

AKI NAGASAKA

YELLOW LABYRINTH



WOMEN & THEIR WORK

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AUSTIN, TEXAS

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Yellow Labyrinth

Entering Aki Nagasaka's installation, *Yellow Labyrinth*, is like tumbling into a dim day-dream in which we're left with only the mystery of our own perceptions. To spend any length of time walking through the archways and between the panels of stretched fabric is to feel as if your body is being tugged toward its invisible endpoint – and pushed there by the glowing yellow light that won't sit still in your peripheral vision. Following the gallery's curved wall as directional force, we attempt to cling blindly to the fabric for support. Seeing only the light-filled floating vibrancy, our vision turns inward. We move quietly and patiently, increasingly mindful of our own breathing. Poised on the frontier of immensity, at the edge of a vastness that lies beyond our limited power to comprehend, we may feel vulnerable and lonely and just a little afraid. Yet Nagasaka asks us to trust, to let go and give ourselves to the radiant energy. The decision to enter unfamiliar territory, of course, means accepting the possibility of losing our way. What happens when we step outside our usual environment only to find that we cannot go back, or that once we return nothing seems the same?

Going beyond the eyes, we are connected to the inner realm of our own consciousness. After several minutes we continue to see nothing, save for the yellow field, which seemingly expands, contracts and disappears. But more does happen – undulating hues of fluorescent yellow float before our eyes unanchored by visual formations of scale, distance and direction. What occurs is a complete coalescence of the light coming from outside and the perception of light, which we generate from within ourselves. This gives Nagasaka's art a psychological veneer: she explores the world around her by experimenting with real sensory experience. As the boundary between the inner and outer worlds vanishes and the nature of reality becomes precariously uncertain, we confront

a dilemma comparable to that of the Chinese philosopher Chuang Tzu who, upon awakening from a dream, did not know whether he was a man dreaming that he was a butterfly or a butterfly dreaming that he was a man. We have entered a mysterious space-time existing in a state of suspension between two distinct physical settings. Because this spatio-temporal dimension is illusive, it invites a relinquishing of both past and future, and surrender to what immediately exists. Nagasaka's medium is perception itself. By creating an ethereal environment in which light is perceived almost as a palpable presence, she has contrived an exquisite poetry out of near emptiness.

Maybe the hyperconsumerism of much recent artistic practice has left the art world hopelessly jaded, maybe the increasingly technological, digital era has sent us in search of diversions of any sort, or maybe the cyclical revival of interest in '70s style radical art has opened long-closed doors. Whatever the reason, Nagasaka's *Yellow Labyrinth* stirs up an anti-commodity bias that harkens to a bygone era when artists regarded themselves more as priests than professionals. Like her conceptual predecessors who dematerialized objects

and sometimes scattered them to the wind, Nagasaka challenges the static, formal object. Her work invades our space, provokes bodily reactions, and invites a whole range of associations. It catches our eyes, hits us in the gut, and leaves us scratching our heads – we simply feel, see and think differently in the maze. Of vital concern is not only the difference between stasis and change, but a much deeper and older set of oppositions between the private and the public, between the self and the world at large, between hidden obsessions and our daily passage with one another. And those oppositions seem to make less sense every day. We rely on an inner compass to keep us on track, even though the destination becomes increasingly difficult to articulate. Accordingly, Nagasaka aims to observe human foible and speculate on the role that memory plays in underwriting our sense of choice and direction in our lives. Approaching *Yellow Labyrinth*, we sense the recurrent longing for a return to something more deeply rooted, to something seemingly earlier and hence primal.

Nagasaka wants to make viewers aware of their own role in the process of experiencing art. Like the drop-dead beautiful installations of

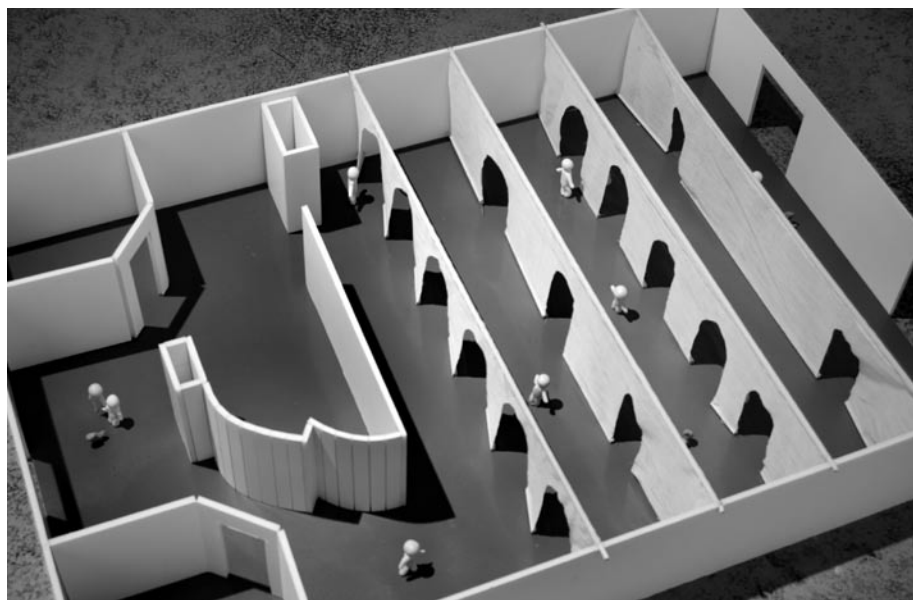


Installation view of *Yellow Labyrinth*, 2007. Yellow fabric and wood. 1700 sq. ft.

Scandinavian artist Olafur Eliasson, her work concerns itself with sensory perception and spectral phenomena. Similarly, Nagasaka's installation is distinguished through its integral relationship to a specific architectural space. Yet Nagasaka utilizes relatively unpretentious materials – yellow fabric, floodlights, wood trim, skinny rods – to create spatial volumes and taut configurations that define, contain and reinvent the space they inhabit. Reminiscent of Fred Sandback's gentle transformative art in which conditioned expectations are constantly upended, Nagasaka's "insubstantial" materials yield vibrant presences that shift between the ephemeral and the permanent. With a soft "line" of fabric and thin air, she brings a perceptual field into being that begins inside our bodies and extends throughout the space that surrounds us.

In her quest to offer us a sense of place, Nagasaka expresses the mythic human need for orientation in a boundless universe. "We are moving objects in time and space," she says. "We are never static and things are changing all the time. But we tend to get used to it, and almost forget about the fact. I wanted to create a space that reminds us we are moving through space and time. I think walking is the perfect action to show the motion. The piece is also about life's journey as moving through and encountering things – but you never know what comes next or what's at the end. I navigate my life with some known and unknowns. Decisions are made by the integration of intellectual/psychological and physical aspects. Through this project, I want to see a glimpse of how it may feel to cross over the time-space dimensionality and to walk into the plane."

Nagasaka has created a work that is as emotionally charged as it is formally rigorous. The four panels of yellow fabric (each 44' x 11') featuring six, three, five and two archways, respectively, touch the gallery walls, ceiling and floor. Seemingly weightless, they make us acutely aware of our own bodily presence – the pull of gravity down our spines, the grace



Model for *Yellow Labyrinth* installation, 2007.

or gawkiness of our movements, the passage of time. The reams of fabric are, strictly speaking, two-dimensional. But they are anything but flat. Significantly, the soft material has the insistence of metal as it slices through space. By probing the interstices between flatness and illusion in such subtle ways, Nagasaka establishes a planar art whose core contains spaces as physical as the pieces of fabric establishing their boundaries. To walk through the various openings is to have our attention shift to the space between our bodies and the work's variously opaque surfaces, which range from luminous shimmer to mysteriously warm reflectivity. The luster evokes those motes of dust that dance in beams of sunlight, which gave us the sense as children that we were actually able to see the air. At times, the panels look like abstract paintings that have spilled out of their frames to energize the many points at which vision and the real world cross paths, dovetailing in perceptions that inflect one another's fleeting movements. In any case, their formal peculiarities give them an otherworldly presence, creating a hypnotic, quasi-mystical, meditative mood. Shadows languorously play across the wall-length opaque panels, and travel in a kind of slow-motion promenade. Not only are we part

of the installation that is this room, but our reflections are too. *Yellow Labyrinth* seeks to resuscitate what the artist deems to be a declining sense of the present, a waning capacity for imagination and wonder. More specifically, the installation disrupts viewers' complacent reading of the work, literally changing their physical and intellectual space of viewing and opening them up to the multiplicity of ideas expressed.

In *Yellow Labyrinth*, the relationships of the parts to each other, and of the whole to the architecture, were calculated to conform to a person's size. Moreover, Nagasaka hoped that each viewer who encountered the work would come away with a different experience, based on the background he or she brings to it. Once we make the choice to enter Nagasaka's labyrinth, the path corresponds to our journey through life, sending us to the core of the maze and then back out to the gallery. It sparks the imagination and introduces it to a design that builds a sense of relationship: to one's soul, one person to another, to many people, to creation of the whole. It enlivens the intuitive part of our nature and stirs the longing for connection. The walk, and all that happens on it can be grasped through the pattern-discerning faculty

of the person walking it. The facility of this special maze is that it reflects back to the seeker whatever is needed to discover a new level of awareness. When the ego is not so tightly in control, it joins other parts of our being to allow us to see beyond ourselves into the dynamic that is unfolding before us. The simple act of walking the labyrinth invites us back into the center of our being and begins to quiet the mind. Movement takes away the excess charge of psychic energy. The walk calms us and guides us. In the end, the turns in the labyrinth path mirror the turns in our lives.

Nagasaka abolishes the notion of sequential time and develops a new form of temporal expression in sync with the variegated, sensual experience of the present. However, while the labyrinth connects phenomena and maps knowledge, it does not strategize a point of view or control a vantage point. What emerges is the ambiguous tension of the artist's vision. By investigating the conditions of perception, Nagasaka sustains paradoxical concerns – of solidity and texture, of soft fabric panels that simultaneously function as lines slicing through space. On the one hand, the labyrinth integrates and reflects generally positive concepts of flexibility and change; on the other, anxiety-provoking notions of impermanence and instability. For Nagasaka, yellow represents a psychological neutral ground that suffuses the environment with both energy and calm. Yet of all the primary colors, yellow is the most inconsistent in symbolism, swinging from positive to negative according to context and range of hue. Connections between yellow skin and fear of disease account for yellow corresponding to the color of cowardice and quarantine. Yellow is the color of dying leaves and overripe fruit. In China, however, yellow was the optimistic bridal color of youth, virginity, happiness and fertility. Moreover, the color has the highest symbolic value in Buddhist countries through its link with the saffron robes of monks, which represent humility and separation from a materialist society.

For all intents and purposes, Nagasaka's work is a temporary installation and has no fixed arrangement. In this way, the work remains public and not a private commodity. It can be configured one way for a specific space, then wholly repositioned according to the lighting, context and physical aura of another location. Buddhism, of course, teaches that all things are in flux, but the cycle of nature is constant in its process of change; the creative spirit is the origin of all things. Within Buddhist meditation there is a persistent focus on cultivating one's capacity to be present with things as they are, to cultivate an ability to see each thing, each being, each moment as though for the first time and to recognize those various states of consciousness. As life speeds up and further complicates our experience, we should value any opportunity to be still, to let the mind rest, to allow seeing to take place. Although her Japanese heritage informs her work, Nagasaka treats the installation metaphorically, focusing on a temporal/spatial plane of continuity. *Yellow Labyrinth* echoes the infinite possibilities of perception and yet questions the construction of reality as it is filtered through individual thought. Ultimately, the project uncovers the multiple interpretive possibilities of both personal and conditioned response. In this way, Nagasaka effectively collapses meanings that are culturally grounded with those that are based more on the less explicit exchange between viewer and site.

Throughout, Nagasaka makes clear that hers is an agenda not of narrowing experience by privileging one aspect or approach, but rather of advocating a broad multivalent engagement. In *Yellow Labyrinth*, the luminous planes emit a sensation of suspension, of indeterminate hovering. The effect is both theatrical and intimate, anxious and expectant – as if the humming vibrancy could be the prelude to some majestic vision. It strikes a deep and mythic chord within us, evoking a primal sensation of archetypal proportions. We become active participants in a rite of passage, progressing from the daylight toward the

mysterious luminosity where we encounter our inner selves. We feel the presence of light inhabiting a space much as we experience the light in a lucid dream. We sense the color generated inside us, that contact to the light within. In the process, our eyes open up to themselves. Nagasaka only asks us to relinquish our time – time to adapt, to submit, to stretch the eye's "muscle" and allow for an enriching experience. This requires a connection, an openness and a receptive spirit. And in time given there is a sense of grace.

Susie Kalil

Houston-based writer and art critic

AKI NAGASAKA

Born in Osaka, Japan.

Lives and works in Berlin, Germany.

EDUCATION

2006	CCA Kitakyushu Research Program, Fukuoka, Japan
2005	BFA, University of Texas at Austin, Austin, Texas

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

2007	Women & Their Work, <i>Yellow Labyrinth</i> , Austin, Texas
2005	New Gallery, <i>Artificial Paradise</i> , Austin, Texas
2004	Closet Space, <i>Miniature City</i> , Austin, Texas

GROUP EXHIBITIONS

2006	CCA Kitakyushu, <i>Open Studio</i> , Kitakyushu, Japan
2006	Art Space Tetra, <i>Unseen Scenes</i> , Fukuoka, Japan
2005	Maeda Studio, <i>once more with feeling</i> , Kitakyushu, Japan
2005	Maeda Studio, <i>Ugly Show for Blind People</i> , Kitakyushu, Japan
2005	Flood Gallery, <i>Scaped Landscape</i> , Austin, Texas
2005	Creative Research Laboratory, <i>Senior Studio Show</i> , Austin, Texas
2005	Laguna Gloria – Austin Museum of Art, <i>Sprouts</i> , Austin, Texas
2005	Arthouse at the Jones Center, <i>Lounge</i> , Austin, Texas
2004	Littlefield and Scarborough Buildings, <i>Mayday Installation</i> , Austin, Texas

PUBLICATIONS

2006	CCA Kitakyushu Research Program Artist Book
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This Panel: Installation view of *Yellow Labyrinth*, 2007. Yellow fabric and wood. 1700 sq. ft.
Cover Panel: Installation view of *Yellow Labyrinth*, 2007. Yellow fabric and wood. 1700 sq. ft.



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Known for its pioneering spirit, embrace of artistic innovation, and commitment to Texas audiences and artists, Women & Their Work is now celebrating its 29th anniversary. Presenting over 50 events a year in visual art, dance, theater, music, literature, and film, the gallery features on-going exhibitions of Texas women artists and brings artists of national stature to Texas audiences. Since its founding, Women & Their Work has presented 1,784 artists in 245 visual art exhibitions, 107 music, dance, and theater events, 13 film festivals, 20 literary readings, and 325 workshops in programming that reflects the broad diversity of this region. Nationally recognized, Women & Their Work has been featured in *Art in America*, *ArtForum* and on National Public Radio and was the first organization in Texas to receive a grant

in visual art from the National Endowment for the Arts. Women & Their Work reaches over 2,500 school children and teachers each year through gallery tours, gallery talks with exhibiting artists, participatory workshops, in-school performances, dance master classes, and teacher workshops.



WOMEN & THEIR WORK

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