

Meet the Rising Japanese Artist Who Uses Her Amputated Legs to Question What Is a 'Correct Body'

BY MASANOBU MATSUMOTO April 27, 2022 8:07am

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Mari Katayama, you're mine #001, 2014.
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The 34-year-old Japanese artist Mari Katayama, whose legs were amputated at age 9 due to a congenital limb disease, is known for creating a variety of works, from hand-sewn objects that mimic her own body to meticulously staged self-portraits that use prosthetic legs that she actually uses herself.

When shooting self-portraits, she uses a remote control and self-timer. Her motto: she always releases the shutter herself. Katayama has now become an internationally acclaimed artist who questions the ambiguity of the division between artificial and natural and what we think of as the "correct body."

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ARTnews JAPAN: I heard that winning the Encouragement Award at the Gunma Biennale for Young Artists in 2005 was a turning point for you as an artist. At that time, you submitted a plan to paint a picture of grasses on prosthetic legs that no longer fit your body and are lying in a closet. The statement says, "Everything that arrives at the ground has roots, and sprouts grow up as a sign of new birth and development."

Mari Katayama: This statement is based on a saying by former U.S. President Theodore Roosevelt, who said, "Keep your eyes on the stars and your feet on the ground." It is a phrase that has always been a theme I live by. I was a high school student at the time. I was studying information processing programming and other subjects at a high school and I thought, "I just have to get my hands on a job! I

need to be able to earn my own living so I can pay my utilities and taxes!" So rather than [thinking] as an artist, the word was in my mind as a life goal. In fact, it is a phrase that I have written on my current prosthetic leg.

PHOTO: MARI KATAYAMA. TITLED: ON MY GALLERY WEBSITE IN 2016.



Mari Katayama, *bystander #014*, 2016.
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ANJ: You were awarded the Ihei Kimura Photography Prize after participating in the Venice Biennale in 2019. You are best known for your self-portrait works, but in the beginning, you made objects, photographed them, and presented them on your website.

MK: Growing up, my family was not very wealthy, and we were a "If you want something, make it yourself" kind of family. Everyone in my family was making something, so production was very close to my heart. However, while everyone else was making something useful, I was clumsy and just couldn't do it. This led to the creation of one useless object after another, which was also a painful experience.

If I had to pay for school lunch tomorrow, I could not even go to my day job because of my physical disability. I think I was also isolated because there was no one around who understood me. So, as if I was seeking friends, I started posting objects on the internet to express that I was making this kind of thing. What I needed was the medium of photography.

ANJ: Later, you developed self-portrait works in which you yourself wear the objects you created in that way. Some of them are interesting in a painterly sense, such as the effective use of mirrors and the use of a series of posters on the wall as if they were paintings in the painting. What are some of your influences?

MK: I draw before I create a work of art, and when I take a photograph, I also place importance on how much the scenery in my viewfinder can be made into a picture. So when you say it is painterly, I certainly agree.

My favorite painter is Modigliani. I also really like the paintings of Marcel Duchamp. Recently, many viewers have noticed that my work is "Duchamp-like." Also, when I was a child, my grandfather used to take me to permanent exhibitions at art museums, and I think I was influenced by the modern paintings I saw there.

I am conscious of treating photographs as "things" rather than images or data, and this may be due, for example, to my admiration for the weight and presence of oil paintings. Also, the decorative framing seen in my work is influenced by the paintings I saw at the time.

ANJ: Are you conscious of the art historical context of your work?

MK: Of course, I am interested in the historical facts of art, and studied art history at university before going on to graduate school at Tokyo University of the Arts. However, I am not aware of my position in this process or what kind of work I should be doing. Some artists have a kind of "artist's mission," but I don't.

When I was a teenager, I felt firsthand that my work was useless, and I want to deny all the idea that art, or people, are born with some kind of mission. Thus, "what happens to things and people that don't serve a purpose?" "Is it right to be useful in a world of rapidly changing values?" I am thinking about it. Rather, I want to live in the present as much as possible.

If a person's life span is about a hundred years, I would like to know how much times have changed in a hundred years, and on the other hand, I would like to do what I can do in my hundred years.



Mari Katayama, *Shell*, 2016.
© MARI KATAYAMA

ANJ: Your official [website](#) is titled “Shell.” The frames of your works are also decorated with shells. What does this word and motif mean to you?

MK: There are several reasons. One is the beauty of the shell shape. It is said that the spiral of the shell is the same or similar to the golden ratio used to describe why paintings of palaces and the *Mona Lisa*, for example, are so beautiful. I think there is a beauty there that transcends the natural and the artificial. In the world, there are ideas such as “beauty as it is” and “nature is beautiful,” right? But that is inextricably linked to the value that “it is not beautiful if you tamper with it.” I am living in a body that has undergone leg amputation surgery, had a scalpel inserted, and had lots of stitches and attachments. A still photograph of it might make you feel a little creeped out, but sometimes it looks beautiful when it is alive and in motion. I feel that the beauty of the alive is similar to the beauty of the golden ratio of seashells.



Mari Katayama, *leave-taking #10*, 2021.
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ANJ: In the statement for your solo exhibition “leave-taking,” which ran from the end of 2021 through this year, you talk about the “correct body.” How would you describe this correct body?

MK: First of all, in my life, I have actual experience that society is made for the “correct body.” For example, when you try to use the elevator at a station to get to the ground level, you have to walk a great deal. The “correct body” is thus the body that society presupposes. And there was a time when I would force myself to go out with a cane to try to overcome that notion if it was the “right” one.

On the other hand, I wondered if it was a problem that I could solve by conforming myself to “that side.” Around that time, in 2011, I started the “High Heel Project,” in which I wore high heels with prosthetic legs and sang. This project led to the idea of communicating to society without ending with “that side and this side are different.” Through these activities and works, or through pregnancy and childbirth, the burden of “my body not being able to be the right body” has been lifted a little in some ways. My body is this way, so how can I live with it? I have come to think in this way, and I have become freer.

ANJ: The objects you have been creating are also in the shape of your own body. The “leave-taking” series presented at your solo exhibition has a meaningful title.

MK: Some of my objects were formed by patchworking several small pieces of cloth on my body. Last year, I was told that almost all of these objects would be donated to a museum, and I photographed the “leave-taking” series as I wondered once again what the objects meant to me. Since the objects were leaving my possession, I thought I would finally capture them in their best condition on film, as if I were vacuum-packing the moment. I also chose a camera that was developed for taking group photos. It opens with a release, but it doesn’t close on its own. So if I wanted to take a long exposure, I had to go close to the camera and release the shutter by myself. That’s why my moving body shows through in the picture.

As a result, seeing my own transparent body made me think that maybe I don’t need to seek for an “ideal body” or a “right body” anymore. I feel as if the work taught me that.

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