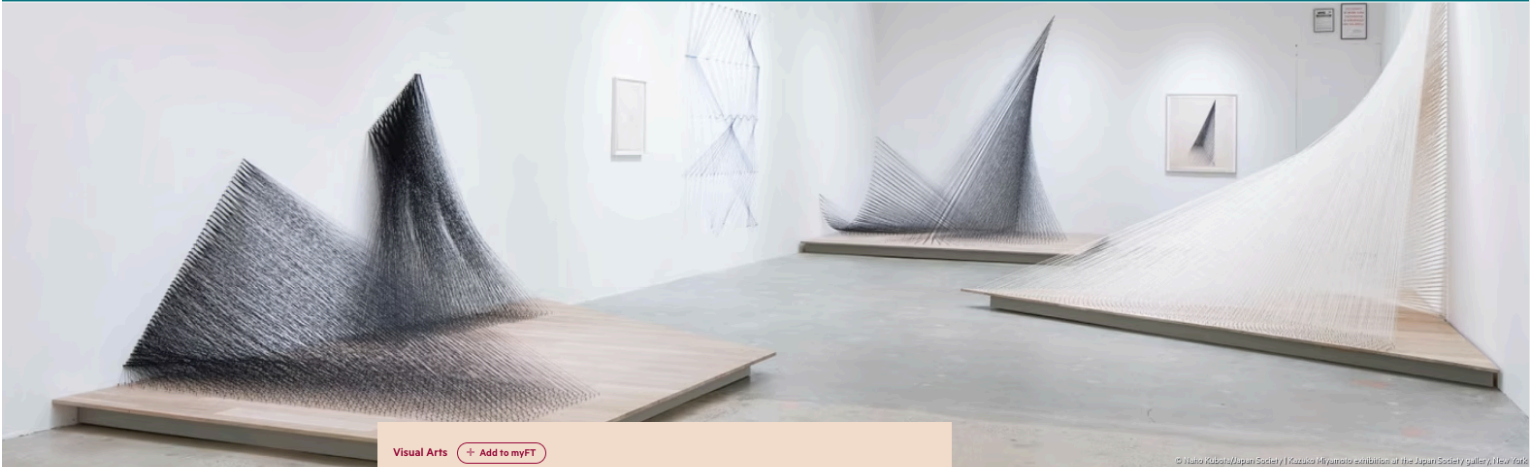


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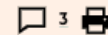
Kazuko Miyamoto's highly strung New York show leaves us wanting more

© Hana Kobori/Japan Society / Kazuko Miyamoto exhibition at the Japan Society gallery / 11.14.16

Feedback

The Japanese-American artist tantalises with works that subvert minimalism

Ariella Budick 14 HOURS AGO



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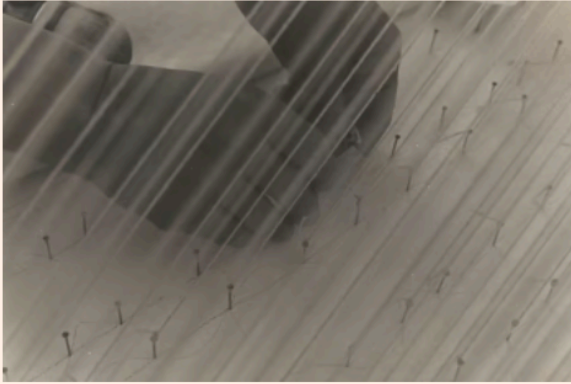
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Kazuko Miyamoto's sculptures cling to surfaces like mutant spider webs, fusing nature and geometry. Lengths of black string run from nails on the floor to nails on the wall, forming tight screens that swoop, cascade or twist in sleek parabolas. Their aura changes, depending on how you look at them. From a certain angle, one appears solid and sinister, as if reaching through the curving plane might cost you a hand. Take a few steps and behold: the same piece suddenly becomes ethereal, even angelic, a thing made of air and fine lines.

Fanning out across the Japan Society gallery in Manhattan, the sculptures give off a minimalist chill, but they are also hot from the effort of measuring, hammering, looping, stretching, tying off and doing it all again, thousands upon thousands of times. It's a labour of love and tedium that in some cases had to be reconstituted for the current retrospective.

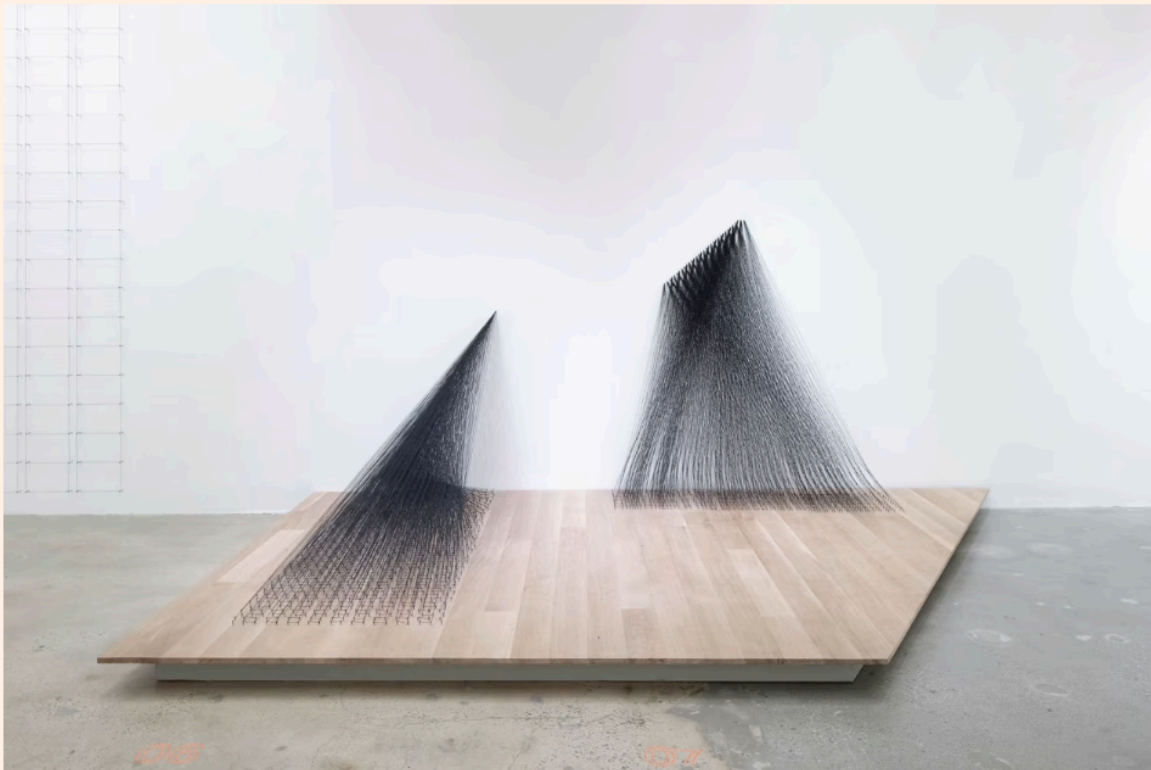
Miyamoto, who has spent nearly 60 of her 80 years toiling on the margins of the New York art scene, many of them in service to Sol LeWitt, deserves this bout of belated glory. LeWitt called her and two other Japanese assistants "an extension of me", but the exhibition makes clear that she has always been her own artist, indebted perhaps, but also idiosyncratic. In the end, the retrospective proves tantalising yet vaguely unsatisfying, since it leaves us craving a more comprehensive survey of her long and varied career.



Installing 'Sail' at Nobe Gallery in New York 1979 © Courtesy the artist/Exile



Miyamoto in her studio on Hester Street, New York, date unknown © Courtesy the artist/Exile

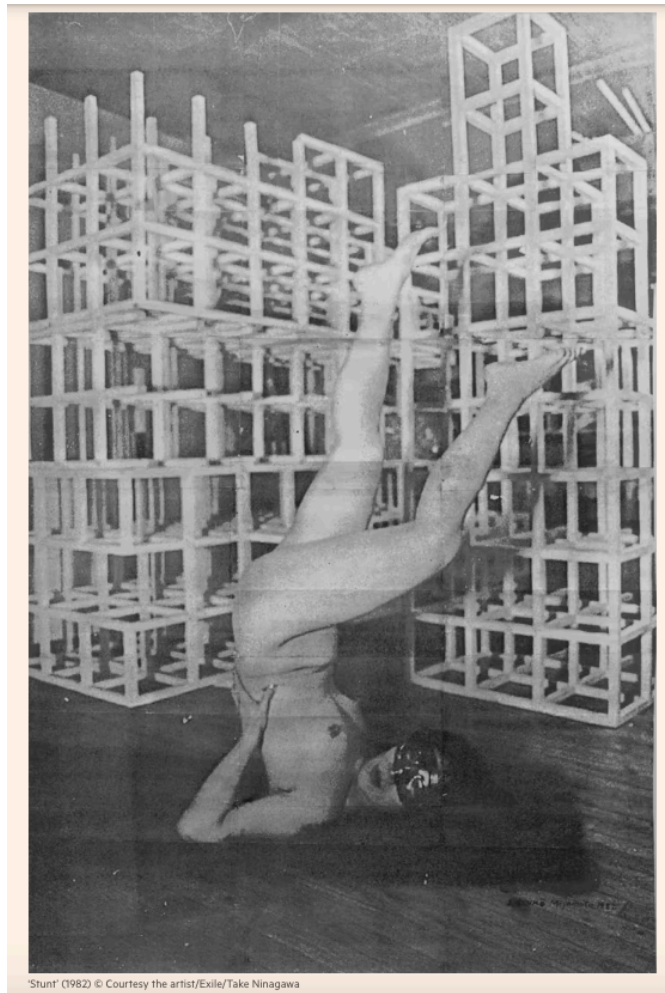


'Female' and 'Male' at the Japan Society gallery © Naho Kubota/Japan Society

She was born in Tokyo in the middle of the second world war, graduated from the Contemporary Art Research Studio in 1964 and promptly quit Japan for the Lower East Side, where she still lives. Four more years of training at the Art Students League and a fifth at Pratt refined her skills and helped her land the job at LeWitt's side. So did the fire alarm that sent her out into Hester Street one night, where she bumped into her older and more celebrated neighbour.

LeWitt was not yet the giant of minimalism that he became, but signing on as his assistant proved to be a simultaneously crucial and limiting decision for Miyamoto, who was for too long perceived as his sidekick. She translated his instructions into meticulous pencil murals, built his wooden structures and executed his silkscreen prints. Along the way she absorbed a repertoire of minimalist tools such as repetition, grids and simple geometries, then mixed them with her own irreverent, explicitly feminist sensibility.

The Japan Society show opens with a 1982 photograph of her, nude, masked and upside down. She poses before one of LeWitt's open-grid white towers, a cool mechanical backdrop for her impishly seductive performance. The rigid male construction looms stolidly behind her, while she props herself up precariously on her elbows, hands supporting her hips, legs scissoring the air to maintain equilibrium for another few moments. The irony is that she helped build LeWitt's rectilinear cage, making this photograph a dual statement of servitude and freedom.



'Stunt' (1982) © Courtesy the artist/Exile/Take Ninagawa

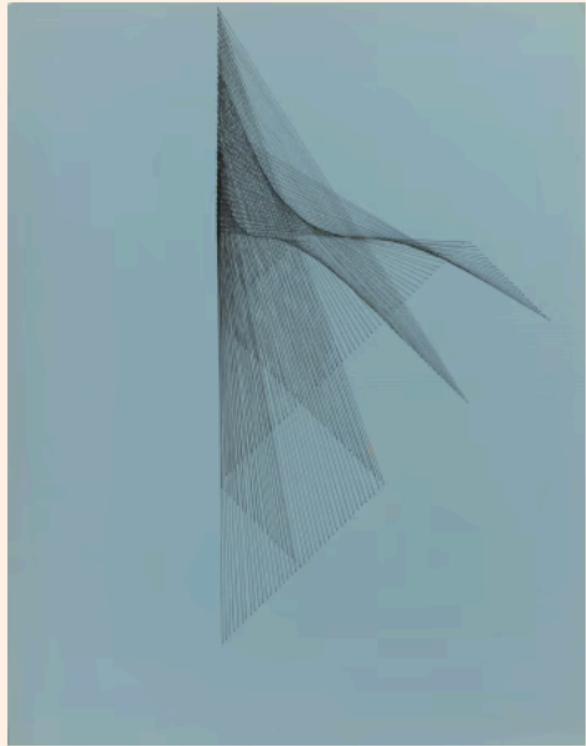
Even as she was doing the boss's bidding, she also commandeered his techniques. His pencil line became her thread, and the works she crafted with it spring to life as you move around them. "Male" (1974) and "Female" (1977), which share a plinth here, lean in or pull apart, depending on the viewer's position. "Male" stands insouciantly against the wall, James Dean-style; "Female" lies recumbent, an abstract odalisque. From a distance, they overlap and amalgamate into a single cat's-cradle-like form, at once vertical and horizontal, dark and dense in some spots, delicate and spectral in others.

The shape-shifting, organic string sculptures constitute both the opening of the show and its zenith. "Black Poppy" occupies a back corner, like a gangster keeping an eye on the room, and yet its two parts appear to dissolve and reassemble like a flight of starlings or a flower made of smoke.

For many artists, this kind of breakthrough can also be a trap, as they keep trying to produce the perfect iteration of the same obsessive idea. Miyamoto, though, moved on, thanks to two epiphanies that were somehow linked in her mind: she gave birth to a son and she saw a swan's nest.



'Red Kimono' (1998) © Courtesy the artist/private collection



'Vincent Corner' (1978) © Courtesy the artist/Zürcher Gallery



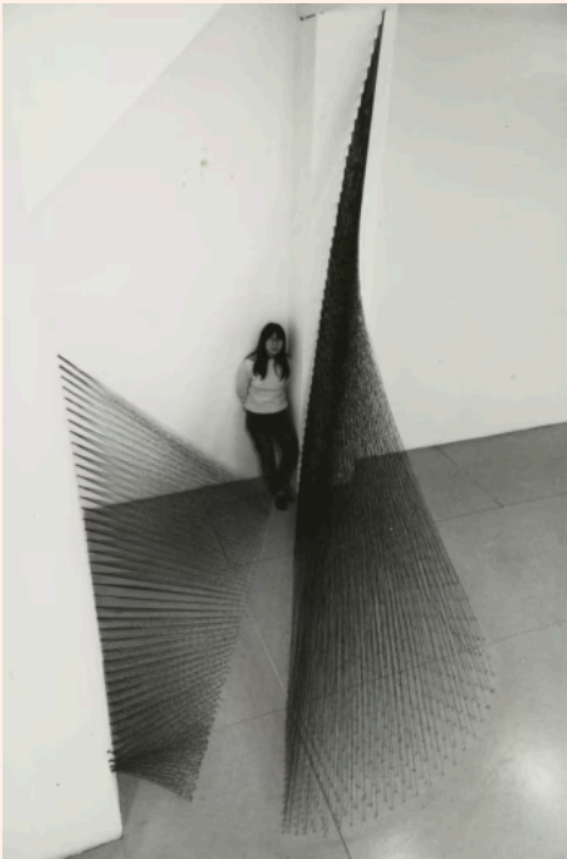
Performance by Kazuko Miyamoto © Courtesy the artist/Zürcher Gallery

Confronting the solidity of flesh and the urgency of its needs started her working with rougher materials and more biomorphic forms, as if she were erecting shelter or crafting tools. She twisted brown paper into rope-like braids, interlacing them with scavenged twigs. The retrospective mysteriously omits these works from the 1980s, but it's clear from photos elsewhere that, like the string works, they trade in paradoxical effects, making weightless paper look like heavy chains.

The show picks up again with Miyamoto's more recent handmade kimono. Though she learnt to sew as a child in Tokyo, only much later did she start treating garments as autobiographical tableaux. In 1987, she blew up a photo of herself naked on a ladder and ironed it on to an antique kimono. Whatever dance or performance she's doing on that ladder is brought to life by the fluttering fabric. Her skin meshes with the kimono's geometric pattern, which looks a bit like magnified blood cells or the dots in a newspaper photograph. It's a wearable document.

Miyamoto's playfulness shouldn't obscure her serious streak. She was involved early on in AIR Gallery, a women's collective at the intersection of art and feminist politics. And living on the Lower East Side meant coming into daily contact with the neighbourhood's shifting crises, from poverty and crime to forced gentrification.

By 1988, Tompkins Square Park in the East Village had become a homeless encampment — a “cesspool” full of “derelicts,” as mayor Ed Koch put it — and a riot broke out when police tried to enforce a curfew. The violence enraged Miyamoto, who saw the park as a refuge for outcasts. She identified with its inhabitants and conflated their blue tarp bivouacs with the shelters she and her childhood friends once hid in: there was freedom in being invisible.



Kazuko Miyamoto inside Black Poppy (1979) © Kazuko Miyamoto. Courtesy the artist/Exile/Take Ninagawa. Picture: Tom Flynn



'Target Kimono' (2005) © Courtesy the artist/Zürcher Gallery

In 1990, she mounted a show called *Shelter* at Gallery Onetwentyeight, which she had opened on the Lower East Side, and displayed a cryptically political kimono. On the back of the robe, which was crudely sewn out of undyed cotton, she made a charcoal sketch of an apartment building crowned by an old-fashioned New York water tower. A caption along the hem identifies it as the Bowery Mission, a shelter and soup kitchen founded in the 19th century and still active today.

Miyamoto renders the mission's headquarters as a vibrant chunk of the city, its grid of windows zippered by a fire escape that zigzags along the facade from skyline to street. Here, her old recombinations of the fluid and the geometric acquire a fresh urgency. Spare though it is, the work lays out what she sees as fundamental needs: clothing, water and shelter, of course, but also beauty, and a way out into the open air.

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