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Traces of Probable Loss: A Conversation with Shinji Turner-Yamamoto

by Bea Huff Hunter

Shinji Turner-Yamamoto's sculptural and photographic installations resonate with a sense of stillness, presence, and spirituality. Visiting locations with personal meaning—historic and sacred sites from Cincinnati to Jaipur and remote wilderness outposts in Ireland, Switzerland, and the Pacific Northwest—he intuitively chooses his materials. In his recent work, he layers found objects and fragments with strata of molten iron, gold leaf, salt crystals, or dust, encouraging viewers

Selections from the "Pentimenti" series, 2018. Sand-cast brass, iron, and slag from fossils, cultured crystals grown on fossils and quartz, and ice crystals, 14–36 x 9–43 x 1–30 cm.

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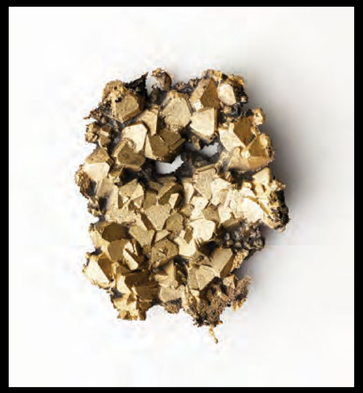

> **The act of collecting and the memory of that act strongly influence my creative process.** How and where I first saw a particular object—whether at a towering, 350-foot road cut revealing Ordovician strata, a small, frozen creek, the outdoor recycling pit of a factory, or at a foundry with its red molten iron splashes—always affect the outcome.

COURTESY THE ARTIST

Pentimenti: Strata #17. Work in progress, Kohler Arts/Industry Foundry Studio.

to consider the passage of time and the emotions and memories embedded within revelatory experiences.

Bea Huff Hunter: In your "Pentimenti" series (2010–ongoing), you add new layers to found natural objects and historical fragments in order to bring hidden meanings to light. The series title comes from the Italian word for alterations in a painting, traces of which survive below the surface of the finished work. How do you go about finding materials for these objects? And what led you to the deconsecrated 19th-century church in Cincinnati, Ohio, where you collected the remains of plaster and gypsum reliefs?

Shinji Turner-Yamamoto: Usually, I do not look for materials; it feels as if they come or manifest themselves to me, often as unexpected gifts. In 2008, when I first visited Holy Cross Church, I immediately noticed plaster architectural fragments and flaked-off paint chips on the floor, covered with thick dust, especially near the apse. I only began collecting these fragments a year later. I liked seeing them there as they were, but when the owner of the building began cleaning up the space for my exhibition, I felt I needed to collect these fragments. When I picked them up and looked at them closely, I began to see landscapes within them, as also happens with traditional Japanese *suiseki* viewing. I thought I would collect just a sampling, but I ended up with around 1,000 pounds of debris. At first, I wasn't sure what to do with all these fragments—I just didn't want them to end up in a dumpster.

When I travel, I receive similar epiphanies, and they are the most powerful force in my artistic practice. For example, on my first trip outside of Japan, I saw rain falling through the oculus of the 2,000-year-old Pantheon in Rome. Rainfall in that manmade space was sublime. That experience defined how I relate to exhibition spaces with my work.

BHH: Could you explain a little about the appreciation of *suiseki* rocks? How does this practice of observing their subtle markings and shapes parallel your experience with the church debris?

ST-Y: In a way, it is a forced *ichi-go ichi-e* ("one time, one meeting") moment. This is one of the most important concepts in the Japanese tea ceremony, as established by 16th-century tea master Sen no Rikyū during the Warring States period, a time of near-constant military conflicts. When you think or sense that this is the last time—and sometimes the first and last time—you may see a person in your lifetime, you are naturally hyperfocused on every detail of that moment, including the circumstances and environment. I felt a strong aesthetic resonance from these materials. I'm interested in the idea of seeing a landscape in a small stone, though what I'm looking for is not a literal miniature landscape as in *suiseki,* but a sense of place or time evoked by the fragmentation of things.

BHH: You became particularly interested in the fragments at the moment of their transition into trash. In a way, your discovery of cast iron byproducts discarded on the floor at the Kohler Co. Foundry, where you were an artist-in-residence in 2018, feels similar. This foundry detritus also found its way into the "Pentimenti" series.

ST-Y: Both the plaster debris and the slag are trash—worthless—in our culture and society. On the other hand, trash does not exist in nature. I add metals and minerals, "little emblems of eternity," as Oliver Sacks mentioned in one of his last essays, to these found objects.

BHH: What is your process once you start augmenting found objects? Do you research the context of each group of objects or rely on intuition? You wrote about the feeling of "gooseflesh" when you entered the deconsecrated church; and in a recent interview, you mentioned feelings of awe when seeing Ordovician fossils in massive road cuts in the Midwest.

ST-Y: That feeling of gooseflesh or awe is the impetus and initial inspiration for beginning to work toward a certain direction. My modus operandi is then to slow down the process to contemplate and define the work while it is still in progress. The act of collecting and the memory of that act strongly influence my creative process. How and where I first saw a particular object—whether at a towering, 350-foot road cut revealing Ordovician strata, a small, frozen creek, the outdoor recycling pit of a factory, or at a foundry with its red molten iron splashes—always affect the outcome.

The church debris is a good example. I really didn't know what to do with it at the time. A new series tends to start suddenly when I am in the chaotic phase of a project. When I first visited the Contemporary Arts Center in Cincinnati to view the space allocated for my "Disappearances" exhibition (2010–11), I realized that the narrow space resembled a church nave. The exhibition was concurrent with my installation at Holy Cross Church, *Global Tree Project: HANGING GARDEN* (2010), and so a concept for the "Pentimenti" series and the whole installation for that space began to take shape in my mind. For months, I had been pondering traces, including the shadows of the church's missing Stations of the Cross. I was also thinking about the "tooling the gold" technique used in icons from the Mount Sinai Monastery in Egypt. The idea was to create new "stations" with gilded "icons" made from these friable plaster and gypsum relief fragments—a perfect *materia prima* for the project I was envisioning.

The "Pentimenti: Strata" series also began abruptly, during the Kohler Arts/Industry Residency. I found myself drawn to the apple blossoms on the tree growing in front of my bedroom window at the Kohler artist house. Somehow, I wanted to capture that fragrance. The impossibility of capturing scent with molten metal made my mind open, in a way—it was an impossible project from the beginning. On the first day, making the sand mold for the piece did not go as planned. I worked on the molds for several days, then realized that I had just begun a completely new series. Interestingly, some of "Pentimenti: Strata"—newly sand-casted brass works embedded with pine needles—emanated the scent of pine for several days.

BHH: **Is the experience of failure or of something not going as planned important to your process?**

ST-Y: Making mistakes is inherent to artistic practice. I am aware that small and significant failures alike bring important insights into my work. When something goes wrong, I need to pause and think very fast, especially when time-sensitive techniques are involved. This has become an acknowledged part of my creative process. Sometimes, I intentionally incorporate impossible or unknown elements into my work to induce a sort of intense meditation.

***Global Tree Project: HANGING GARDEN,* 2010.**
Dead and live white birches, soil, water, metal structure/support for broken trunk, and water irrigation system, view of installation at the deconsecrated Holy Cross Church (National Register of Historic Places), Cincinnati, OH.

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BHH: Does your interest in archaeology also inform your work with discarded materials like foundry slag?

ST-Y: It very likely does. Even a day-old slag fragment resonates aesthetically with Etruscan, Egyptian, or other archaeological remnants. Slag possesses a certain characteristic of earth-origin volcanic rocks and celestial-origin meteorites. I see slag as comprising archaeologically and geologically timeless objects, and I was interested in using it as a means to incorporate a timelessness into my work. *Scoria*, the name for a particular kind of volcanic rock, comes from a Latin word meaning both "slag" and "dross."

I did not plan to use slag. Actually, I didn't think about the existence of slag at the Kohler factory at all. Then, a few weeks into the residency, when I was walking between the artist studio and the "pep-set" sand mold-making area, I found a small, dark, glass-like object on the factory floor. This fragment later became an element in *Pentimenti #83*. I began noticing all kinds of foundry byproducts. What I call "iron slag spherules" were among the most intriguing for me. In archaeological terms, they would be called "slag spheres" or "spherical hammer scales"; but they resemble the spherules found at meteorite impact craters, which are formed in the air from vaporized meteoritic metal, so I prefer to call them spherules. I realized that a similar event—albeit on a much smaller scale—happens during the transportation of molten metal.

BHH: Could you describe how you make the cast "nails" that you use to install these works?

ST-Y: The "nails" are also byproducts of the casting process. When you cast metal, you need entries—sprues and gates—for molten metal to get into the mold, and then you also need exit vents for heat and gas. Some metal should overflow into these channels. The nails are solidified overflow from the vents—and once they were cut off, they happened to be the perfect hanging nails for my work. During the latter part of the residency, I tried to eliminate the need to make these channels by incorporating them into the works themselves. For example, in the "Pentimenti: Strata" series, there were no sprues, gates, or vents to cut off.

Casting brass and iron alloys at the Kohler factory, I soon realized that how we poured molten metal into the mold significantly affected the color, tone, and texture of the resulting surface. I noticed this

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT:

***Disappearances: An Eternal Journey,* 2011.**
Fossils, including coral, indigenous gypsum fragments/powder, processed gypsum, 8,000 square feet of burnt limestone/concrete floor, and rainwater, site-specific installation in an abandoned industrial building, Grand Rapids, MI.

***Pentimenti: Strata #1,* 2018.**
Sand-cast brass with pine tree needles, 43 x 40 x 3 cm.

***Pentimenti: Strata #8,* 2018.**
Sand-cast brass with pine tree needles, 38 x 43 x 17 cm.

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particularly when I cast thin ice crystal formations that I had captured at a frozen creek during my spring 2018 Bernheim Arboretum and Research Forest artist residency. For "Pentimenti: Strata," I crystallized the flow of molten metal into an almost two-dimensional work, partially controlling the hand-pouring rhythm and speed. The resulting surface manifests as a forged, strata-like geological formation united by single or dual columns—traces of the high-heat-flow, textured area.

BHH: The process of casting resonates for me with the process of photography—an indexical process that can result in "death masks," moments frozen in time, according to Roland Barthes. Several of your recent projects have used photography and film to explore geological forms. Do these projects, such as *Sidereal Silence* and the *Global Tree Project: LIGHTNING,* work between the languages of sculpture and photography? Is photography another way to preserve or transform things that are susceptible to loss?
ST-Y: It does seem that a sense of probable loss—or ephemeral phenomena, events, and objects—triggers my actions. There is an urgency. In 2011, when I was on the hunt for lightning-struck trees in the Bernheim Research Forest and finally found them, I did not take any photographs until, suddenly, a dead tree crashed to the ground beside me. The sound, which was muted but immense, left me enveloped in an utter, deep-dead silence. When I "woke up," I realized that these trees might not be standing the next time I encountered them.

I have always been looking for something real—a form or color intrinsic to the material itself. Through photography, I'm calling on an aesthetic force that comes from memories of a form, color, or movement. Through my recent experience of mold making and casting, this force is becoming more salient in my work. The same process occurs in nature as petrifaction. I have observed 230-million-year-old petrified wood in eastern Arizona. I regard my practice as an alchemical process that accelerates natural phenomena that normally occur over a geological time scale.

BHH: Do you still, as you once wrote in an artist statement, "see powder and dust as the ultimate material, that which is eternally in the process of vanishing?" Are there theoretical underpinnings to your interest in dust, such as Rosalind Krauss and Yve-Alain Bois's concept of "formlessness," which celebrates the basic materialism of art as opposed to its high status?
ST-Y: I continue to be interested in powder and dust at many levels. Powder maintains its original character, yet, in an empirical sphere, it tends to elude its own materiality. Conceptually, I associate these materials with the sand or pebbles that create the white expanses in Japanese gardens and Shinto shrines, which suggest a primordial sea in which cosmogonic rituals occur. They remind me of the Greek *temenos* or the Roman *templum,* a sacred space. Materiality is vital in my creative process, yet when I am completing the work, it should be transmuted to something else, leaving traces of what was.

BHH: Perhaps you're moving away from a base materialism to something transformational. Your application of gold leaf to broken fragments feels like a restorative act, and the salt crystals you've been growing are also generative—unlike the entropic grinding down of stuff to powder. Do you seek a balance between these processes? Their relationship reminds me of the quotation from Lucretius that you have said inspires you: "Visible objects therefore do not perish utterly, since nature repairs one thing from another and allows nothing to be born without the aid of another's death."
ST-Y: I might be questing for that balance or tension in all of my work—a visual consonance that makes sense to me. It's a sort of mirror for our own existence in the universe: the coexistence of entropy and generative force.

COURTESY THE ARTIST

***Global Tree Project: ISTANBUL,* 2016.**
Japanese maple, soil, plant fiber twine, gold leaf, water, and mist cloud, view of installation in abandoned Yahudi Yetimhanesi (Jewish Orphanage), Ortaköy, Istanbul.