

NY ARTS

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Interview with Melissa Ichiuji Steven Psyllos NYArts Magazine Executive Editor

Melissa Ichiuji's sculptures drew me in while walking around last years Art (212) debut art fair in NYC. On view were *School Girl* and *Afternoon Delight*, which I studied for at least a half hour. The craft of these sculptures took my breath away; so raw, severe, yet delicate almost, subtle. The compositions of these figures seemed to be extracted from a dream, a nightmare perhaps, and placed right there on display, lonely in the bright lights of a collector's showroom.

Represented **by Irvine Contemporary** in Washington DC, Ichiuji's sculpture is truly on the (razor-sharp) cutting edge of her generation. Unique, surreal, and grotesquely genius.

Steven Psyllos: You have a history of dance and drama. The form of these sculptures seems to be informed by your performance work. How do the various mediums feed each other, and ultimately, your creativity?



Melissa Ichiuji, *Afternoon Delight*, 2006

Melissa Ichiuji: I see my work as small bits of theatre. There are characters, there is conflict, some mystery, a possible narrative that is open ended, and hopefully something worthwhile to consider.

When I think of performance the first thing that comes to mind is a stage. In most of my work there is an element of the performative and often my methods of display go back to the conventions of a stage or set. A stage implies a line or an edge or boundary that is not meant to be crossed and delineates a space for action. My figures exist within boundaries but they are longing to cross them. They push through the physical boundaries of their flesh as well as psychological thresholds of their programming and their potential for pain, pleasure, love, suffering and attachment. They have forgotten themselves, their ego, perhaps, and are left exposed. They are experiencing a private moment in public. This is the thrill of good drama.

1412 14th Street, NW, Washington, DC 20005

T: 202-332-8767 F: 866-289-6809 info@irvinecontemporary.com www.irvinecontemporary.com

There is a physicality to each of my figures that originates in the spine. They are built in layers and everything radiates from this axis both literally and metaphorically. The spine informs the intention of the character and is where her potential lives. There is no way to separate my sculptural work from my experience as a dancer. My training both as a dancer and an actor taught me that the essence of a character begins with the condition of the spine. At 17, I danced at The Martha Graham School in NY. From her I learned that the body never lies. No matter what you may think you are hiding, your body will always betray you. In other words, one cannot hide their subtext; it will always reveal itself through posture, movement and gesture. This idea has had a profound influence on my work and me. The notion that the essence of a person can be found on the outside is both intriguing and troubling. As a dancer, I clearly understand this. However, as a dabbler of Eastern thought, I believe that we are not our bodies. Our body is only a vessel and has nothing to do with the essence of our being. I think both concepts can be true and am fueled by that duality. Although I have spent much of my life as a performer, lately I find the idea of being on display both terrifying and vulgar. For now my sculptures satisfy my needs to be an exhibitionist and a voyeur.

SP: Where do the sculptures come from? Do you “see” them or are they a result of sketches and working and reworking?

MI: Yes, I see them. They come to me as pictures in my mind, and often arise fully formed, like a snapshot or still life. I am inspired by stories people tell me about their lives or their dreams, and my figures often represent people I know or observe. The themes come from popular culture, family dynamics, childhood memories, and feelings of confusion associated with growing up while trying to make sense of the world and the conflicting messages found within it. In other words, the human condition in general.



Melissa Ichuji, *School Girl*, 2006

I see them in my mind's eye, and then I sketch them. The composition or the “choreography” is established from the start and rarely changes. It is one idea or sentiment I am after, and I usually try to convey it as economically as possible. The things that do change are fluid and relate to issues of composition, color relationships, materials, and texture.

An idea or feeling will come to me and I usually know right away if it is good and worth pursuing. If an idea is not strong from the beginning no amount of fiddling with materials will make it good. I don't bother with the ones I feel unsure about. I rarely

start something cold and hope it will come together later. I need to see it clearly and be absolutely compelled to make it come to life.

SP: The fact that these pieces are sculptures contributes to an added air of the surreal. I can see these forms as paintings, as collage even. But in putting them together in the third dimension, for one to view from every angle is impressive. The work is seamless in a way, it is strong throughout. Choice of material, form, concept. What sorts of materials do you use?

MI: My childhood home was full of books and it was like my secret garden. We had hundreds of them stacked around the living room and my sister and I spent hours looking at the pictures. My parents had very eclectic taste, and I was especially drawn to anything graphically bizarre. It wasn't until much later that I was able to associate those images with Salvador Dali, Hieronymus Bosch, the Joy of Sex, Arthur Rackham, Japanese and eastern erotica, Heinrich Kley and political cartoonist Fonz Van Woerkom. They all had an element of the grotesque and fantastical. While my work has been described as surreal, I did not set out to make surreal art. My style has arisen out of my desire to emphasize what I think is relevant and soften or eliminate the extraneous, then frame the picture as cleanly as possible.

I like to juxtapose synthetic and natural materials, and I get a real thrill out of fashioning organic substances, such as internal organs, flesh, blood and veins, from humble stuff like pantyhose, thread, dried fruit, and old socks. Occasionally, I incorporate bones, plant matter, human hair, or animal fur to add tension between the "fake" real and the "real" real. Perhaps this goes back to questioning the importance of internal vs. external. Is any of it real or true? Can any of it be counted on at all?

As a child I was obsessed with trying to make food and pets and even companions out of old scraps of discarded clothes. I made raspberries and trees and vegetables and life-sized people sewn from cheap polyester fabric stuffed with plastic bags or tissue. I thought I could will something to come to life if I could make it in three-dimensional form. So far it hasn't worked.

SP: How long is the process of making a piece?

MI: The content of my work has been floating around in my head most of my life. The themes I deal with have been brewing for a long time just waiting for the appropriate outlet. My art contains all that I have ever done. But more specifically, once I have settled on an idea an average-sized piece generally takes about three to five weeks to complete. I don't like to rush because some of the best decisions come when I have time to step back and consider several options. I rely heavily on first impulses. From there I strip the idea down. The more refined the elements become the more carefully I weigh each decision.

A big frustration is that I have so many ideas and only so much time. My studio is bursting with sketches and fabrics and materials that I can't wait to explore and make into sculptures. I am also toying with incorporating my figures into stop animation films. They are all like little sad puppies wanting my attention, and I desire nothing more than to give each one my time and devotion. Beginning a work is like entering into a relationship. A love affair, really. It unfolds so sensually and I never know how it will resolve itself. I am always surprised and deeply satisfied in the end. So much so that letting go of work is difficult. More so than I ever would have imagined.

SP: What elements must be considered when working in sculpture?

MI: Restraint is everything. Knowing how much information is enough and how much is too much is tricky, but critical. Every choice must serve the idea. If not, it is simply decoration and, unless the concept has something to do with decoration, I get rid of it. Awareness of material choice is important. Every element that I incorporate into a piece is loaded with its own history and references and baggage and will lead the viewer down a road. It is wise to make sure it is the right road for the piece, and preferably one that leads to more interesting questions. It is important to me to consider the effect I want the physical presence of the work to have on the viewer and how I want a viewer to relate to and interact with the piece. This decision will determine things like scale, accessibility, form, materials, concept, and level of craft.

SP: Describe your work.

MI: Lately I have been making dolls that act out fantasies relating to power, sexuality, repressed violence, and guilt. My figures have an otherworldly quality and are infused with joy, curiosity, action and freedom. I use rich colorful fabrics and tactile materials to employ a whimsical aesthetic associated with childhood that plays against the seriousness of the themes.