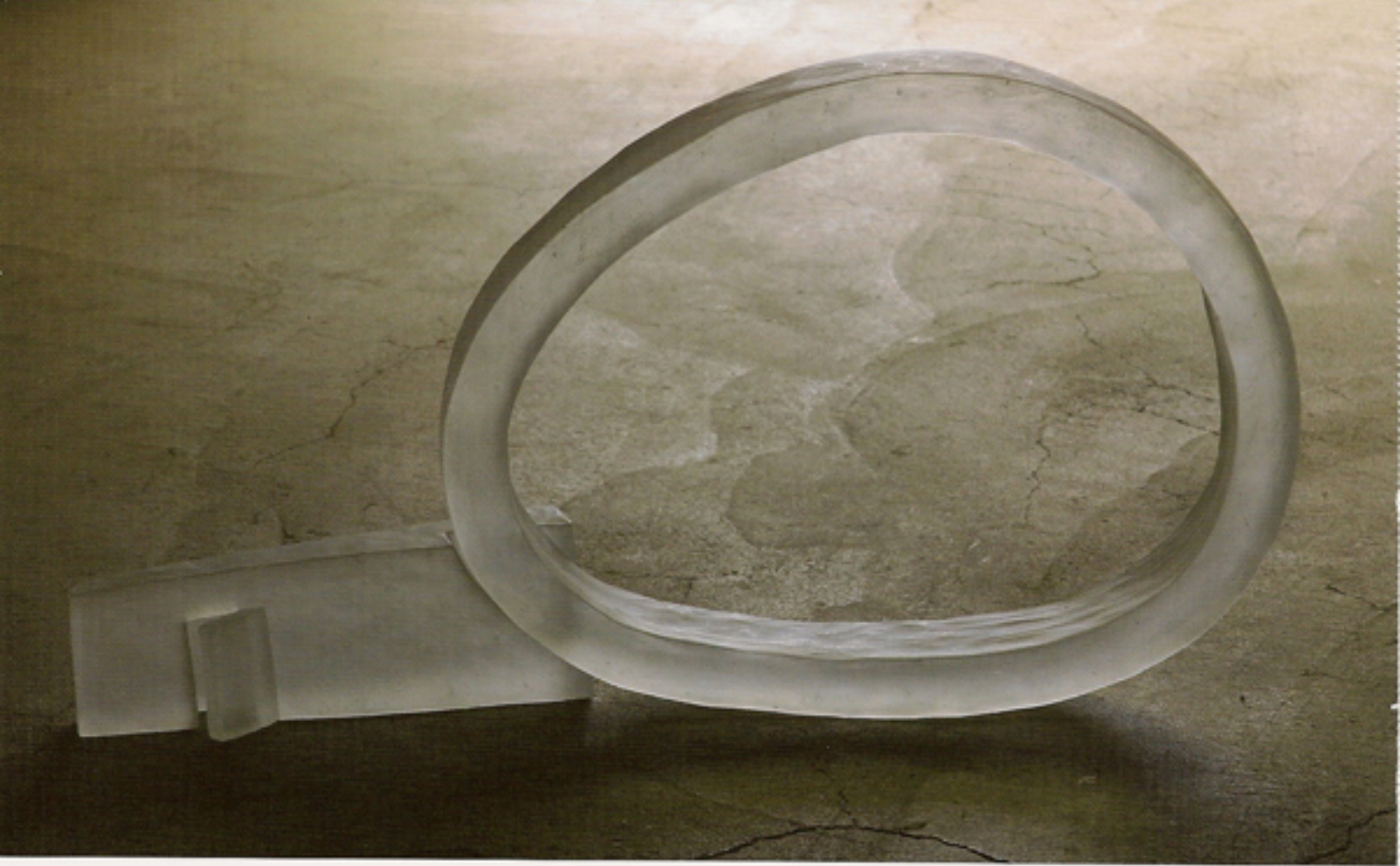
The turning point in her art career took place in 1993, when her husband was offered a job at the Centre International du Verre et Arts Plastiques (CIRVA) in Marseille, France. Shioya wasn't particularly interested in working overseas, but she followed her husband with the promise that they would come back to Japan after two years of work. They worked as assistant glassblowers, and they both had the chance to work with Lino Tagliapietra as well as with other artists at the center, where they improved their skills.

Living and working abroad was a first for Shioya; in Marseille, she experienced culture shock for two main reasons. One was the European hierarchical concept of art; despite the best efforts of an institution like CIRVA, the attitude was that fine artists and glassblowers were considered separately in French society, and Studio Glass wasn't valued. The other harsh reality was encountering foreign workers from North Africa. Shioya found herself sharing their experience of being a foreign worker and feeling her values were being denied by the rules of European culture. Unable to create any work of her own, she instead poured her disappointment into her poetry. One day she found three-dimensional forms suggested by her words; she decided to make them in glass by employing a casting technique.

Her first work was inspired by an encounter one evening with a middle-aged Arab man who was standing on the street looking up at the sky. In Shioya's imagination, he was waiting for the moon. If she had greeted him by saying, "The moon is beautiful tonight, isn't it?" she felt sure he would have replied, "The moon is even more beautiful in my country." From this thought, she made a poem and then created her first work in cast glass; it was titled *Ikoku no Tsuki* [*The Moon in Exile*] (1993). (A better English translation would be "The Moon in a Foreign Country.")

In Japan the moon is often used as a symbol to show nostalgia for one's hometown in music, literature, and other forms of art. "Princess Kaguya" is one of the oldest and most widely known stories. The plot is that a princess who was born inside a bamboo tree returns to the moon after growing up. In Shioya's imagination, the moon she saw in Marseille, a lonely moon for the Arab foreign worker, became a moon in the African desert. In *Ikoku no Tsuki*, the moon changes into one that viewers might see in their own home countries.





When Shioya and her husband returned to Japan in 1995, the economy was starting to suffer, galleries were closing, and exhibitions of glass sculptures were scarce. This was the year the Japanese sold most of the buildings they owned in Rockefeller Center.

Shioya needed a bigger studio for her casting and moved to a small village in Ibaraki Prefecture, 120 miles north of Tokyo. An American art dealer traveling through Japan in 1997 came upon her work and offered her a show in a gallery she was planning to open in Boston. Since her first U.S. show in 1999, Shioya continues to exhibit with Chappell Gallery, which has since relocated to New York City.

The moon motif is used as a metaphor in various cultures, and for Japanese it has a special meaning. In *Five Nights* (2001) and *Night Repeating* (2002), Shioya depicts moons to imply the passing of time. You may see the connection with the fact that the lunar calendar was used in Japan until 1872. It's still used for many occasions. When Shioya looks up at the sky and recognizes the shape of the moon, she roughly counts how many days have passed from the last time she saw it. Moon viewing is one of the important events in fall; Japanese people celebrate the harvest moon in September by displaying pampas grass and dumplings with sweet bean paste. Shioya likes to think that the moon appears in the sky the same way all over the world. We must share things equally, just as moonlight spreads evenly over the earth. This idea is shown in her work entitled *Ring of Moon* (2007).

In *Dancing Moon* (2000), *Sky with Moon* (2000), and *Threatens to Storm* (2001), Shioya applies a form of stop-motion that often appears in manga (comic strips). This style is also seen in *ukiyo-e*, and a good example is Hokusai's most famous print, *The Great Wave off Kanagawa*. Shioya was born in 1961 and was 2 years old when the first Japanese TV animation series, *Astro Boy* by Osamu Tezuka, was televised. She is of the same generation as Takashi Murakami and Yoshitomo Nara, and was similarly influenced by Japanese animation style. Although her works are three-dimensional, some of them have flat reverse sides, and they are created with the intention of being viewed from the front. Shioya's style has similarities to what is known in Japan as "super-flat," and using it, she makes effective use of the light passing through from the rear.

Buildings, doors, chairs, figures and animals are often used in her work. They are ordinary everyday items for people, but Shioya gives them a new meaning. A bear-like animal features in her recent work, *The Entrance to Wonderland* (2008). The animal has a door in its side that you are invited to enter on your way to the world of fantasy. The idea came from her imagination of how great it would be if she could go into this other world on its back when she sees an animal.

Shioya's notion of art resists choosing between opposites. From her experience of living in France, she accepts the differences in the world and does not impose the hierarchies she saw there. Loving to explore its nature, Shioya has chosen glass for her medium. Holding the weight and feeling the surface texture of cast glass, Shioya takes a part in all the processes of creation. Her work has restraint but also the assurance that the place you are longing for in your dreams is the place you're presently in. ■

TOMOKO AOKI is a writer, editor, and curator based in Kyoto, Japan.

THIS PAGE
Days, 2007. Cast glass.
H 13, W 26 1/2, D 2 1/2 in.
COURTESY: THE ARTIST

OPPOSITE, TOP
The House with Nothing,
2008. Cast glass. H 18,
W 34 1/2, D 6 in.
COURTESY: THE ARTIST

OPPOSITE, BOTTOM
Roof Gardens, 2006. Cast
glass. H 18, W 4 1/2, D 4 in.
(each object)
COLLECTION: PALM SPRINGS ART MUSEUM
COURTESY: THE ARTIST

