

## ART TALK Going Near to See Far: Asian Art in Houston

by Rosanne Friedman

A celebration of Art of the Far East has happened and is currently happening in Houston. Offered were moments of appreciation with the Buddhist ideals of "I am content with what I lack" with Japanese artists coming together to create a space using traditional ideas and "Drawn from Nature" currently at the Asia Society with ideas of and from nature in a contemporary format.

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SOHEAP PICH



TERRY HAGIWARA TEA BOWLS

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A Japanese Garden transformed a modern space at 4411 Montrose designed by Keiji Asakura. All who entered were greeted just beyond the door for a moment of mindfulness to prepare: calligraphy in Japanese is written, “I Am Content with What I Lack”, a phrase that is inscribed on a stone water basin used for ritual purification in the temple gardens of Ryōan-ji in Kyoto. A spare seasonal flower arrangement by one of three Ikebana schools of Houston that participated in this exhibit—for a sense of nature. And then we stop for Mari Omori’s paper lantern. A woven paper structured over a rectangular cube, lit from the inside in daylight, the simple bent paper sparkles with the light, loose to catch the breeze of entry. It is a beautiful example of the Hiru Andon or daytime lamp, for something or someone that seems to have no purpose. It refers to the classic story of the ronin or leaderless samurai from the 18th century, who seemed to be doing nothing but were quietly working to avenge the death of their leader and at the same time transforming the political power structure and ended up setting the example in Japanese culture of loyalty, sacrifice, persistence and honor —ideals that the samurai and by extension people seek to have

in their daily lives. This classic story of the Forty Seven Ronin is a cultural icon recalled in Japanese theatre, puppetry, and film.

The path is designed step by step stone by stone to focus the vision of the participant. It takes us along to the Japanese Lantern, another classic form that I’ve spoken of in this column before. Each part has Buddhist significance from the earth to the sky, from the physical to the gift to the heavens. Houston’s sister city of Chiba presented a wonderful example of one that is in McGovern Gardens.

Looking up and lining the space are layers of translucent Japan paper covering images of the landscape of Kyoto like a veil. In a dramatic view we see a sculpture done in Brazilian black granite, called Night Ocean, articulating a wave by Masaru Takiguchi. This sense of wholeness and flow and coming together is tender and eventful and necessary in our sojourn in the garden. An echo of the tea ceremony is found in the most interior space with stoneware tea bowls by Terry Hagiwara. Unlike a set of matching cups we find in the west, each tea bowl has its own identity arranged in the case like a miniature landscape.

To exit there is a place to pause for a moment in a small room that is the illusionary outside space. with bench to ponder in front of the Zen Rock Garden—big rocks mirror hills and



MASARU TAKIGUCHI NIGHT OCEAN



MARI OMORI - PAPER LANTERN



ZEN ROCK GARDEN

small rocks are raked to echo water, providing harmony for all who enter.

The Japan American Society of Houston worked with The Museum of Fine Art curator, Christine Starkman to create this environment. Though this is now closed, we hope for this circle to come around again.

The Asia Society at 1370 Southmore Boulevard offers contemporary artwork in “Drawn from Nature” that will run until February 21st. The focus of this exhibit is the inspiration, materials and processes in nature. Each contemporary artist from different places in the Far East illumine different responses in their relationships with nature from the geometric to the organic. Interesting to note that two of the artists were children of the country in time when more and more is culturally and city centered.

Palden Weinreb looks for the engineered structure beneath the surface in nature believing that existence is a facade that he searches through to find the essence. His drawings, created with precision, set up stunning dimensions. There is magic in his master craftsmanship.

Seon Ghi Bahk speaks of his childhood in remote Korea, spent with the wind and the trees. The basis of his work is the acuity of his forms in a dialectic of nature and culture. The power of the material, charcoal transformed from trees, are suspended in precision in space. Stunning are these wholes created from more than the sum of their parts.

Soheap Pich a refugee from Cambodia and in his life’s journey returns to that country seeking resolution of meaning in his artwork. From training as a painter he finds rattan and bamboo, with those materials he develops organic forms that grow from his childhood’s innocence.

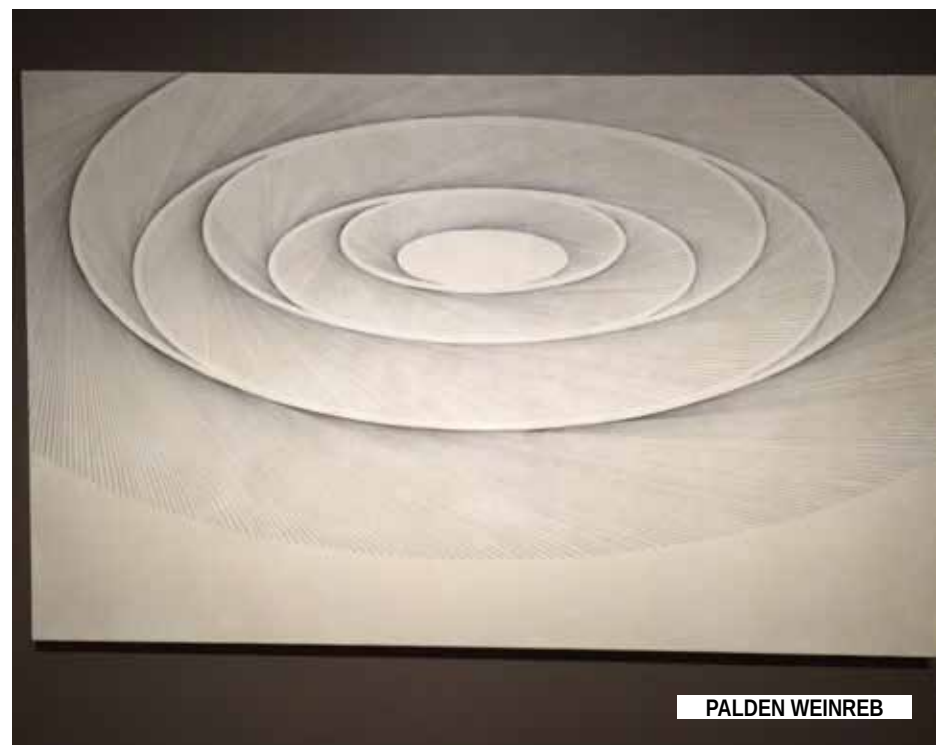
Mineko Grimmer, originally from Japan, freezes pebbles in water and hangs these over layers of tense wire and bamboo structures. As they thaw, pebbles are released to create sounds upon impact with those materials—nature’s sounds, ethereal sounds. One could say that the artist sets up nature to outdo the artist here. This is delicious because of the tension of where art stops and nature starts is exacted here—echoing through the galleries.

Bridget Bray, curator of the exhibit, notes “that there’s a certain wildness in nature but there is also an underlying organizing principal to it.” Bridget Bray has been following these artists for a long time and when she came to the Asia Society in 2014, she felt like these particular artist’s approach to materials was harmonious with the architect of the Asia Society building, Yoshio Tanaguchi in his use of natural materials such as Jura Limestone and American Cherrywood evident in this building completed as recently as 2011.

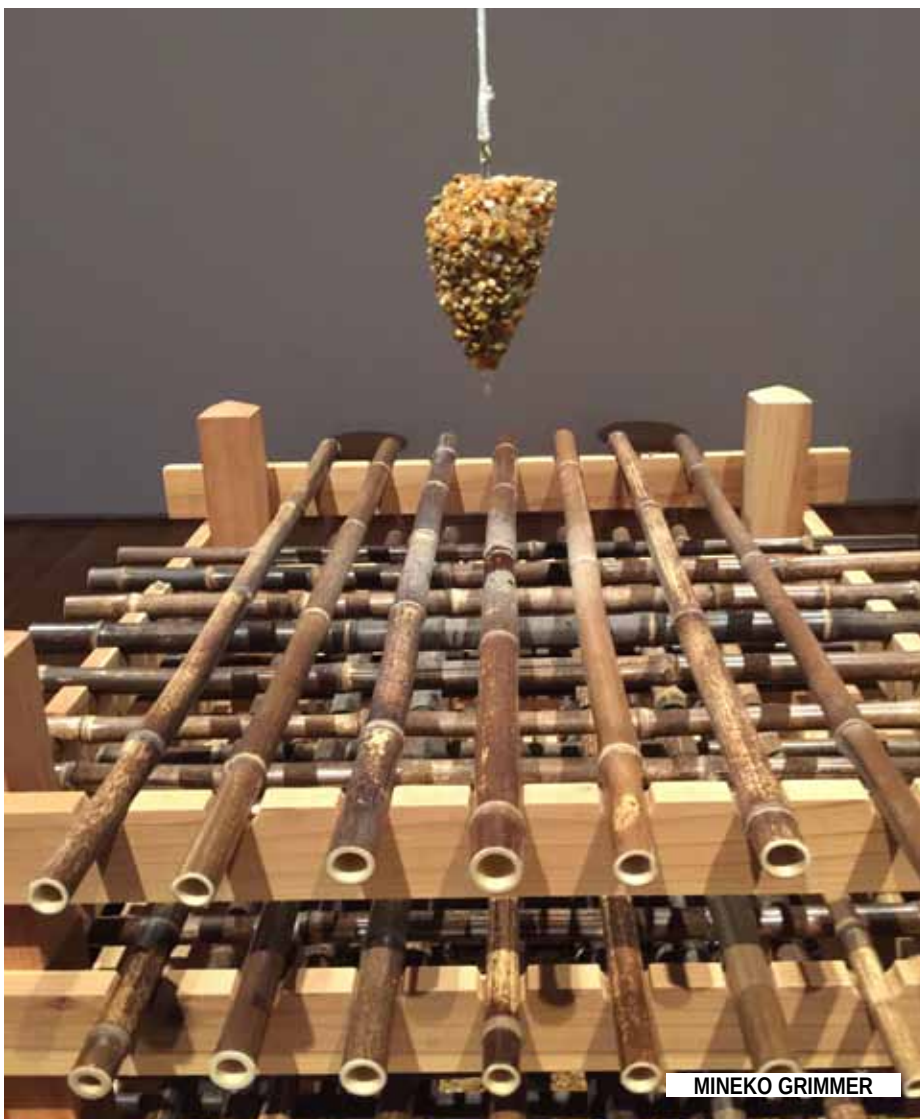
These artists are inspired by nature, with it’s own timing and tensions and structures, but leaving in their wake are moments of awe for all who enter here.



ASIA SOCIETY BUILDING



PALDEN WEINREB



MINEKO GRIMMER



SEON GHI BAHK