

Mari Katayama: *tree of life*

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With her own physicality and its relationship to the wider world as her central motif, Mari Katayama (b.1987 in Saitama Prefecture, raised in Gunma Prefecture; currently lives and works in Gunma Prefecture) produces an eclectic oeuvre that encompasses a wide range of fields from intricately crafted handsewn objects to photographic works, video, and art projects. Katayama's work is autobiographical yet evokes universal empathy, questioning how the "roles" and "frameworks" society imposes upon individuals shape the boundaries between self and other, as well as what constitutes "correctness." In 2025, Katayama produced commissioned works for the Victoria and Albert Museum in the UK (supported by the V&A Parasol Foundation Women in Photography project). This exhibition, which marks the opening of Yutaka Kikutake Gallery's new Roppongi space, will be the first opportunity to present the artist's latest body of work in Japan, including the "tree of life" series newly acquired by the V&A.

"tree of life" is a series of ten photographic works in which Katayama herself appears as the subject within a mirrored space constructed by her in her own studio. Surrounded by handsewn objects, her outline reflected in the mirrored surface appears strikingly ambiguous, making it unclear whether it is a mirror image or a real image. Sky and earth, reality and illusion, inside and outside, self and other—the reflections produced by the mirrors blur all contours, as if the generation of proliferating images is repeated infinitely. This work deeply reflects Katayama's persistent awareness of the plasticity, reproducibility, and endless renewability of digital images—a concern she has held since the early stages of her career—and is also connected to her often-mentioned desire to connect with the "unowned body." The portraits were taken together with her largest hand-stitched objects to date: a three metre entity with multiple limbs and a twenty-metre-long tube called "koilia." They were all photographed by Katayama herself, consciously exploring the power dynamics inherent in the relationship between photographer and subject. Katayama speaks of her own body in tandem with "publicness" precisely because it is an entity that is always shaped by systems, social contexts, and the gaze of others, and this is not unrelated to the "public" nature of her work. Katayama's image, photographed and objectified, is even detached from herself, and manifests as a site where social, physical, and emotional realities intersect. Her body, emerging within the infinite reflection of mirrors, questions the boundaries between self and other, while simultaneously embracing its public nature as a cyclically renewed body without an owner.

On the other hand, Katayama's approach of working with a medium-format camera, capturing time with a single shutter release without employing multiple exposures or Photoshop, can be said to be deeply rooted in the physical and corporeal realm, including the act of sewing with a needle and thread. What she attempts within the mirrored space constructed in "tree of life" is to address the sense of distance in relation to the fictional nature of digital images, as well as to materialize them on a physical and spatial level.

To whom does one's body belong? Revealing the ambiguous boundaries between things through the multiplying mirror reflections, Katayama's gaze, cast upon living in the here and now while subjected to roles, labels, and various other designations, is also directed at each viewer who stands before her work. Her image persistently questions the relationship

between society and the world, self and other, as well as the connections between the world and the self with its many aspects and roles. However, her figure, distorted and disrupted within infinite reflections, also suggests how things are relative to one another. The images that appear before our eyes resemble tree roots and branches, with flowing rivers reminiscent of blood vessels, all of which evoke the cycle of life.

We welcome visitors to take this opportunity to view Mari Katayama's new work "tree of life"—an extensive project conceived over a period of five years, and a true milestone in her artistic practice.

Mari Katayama (b.1987, Saitama) conceives of her own body as a living sculpture, producing an eclectic oeuvre that encompasses self-portraits and other photographic works, intricately crafted handsewn objects, and video installations. While bearing autobiographical elements that reflect the artist herself at various moments in her life, her works are also deeply imbued with a strong volition towards a universality that is grounded in the artist's own experiences and thought processes, and have garnered empathy across various different fields, transcending the boundaries of art. Through the "High Heel Project," a long-term artistic and activist initiative launched in 2011

advocating the "freedom of choice for all," she has continued to actively update society's existing frameworks, making it stand as a valuable example demonstrating, in a highly concrete manner, the potential for artistic practice through works to connect with society. Her major solo exhibitions include, "Mari Katayama -Display at Tate Modern, Performer and Participant" (Tate Modern, London, 2023), "Mine and Yours" (Foto Arsenal Wien, 2023), and "home again" (Maison Européenne de la Photographie, Paris, 2021), with selected group exhibitions

such as "Women in Photography" (Victoria and Albert Museum, London, 2025), "QUELLE JOIE DE VOUS VOIR" (Les Rencontres d'Arles, 2024), "Acts of Resistance: Photography, Feminisms and the Art of Protest" (South London Gallery, 2025), "LOVE: Still Not the Lesser" (Museum of Contemporary Photography, Chicago, 2023), "58th Venice Biennale: May You Live in Interesting Times" (Arsenale, Giardini, Venice, 2019), "Contemporary Japanese Photography vol. 14: Photographs of Innocence and of Experience" (Tokyo Photographic Art Museum, 2017), "Roppongi Crossing 2016: My Body, Your Voice: (Mori Art Museum, Tokyo, 2016). Her works are included in the collections of Tate Modern (London), Victoria and Albert Museum (London), Fondation Antoine de Galbert (Paris), National Museum of Art, Osaka, Tokyo Photographic Art Museum, and Mori Art Museum. In 2025, six works from her "tree of life" series, commissioned by the Victoria and Albert Museum, was newly acquired and added to the museum's collection.