

Studio visit: Keiko Sato

An imagined landscape of contemplations

Keiko Sato (Iwaki City, 1957) has an underground studio. In front of her house in Nijmegen, where she's lived since 2001, there's a brick staircase leading to the basement she uses to design her unstable installations. The room is too small to contain her architectural and scenic structures at their eventual full scale, but her studio allows her to try out what's in her mind's eye. She's currently looking for a bigger workspace where she can build her work at its actual size.

Standing on her table are dozens of small sculptures made from wax, clay and insulation wire, whose resemblance to artificial plants and flowers gives them a deceptively natural appearance. On the wall there are drawings that present similar ideas. On the floor, she has laid out these objects like a park that's incorporated into an urban area of slender wooden beams. The combination of natural materials, organic shapes and mathematical constructions gives rise to an idyllic cityscape that, bathed in the light of the small lamps she has set up around it, turns into a frightening interplay of light and shadow. The oppositions between natural circumstances and artificial injections, between organic extuberances and geometric constructions, characterise almost all of her topographic installations. There's an ominous expectation lurking beneath an innocent environment, while at the same time there's an original sweetness to be found in a dilapidated urban ruin. This coexistence of internal contradictions, of objects and their emotional representations, is the key to her work.

The town of Namie, situated in the prefecture of Fukushima in Japan, is a suburb of Iwaki City, where Keiko Sato was born. It lies on the coast about ten kilometres from the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant. Sato was raised there by her mother who had divorced at a young age, though it was mostly her grandmother who took care of her. Aside from an incidental encounter, she had no personal contact with her father. She was thirteen when her grandmother told her he had been a kamikaze pilot who survived his mission when a lack of fuel forced him to land on an island in the ocean before he could reach his target. Traumatized by the war at a young age, he turned to gambling, and his marriage became untenable, her grandmother and mother said. She remarried when Keiko was twelve, and her stepfather already had a son and daughter. Thirty years later, this family history would come to play a role in her work as a visual artist.

Keiko Sato was trained as a midwife and worked in the academic hospital of Fukushima. Her interest in visual art lay dormant for a long time, until she started participating in the activities of a group of people who gathered in a small house for artistic development. In 1989, she enrolled in an application exam organized by the London Goldsmiths College of Art in collaboration with a Japanese company in Tokyo. This was the era of Margaret Thatcher, whose deep budget cuts also affected art education, forcing Goldsmiths to look abroad for paying students. Keiko Sato was among the first cohort that made up a separate class of Japanese students. She was the oldest participant, aged 32 at the time. "I paid for my studies with the severance payment from the hospital and the money my mother had saved for my wedding, and I worked part-time for a Japanese business in London. It was a whole

new world. I didn't speak the language and wasn't familiar with European perspectives on art. I learnt a lot about it from a publication called 'Boys Art' by Nobuo Nakamura, who had gone to Europe to study at the Royal College of Art. In the book, he describes getting a handle on European perspectives on art. That helped me identify my position in London with my Japanese background. After the preliminary year, I was able to follow the bachelor programme, thanks to artist and lecturer John Thompson. I worked my fingers to the bone. I was so happy to be able to study art, even though becoming an artist had never been my dream."

In 1993, Keiko Sato was accepted at the department for autonomous art at the Jan van Eyck Academie in the Netherlands, where she has lived since then. She made her first large-scale installation in 1995, which she exhibited at W139 and again in 2018 during her exhibition at Club Solo in Breda. It consists of a spaciouly arranged architectural network of glass tubes filled with various kinds of tea and covered in wax and clay at the bottom. "As I was setting them up at the Jan van Eyck Academie in 1995, someone wearing really thick glasses walked into the installation, knocking over one of the tubes and scattering shards of glass and puddles of tea all over the room. After I'd recovered from the initial shock, I realised that this was the final piece that completed the installation, and I left it like that. It gave the work its own necessity."

This unforeseen transformation gave Keiko Sato the idea to unite the discrepancy between the material quality of her work and the objects she used. A natural bond arose out of this combination, like the tea seeping through the porous wax and clay bases in the installation, forming watercolours on the floor, and the shattered glass forming a trail on the ground.

These experiences gave rise to her well-known and rather notorious installation built out of cigarette butts and the ash she would leave on the ground while working in her studio. She wondered why she smoked, and observed people smoking to determine how smoking cigarettes corresponded with a range of emotions. The installation she made from the byproducts of her smoking habit evoked a battlefield of personal feelings and a landscape of spoilt pleasure. The combination of escaping from reality in a puff of smoke and the self-destructive drive is reflected in the installation of the remains of her own use of tobacco, a natural products that resulted in an artificial action. "I wondered how we'd been able to turn something natural into something so ugly, and I combined the butts with unsmokeable twigs from nature into an imaginary landscape of contemplations. I make my installations the same way a painting comes about. I don't overthink it. The same applies to 'Things they left behind', which shows broken crockery and leftovers. The first time I made that piece, I kept adding elements to test the limit, to figure out what would push it over the edge. I take one step over the limit and then two steps back so the work stays within my personal scope. I noticed that need when I began collecting other people's cigarette butts and ash for the installation in order to realise the work. While doing a version in Vienna I noticed I no longer felt my own presence in the work. It was too close to someone else. Some of the butts had lipstick on the filters. I had to correct myself. It's a work that brings out very different responses across different countries. The main reaction in Germany is one of disgust, while in England they're more appreciative of the humorous and aesthetic side of it."

A few years ago, Keiko Sato was making one installation after another in various countries. For all the sensory strength the work exhibited, its temporary nature meant that it received little recognition from museums - and that there was no real way to acquire it. It's no surprise then that she's not the kind of commercially successful artist whose work is traded for high sums. Only derivatives of her work, in the form of photography and drawings, make it to the collections of the Province of Gelderland and private collectors, via her gallery Andriessse Eyck. She mostly earns a living from the fees paid for the creation of her installations, and she's supported by grants from organisations like the Mondriaan Fund.

After an expeditious start to her career in art, a number of factors steered her work in a new direction. She was working in New York when Al Qaida destroyed the Twin Towers in the 11 September attacks. She realised that her personal situation, the place where she's from, her current circumstances, historic events, and their effects on the individuals involved are always deeply interlinked in a way that can rip you apart on one hand and leave you to fend for yourself on the other. This is what happened in the same period when she fell ill and was hospitalised with hypertension, from which she only recovered slowly. After that, her work has always remained a form of personal accountability between what she is and where she comes from, making her oeuvre a quest for a destination. During a Berlin residency, she had to address her relationship with her stepsister, a member of the Japanese Communist Party, which in turn forced her to consider how the European relations between capitalism and communism apply to Japan. Her stay in Berlin led to an invitation to participate in the 2009 exhibition "Every Life/Another Space" organised in the city

hall of Yokohama, where she created a landscape installation made of tree trunks, fabric threads, soil, and plants, along with computer chips and batteries, presented as if they were archaeological finds. This gave the work a sharp focus on the interrelation between natural and artificial energy. Keiko Sato: "The curator described it as a liminal space between life and death."

By then, she had already addressed the historical humanitarian tragedies in Japanese history in her documentary work "How to tell the story of my father". In the book, published in 2009, she investigated how his participation in the Second World War had shaped his life.

Keiko Sato: "In order to be able to make my work, I first have to process my experiences. After the 2011 tsunami and the ensuing Fukushima nuclear disaster, the interaction between devastation and fertility has taken on a different meaning in my work, not just in terms of a correspondence between natural growth and artificial destruction, but also as the historical paradox between freedom and coercion. I travelled to Fukushima in 2013 and made the work 'Forbidden', as the place where I'd grown up was no longer accessible." Measuring four by four metres, "Forbidden" shows a nondescript chaos-stricken area hemmed by dead and cut-down tree trunks in an artist's impression of the restricted terrain.

In 2021, Keiko Sato participated in the exhibition "Suffering Matters", set in St. Stephen's Church in Nijmegen, with the installations "Shadow of Memory" and "Light is Still On". The first work drew a connection between the 1944 bombing of the city of Nijmegen and the nuclear strike on Hiroshima. Portrait pictures of the victims molten into shattered glass make the

pain of both crimes against humanity frighteningly tangible. The second work looks back on the nuclear disaster in Fukushima, showing the ravaged area she was not allowed to return to. But the installation is mostly about what it doesn't show, something that has been permanently withheld from her, and which she can only picture in her memories. The installations have their own size and scale, and in that sense they are "true to life". Her works almost invariably picture a scene from above, seen from a great height, as if through an airplane window. Nonetheless, there's nothing keeping you from getting up close and observing every detail.

In the spring of 2022 Keiko Sato is working to complete a piece of public art for the neighbourhood of Schuytgraaf in Arnhem. The supporting art organisation Stichting Plaatsmaken had commissioned the design of a temporary work that was to last ten years. The grand sculpture she's aiming to realise is a large, torn half-sphere with a diameter of around five metres, concealed by the inclined terrain surrounding it. You can walk through it and look up from it through a crack in the top. This is Keiko Sato's way of referring to the nearby excavations that have unearthed remains from the Roman era as well as to the bunkers from the Second World War that have been found. Once more, as often, she unites extremes that initially appear to stand in contradiction, only to reveal an unexpected cohesion at the second glance.

Keiko Sato: "My work draws some surprising responses. For example, I'm in contact with a woman from Singapore who's affiliated with the education programme 'Project Zero' at Harvard University in Boston. She's working with visual art and science, and she saw my work from Yokohama on the

internet, the piece that incorporated dead tree trunks. Now, near Harvard there's a forest - Harvard Forest - where trees are dying because of an insect called the 'hemlock woolly adelgid', which comes from Japan and which they can't defend themselves against. After a whole string of rescue plans, the decision was made to leave nature to its own devices. 'Leave it be', as they put it. When a tree dies, that will have to be its fate for now. The dying forest is open to visitors.¹ We have a tendency to shy away from death. We'd rather not look it in the eye. We go to the hospital to die. I'd like to ask the question of whether we can make death visible in an acceptable way."

Alex de Vries

¹Hemlock Hospice, <https://harvardforest.fas.harvard.edu/hemlock-hospice>, red