

**NAO
MATSUNAGA**

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I never violate an inner rhythm. I loathe to force anything. I don't know if the inner rhythm is Eastern or Western. I know it is essential for me. I listen to it and I stay with it. I have always been this way. I have regards for the inner voice.

- Lee Krasner

Nao Matsunaga has always drawn. However, during the Launch Pad LaB Residency, he has made his most extensive foray into drawing and painting to date. His open-minded, open-ended approach manifested itself in a surprising series of abstract works on paper and linen.

It points to a pivotal moment in Matsunaga's career: a moment in which he fully embraces experimentation in this fresh medium.



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Starting from smaller-scale drawings, he translated conceptual ideas or material interventions to larger scale expressionist paintings, built up with layers of poured and then scraped off acrylic paint, spray paint and/or pencils on watercolour paper and prepped linen. Important in the genesis of these works was that Matsunaga positioned the watercolour paper flat on the floor to make the most of the specific architecture of the studio space. It proved to be a whole new way of working for him, activating different parts and muscles of his body and challenging the understanding of normal gravity. It also literally left its mark on the works, as an accidental “frottage” occurred - which he willingly accepted.

Remarkable in these pieces is also the use of colour, in contrast with his previously largely natural palette. In the drawings and paintings, however, he distills a select set of colours that communicate with each other, conscious of the power colour possesses. The deep, electric blue interacts with an energetic yellow, the soft orange with a faint green. White paint serves as a counterweight, balancing out movement and depth, but also acts as an element of control: it provides the physical, if not mental, reassurance that things could be whited out.

For years, the practice of Nao Matsunaga has mainly revolved around ceramics and wood carvings. The resulting body of work is an ever-expanding universe of individual pieces, exploring what makes a particular object more special than another. What brings the ordinary into the realm of the extraordinary? It is an essential question for Matsunaga, which harkens back to his continuing interest in ritualistic objects and ceremonial spaces.

These items and sites, charged with a suggestive power, an elusive sacredness, have been a universal part of humans' engagement with their environment throughout history. Matsunaga's works attest to his fascination for prehistoric and ancient elements and the similarities between them in cultures around the world, without overtly referencing them. Like an artist-archaeologist, he mines the multiple meanings of objects.

Moreover, in these sculptural works in clay and wood, Matsunaga challenges the properties of the materials, skillfully unskillfully - precisely because he is in complete control of the medium, he can break away from it. His pieces speak an idiosyncratic visual language, created by unconventional formal techniques (for example smacking clay materials in his palms), different surface treatments (such as “blanket glazing”, a process in which a chunk of ceramic glaze melts and moves when fired) and unexpected assemblages (occasionally forethought by drilling random holes to join parts later, for instance). Taking objects out of the kiln is hardly ever the end, but rather a beginning, without an end in mind.

The ceramic and wood practice of Matsunaga shows, however, many similarities with the “family” of paintings created. Every piece is thought of as a multilayered recording of feelings, ideas, movements, whether they are glazes on clay or paint strokes on paper. The few works he made on leftover fabrics during the residency also testify of this approach: the layering process remains, although the carrier changes. The consequent results then of course also differ greatly, especially because Matsunaga seeks ways to push the materials, to let them speak in a different tongue.





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But be it scraping paint or slapping clay: both are a take on material conventions. This is only possible because Matsunaga builds enormous muscle memory. In either medium, his practice consists of considerable repetition, of a methodical yet intuitive approach to making, and making again, and learning from making. Without a preconceived idea, he becomes complicit with the materials, which in turn allows things to happen in the moment. He learns to walk, whilst simultaneously installing a system to trip, to enable himself to see everything differently. Also the parameters that define the distinctive characteristics of a piece are the same: the speed with which and time during which he engages with the piece, as well as the physical distance he keeps to it. In both ceramics, sculptures and paintings there is hence an inherent tension between the rough and refined, between pause and play. Furthermore, the titles of the work are chosen in a similar vein. Words or sentences from books, music, podcasts feed into the myriad interpretations the works themselves allow for. For this another parallel: every piece is a portal to another world. It could be an uncharted inner territory or an unknown prehistoric area; a deep-sea atmosphere or a long forgotten symbol belonging to an ancient culture. In this sense, the works are invitations to surrender and feel, very much like Matsunaga himself surrenders and feels.

Matsunaga considers himself a channel, or a guide, for the work. He sets up the conditions for the piece to arise and acts on it when it does. It is a form of blind making, not knowing what it all will lead to. Of blind trust as well. But by practice, Matsunaga has developed ways to get in the zone - usually with some jazz or 1970-80s American funk - and stay there for one to two hours.

In these bursts of concentration, he walks with everything in his (sub)consciousness, he feels along, he is present. When he surrenders, his body, his hands move faster than the logical part of his brain. The bodily imprint in the works is undeniably there: perhaps even more extreme in ceramics by means of manual moulding and fingerprints left behind, but also in painting by means of dancing around the canvas, moving materials around. The final sculpture or painting is then an organization of energy on a specific surface, a recording of the little bits of transcendence Matsunaga feels when working. It sits within an art historical tradition of spontaneity, of chance, of play that cannot be analyzed until afterwards - if at all. For Matsunaga once spoke about an emotional, almost spiritual experience he had with art that he could not put into words, amazed at what paint on canvas could do to people. Surprising himself, he started to cry in front of a painting by Lee Krasner.

Nao Matsunaga (b. 1980, Osaka, Japan) works and lives in London. He studied Wood, Metal, Ceramic and Plastic at the University of Brighton and later Ceramic and Glass at the Royal College of Art in London. Recent solo exhibitions include 'Panta Rhei to Curtis LeMay', Token Art Centre, Tokyo (2020); 'Deepcuts', Marsden Woo Gallery, London (2020); and 'Gillian Ayres, Rachel Jones and Nao Matsunaga', New Art Centre, Salisbury (2019). His work has also been included in numerous international group exhibitions and biennials and is held in both private and public collections, including the V&A Museum, London and the York Museum and Art Gallery. In 2012, he won the Jerwood Makers Open and one year later the British Ceramics Biannual Award. He participated in many residency programmes, including Arskala Principle Studio, Yogyakarta, Indonesia; the National Academy of Art, Oslo, Norway; the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, UK; and the Cranbrook Academy of Art, Detroit, USA. He also is a frequent visiting lecturer at different educational institutions.

