





*Nature's Sway*  
Recent Works by Mami Kato

January 23 — February 23, 2025  
List Gallery, Swarthmore College





## Process and Presence in the Art of Mami Kato

—Andrea Packard

Director, Swarthmore College Art Collection  
and Curator of the List Gallery

The List Gallery is pleased to present *Nature's Sway, Recent Works by Mami Kato*, the artist's first one-person exhibition in the United States. After emigrating from Japan in 1992, she married furniture maker Michael Hurwitz and they established adjacent studios, first in Philadelphia's Old City neighborhood, and, more recently, in Fishtown. She developed her artistic practice while raising a daughter and centering family life. As an émigré, she felt especially drawn to organic materials, such as rice straw, eggshells, and gampi paper, that made her feel more connected to her Japanese roots. Decades later, she continues to transform such humble materials into remarkably animated and beautiful sculptures. Writing in 2019, Martin Puryear observed that she works in a near-meditative state. "Her making process seems to ignore the passage of time and the act of making seems far more important to her than what happens after

the work is completed. As a consequence, her work has not been frequently seen in exhibitions and her name is not nearly as well-known as it deserves to be."<sup>1</sup> Kato's craft reflects remarkable skill and patience, but she does not consider labor to be an end in itself. Rather, she creates many of her works as a way to think about concepts distilled from diverse fields of study, including ecology, mathematics, quantum mechanics, and Buddhism. The resulting artworks invite us to experience a similar spirit of inquiry, presence, and wonder.

Kato's interest in organic forms, from the microscopic to the immeasurably large, leads her to work with a wide range of media and scales. Upon entering her List Gallery exhibition, visitors immediately encounter a series of four small and intricately detailed works which call attention to the elasticity of her natural subjects and materials. She often begins such works by drawing an image, such as a leafy plant or amoeba, placing the drawing on a light table, and covering the image with a piece of semi-transparent gampi paper. Then, instead of tracing her initial drawing, she wets the paper and uses needles to gently loosen and rearrange the gampi fibers until they echo the underlying image. Next, she brushes on delicate layers of gouache paint. A hidden layer of matboard separates the sculpted top layer of paper from an underlying drawing or colored page. From a distance, her images look opaque and two-dimensional, but on closer inspection



one discovers the sculptural openings, shadowy interiors and subtle hues.

In contrast to Kato's intimate works on paper, her large-scale sculptures, such as *Big Knot* (2019, page 27) and *Umbilical Field* (2011, page 25) are sinuous and boldly activate the surrounding space. Kato created these works and a smaller wall-mounted piece, *Uro #2 [Foxtail]*, (2020, page 23), by covering mixed-media armatures with bundles of Japanese rice straw. The warm-brown textures both animate the forms and evoke nature's vitality. Whereas the works on paper prompt quiet contemplation, these ambitious sculptures encourage movement.

In addition to working with paper and straw, Kato frequently uses eggshells as a medium that reflects nature's malleability and capacity for renewal. For example, she created the undulating stem of *Egg Flower* (2017, page 16) by joining the convex portions of eggshells saved from her own kitchen. The stem curves downward from the wall before bending up and forming a bloom constructed with concave egg fragments; their joints form tessellations reminiscent of honeycombs. Other egg-formed sculptures, such as *Biode* (2023, page 21), incorporate lace-like structures that evoke both biological forms and mathematical principles. Both the title and twisting lattice structure of *Klein's Basket* (2019), another eggshell work, recall the Klein Bottle—a geometric model that describes a continuously

twisting object where outside and inside become interchangeable.

In her essay for this catalog, Kyoko Kinoshita offers further insight into such works as well as two major pieces that Kato completed just before her List Gallery exhibition: *Quarantine Houses*, a ten-foot-long mixed media light sculpture, and *En'nyū*, a site-specific installation created with jute fiber. Kinoshita discusses Kato's profound connection to the ecology and culture of Akita, Japan, where the artist was born and raised, and introduces her principal conceptual interests and inspirations. We hope that this exhibition, catalog, and related educational programming spark further recognition and scholarship.

#### Endnote

<sup>1</sup> Martin Puryear, Introduction to *Kato/Hurwitz, Convergence and Divergence*, an exhibition catalog published by Wexler Gallery, Philadelphia, May 2019, p. 3.







## The Life and Art of Mami Kato

—Kyoko Kinoshita, PhD

Mami Kato was born in 1960 and raised in Akita, a prefecture located in the northwest of Honshū, the main island of Japan. For the first 18 years of her life, before attending university in Tokyo, the region's abundant natural and spiritual features exerted a strong influence on the formation of Kato's philosophy and art practice.

Facing the Sea of Japan, nearly seventy percent of Akita prefecture is covered in forest. Its northern part is home to the Shirakami Mountains, the largest primeval beech forest in Japan and a registered UNESCO Natural World Heritage Site, while the Ōu Mountains and Nasu Volcanic Range run along the eastern border. Akita is one of the snowiest regions in Japan, and rich minerals in the snowmelt and mountain spring water flow into the vast plains that stretch across the center of the prefecture, helping to make it one of Japan's leading producers of rice. Blessed with such abundance, Akita is a natural home to Japan's deities of nature, who continued to be acknowledged even after the introduction of Buddhism in the sixth century, C.E.

Kato studied painting at Musashino Arts University in Tokyo and sculpture at the Tokyo School of Art before attending the Philadelphia College of Art (later, University of the Arts) as an exchange student, earning a BFA in 1987. In 1992, she returned to Philadelphia, where she married her husband, furniture-maker Michael Hurwitz, and began to establish her studio practice. Until her daughter left for college, Kato lived a family-centered life, limiting herself to making art while her daughter was at school. Nevertheless, Kato completed ambitious pieces during those years, primarily using rice stalks to make works such as *Rice Bowls* (2010) and *Umbilical Field* (2011, detail opposite).

Whenever Kato went back to her parents' home in Akita, she was able to obtain large quantities of rice stalks inexpensively in the form of rope, that she would then unravel back into loose straw. However, in recent years, fewer young people in Akita are choosing to farm, and the rice fields are being destroyed as land development progresses. Although Akita is now undergoing a major transformation, for Kato, the rice fields that stretch out in her mind's-eye remain the true embodiment of Akita, and rice stalks are still directly associated with the land where she was born and raised. For example, *Umbilical Field's* undulating form looks as if it contains the surging and circulating energy of the fertile land of Akita while also suggesting an enormous umbilical cord or an infinite loop. Kato positions the work



directly on the gallery floor, inviting one to view it from various angles; its changing organic shapes suggest a model of all that connects the lives of various phenomena, from the microscopic to the macroscopic.

Kato explores similar forms in more recent works, such as *Flowpod* (2020). Sculpted with cotton cloth and bio-epoxy resin instead of rice stalks, *Flowpod's* smooth, seemingly infinite loop looks organic, like a seed or a uterus that gives birth to new life, its growing cells multiplying continuously.

Later in her career, Kato began to explore the use of eggshells—a frequent element of her everyday life as well as a symbol of natural life cycles. Employing eggshells to create an art object requires extremely delicate and patient work. Her first experimental work with shells, *Study (Blue)*, was shown and sold at a charity exhibition in 2011 for victims of the Great East Japan Earthquake. Further experiments developed into works such as *Closed Beginning Opens the End* (2018, right), *Klein's Basket* (2022, page 17), *Emanate* (2023, page 18), and *Loop* (2023, page 19). At first glance, *Closed Beginning Opens the End* looks like a white flower in bloom, but the eggshells that make up the object also appear to be multiplying like cells from the center. Kato has a deep knowledge of Buddhism and is particularly fascinated by the teachings of the Avatamsaka Sutra, which describe the world we live in as a starting

point, from which, like a lotus flower opening, the universe expands infinitely in a radial pattern, beyond which we see the existence of many other worlds. *Closed Beginning Opens the End* seems to express this worldview perfectly.

*Quarantine Houses* (2025, page 28-29) reflects Kato's compassionate attentiveness to everyday experiences. The work was inspired by Kato's daily commute between her house and studio during the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic. As she biked through nearly empty city streets on her usual route, it was only then that her attention was drawn to the bright green trees and grass and colorful flowers. Kato was strongly impressed by how their natural cycle continued despite human crises and isolation. In response, she began a di- aristic process where each day, she collected one or two different plants on her way to the studio.



Once there, she made a house with origami washi paper and enclosed dried sprigs inside each “home.” To complete the work, Kato placed more than 30 of these houses side-by-side on top of a ten-foot-long lightbox mounted to a wall, illuminating them from below. Positioning plants in the homes where one would find people who were forced to quarantine, Kato calls attention to the way the natural world and humanity are one and the same.

Another recent piece, *En'nyū* (2025, pages 32-33), allowed Kato to revisit creating work using jute fiber. Kato began using jute more than ten years ago after becoming interested in new ways of visualizing space by creating an ephemeral, three-dimensional object. As Kato stated, “I was thinking about this work [as a way] to realize concepts, such as quantum mechanics, Buddhism, and so on, that had always been in the back of my mind.”<sup>1</sup> The installation's title refers to the Buddhist principle meaning, “Each thing remains one while maintaining its own position, blending into the other without any interference.”<sup>2</sup> Kato began creating *En'nyū* for the List Gallery by untwining ropes of jute and further separating the fibers into wiry threads that easily stick together and coalesce to form larger volumes. She then installed the bleached jute fibers so that they descend from the ceiling in one corner and span the twenty-foot-square gallery floor. The fibers, which have been made fluffy by incorporating air, are piled up by delicate handwork. From

afar, they look like they have a solid shape, but when viewed up close, they are just a collection of fibers. The mysterious form seems to have substance and also doesn't, representing the Buddhist concept of *En'nyū*.

Whether she is working with eggshells, resin, jute, or rice stalks, Kato contemplates the dynamism of nature and the invisible structures and principles that shape the universe. It is not surprising that she is especially fascinated by the Avatamsaka Sutra, which addresses everything from the infinitesimal to the infinitely large in space-time. Whereas the teachings of Buddhism cannot be scientifically proven, Kato identifies where they come to conclusions similar to the laws of science, including quantum mechanics. Using materials familiar to her, first, during her childhood in Japan and currently, in her daily life in the United States, Kato creates objects that spark our own process of inquiry.

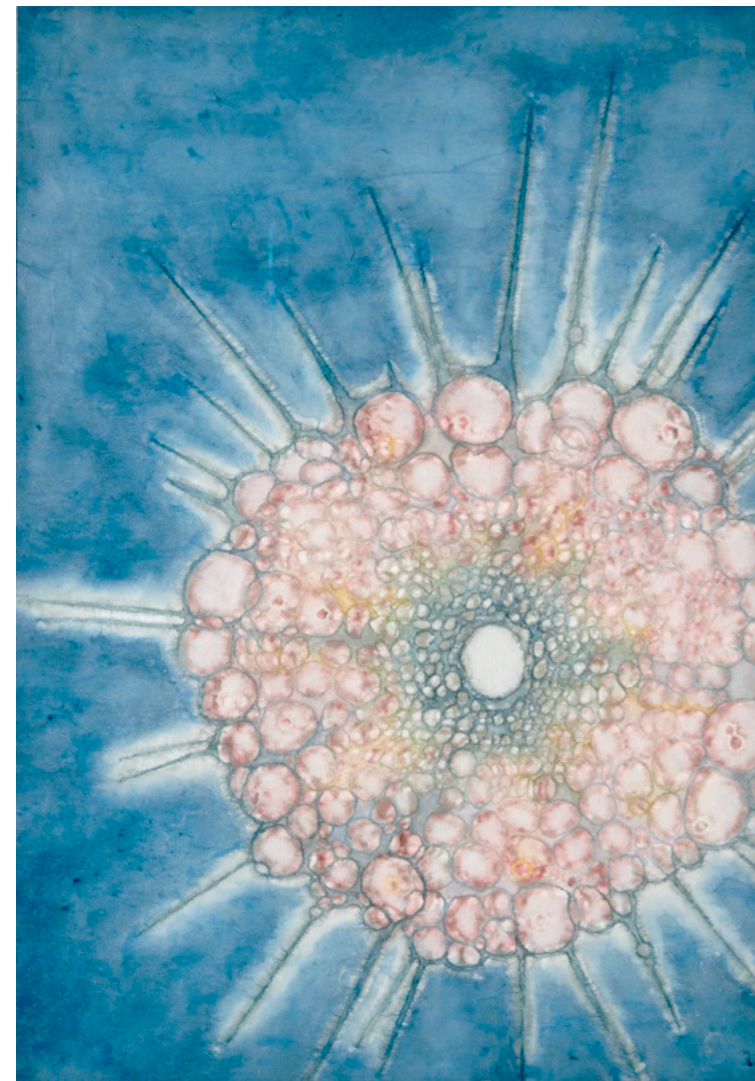
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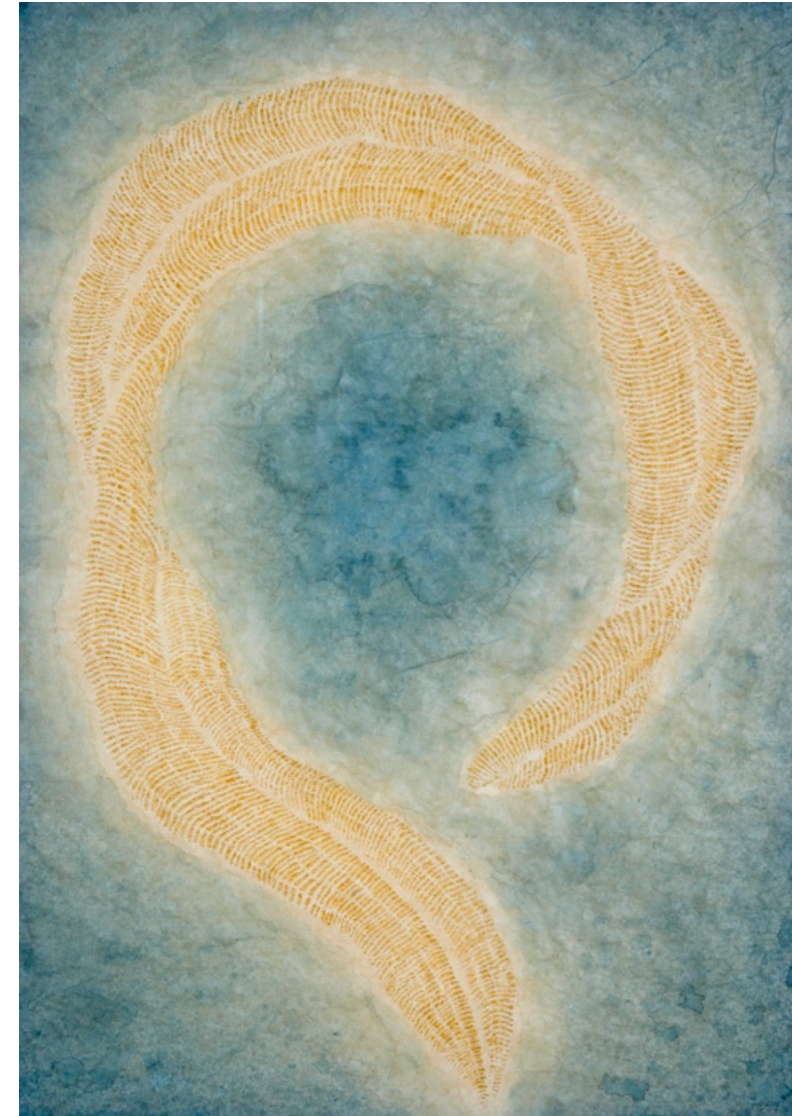
#### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Email exchange with the author on December 8, 2024.

<sup>2</sup> Hajime Nakamura. *Kōsetsu Bukkyō-go Daijiten*, Tokyo Shoseki (2001), p.145.











Opposite and above: *Egg Heart*, 2019, egg shells, rice paper, milk paint, bronze pigment  
13 ½ x 13 x 9 ½ inches. Courtesy of the artist



































## Biography

Mami Kato was born in 1960 in Akita, Japan. She studied painting for three years at Musashino Arts University Tokyo before studying sculpture at Tokyo School of Art (1982-1985), where she worked with Styrofoam, wood, plaster, metal, fabric, and paper. She also studied sculpture at the Philadelphia College of Art, where she received a BFA in sculpture in 1987. In 1992, after working and exhibiting for several years in Tokyo, Kato moved back to Philadelphia, where she continues to live and work.

Kato has presented her work at numerous venues abroad, including solo exhibitions at Ai Gallery and Shibuya Tokyu, in Tokyo. She has also exhibited internationally at Sarah Myerscough Gallery, London and the Wutong Art Museum in Shanghai, China. Her participation in major art fairs includes Design Miami (2022 and 2021) and Expo Chicago (2020). In the Philadelphia region, her recent exhibitions include *Kato/Hurwitz, Convergence and Divergence*, a two-person exhibition at Wexler Gallery, Philadelphia with her husband, Michael Hurwitz (2019). Her work was featured in PAD London, London (2024); *Natural Rhythms*, at Chautauqua Institution in Chautauqua, NY (2022); *Sugoi! 200 Years of Japanese Art*, at Kalamazoo Institute of Arts in Kalamazoo, MI (2023); and *Panta Rhei: Everything Flows*, at Ippodo Gallery, New York, NY (2023). Kato received a fellowship from the Center for Emerging Visual Artist (2011-2012). Currently, she is represented by Wexler Gallery in Philadelphia, Ippodo Gallery in New York City, and Sarah Myerscough Gallery in London.



## Acknowledgements

It was both a pleasure and privilege to curate *Nature's Sway: Recent Works by Mami Kato*. I am deeply grateful to Mami for her creativity and for entrusting her work to the List Gallery. We both greatly appreciate the invaluable support and counsel provided by Michael Hurwitz and Marina Kato Hurwitz. In addition, I want to thank Kyoko Kinoshita, whose insightful essay reflects both her professional expertise and her close friendship with the artist. We also thank Luther W. Brady Curator of Japanese Art Xiaojin Wu for providing us with the opportunity to study Kato's sculpture, *Closed Beginning Opens the End* (2018), which is held in the collection of the Philadelphia Museum of Art. Our programming and outreach efforts were also supported by Associate Curator and Exhibitions Manager Tess Wei, who designed this beautiful catalog.

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—Andrea Packard  
Director, Swarthmore College Art Collection  
and Curator of the List Gallery

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Front and back cover image:  
*En'nyū*, [detail], 2025, site-specific installation, jute fiber

Inside front cover: Mami Kato's signature stamp, a detail from  
*Plant Sway*, 2021, rice paper, gouache, 13 x 9 ½ inches.  
Courtesy of the artist and Ippodo Gallery, New York, NY



