

Fall 2025 Arts of Asia Lecture Series
It's Magic: Art and the Power of Transformation
Sponsored by the Society for Asian Art

The Magic of the Floating World:
How A.A.Murakami Make Fantasy Reality and Reality Fantasy

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AA Murakami's *Floating World* (short introductory video accessible via this [link](#)) was their first American museum exhibition and also the first time the artist duo installed more than one of their immersive environments at once.

AA Murakami is composed of Alexander Groves and Azusa Murakami, a married couple who reside in Hayama, just outside Tokyo. In addition to their artistic practice, they have produced many innovative works of design under the name Studio SWINE; "SWINE" is an acronym for "Super Wide Innovative New Explorers," and represents their location-specific projects inspired by the practice of "gonzo journalism," the journalistic technique in which reporters embed themselves long-term within their area of research. Their previous projects, which will be addressed in the lecture, have included residencies in England, China, Dubai, Brazil, and aboard a transpacific sail boat.

Their practice revolves around "Ephemeral Technology" (or "Ephemeral Tech"), an invention of the artists that refers to the use of cutting-edge technology to manipulate the natural world, eschewing digital screens in favor of manual processes that involve unstable materials such as mist, fog, magnetic fields, and plasma. Not to be confused with the substance within our bloodstreams, this "plasma" is actually the fourth state of matter (the other three being liquid, solid, or gas). It is an inherently volatile and unstable material that composes our sun, our stars, and the tails of comets, among many other things. While extremely rare on earth, plasma is actually the most abundant form of matter, comprising over 97% of our known universe.

The effect of Ephemeral Technology therefore avoids repetition and stability. As such, each visit to one of AA Murakami's immersive installations will differ from the last; the exact conditions of each installation are impossible to repeat with 100% accuracy.

While they employ and develop new technology for each of their projects, their work is inspired by traditional Asian art, especially Japanese Buddhism and Shinto. They take great inspiration from the Japanese concept of "*mono no aware*" (mo-no-no-ah-wah-re) which can be translated as "the impermanence of things," a somewhat bittersweet or melancholic acknowledgement of the irreversible passage of time and the beauty of decay. A classic example of *mono no aware* are the falling blossoms of Japanese cherry trees, which at once represent the height of beauty – pink flowers in full bloom – but also the end of a life cycle, their slow descent from branch to ground cannot be repeated and can only be experienced for an instant, necessitating physical presence.

Another aspect of Japanese culture that inspires them is the Shinto concept of *magokoro* or the "true heart," the sense of otherworldly awe that comes from encounters, both large and small, with the natural world. Similar to the Western concept of the sublime, *magokoro* can also be experienced

through somewhat quotidian experiences, such as prolonged eye contact and mutual acknowledgement with a wild animal. Formally, some of their works draw on Buddhist symbols, such as the mirror of karma (used in the afterlife to reflect, quite literally, upon all of one's deeds) and the *enso*, the so-called "Buddhist circle," a multivalent symbol that embodies both emptiness and completeness, its never-ending line made by a single, instantaneous gesture. It should be noted that Buddhism and Shinto historically shared a syncretic relationship and were not formally separated until the Meiji Restoration of 1868 when Shinto was formally established as the state religion. Indeed, on the grounds of nearly every historic Buddhist temple complex, one can find a Shinto shrine to a "tutelary *kami* (god)."

A final aspect relevant to their *Floating World* installation is the concept of the *kigo* (kee-go) or "seasonal word." In traditional Japanese poetry and literature, the mention of certain flora and fauna are meant to subtly signal the season in which the story takes place. For example, the *suzumushi* (soo-zoo-moo-shee) or Japanese Bell Cricket, whose sound is replicated in *Under a Flowing Field*, traditionally denotes the late summer, the time of year when choruses of chirps erupt from the harvest fields.

Addendum:

This presentation will conclude with a short preview of two upcoming projects, which will be available for travel to other institutions. Brief notes on each are below:

Tokyo x 100

This exhibition examines the concept of the "views of the capital," originally taken from Chinese art and later adapted to Kyoto and ultimately Edo (later renamed Tokyo). It is inspired by the MFAH's recent acquisition of a complete original set of Koizumi Kishio's (1893-1945) *100 Views of Great Tokyo During the Showa Era* (1927-1940) (*Showa dai tokyo hyaku zue*). Only ten complete sets were published and the MFAH's *100 Views* represents only the second set ever discovered. In this context "Great Tokyo" might be more properly translated as "Greater Tokyo," an official term representing the Showa period expansion of Tokyo through the official designation of additional wards.

This exhibition will also include works by Hiroshige, Kiyochika, Yamaguchi Akira, Sato Masaharu, Moriama Daido, and others.

Kohei Nawa: Metamorphosis

Kohei Nawa (b. 1975) is a Kyoto-based artist and professor at the Kyoto School of the Arts (Kyoto Geidai). His practice includes multimedia, architecture, and performance and is centered around the concepts of transience, liminality, and material invention. Working with a wide variety of materials, especially glass, silicon, and plastics, he creates sculptures, installations, and paintings that capture the mystery of the natural world. His work is further distinguished by his indefatigable research into how materials age over time, often requiring several years of testing before being released. His massive studio, known as SANDWICH (it is inside a former sandwich factory) is situated in the Arashiyama Hills outside of Kyoto; like AA Murakami he is greatly inspired by *mono no aware* and Shinto, especially the native Japanese deer (*oshika*), who are viewed as sacred vassals of the gods. This exhibition will be his American museum debut.