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Q&A: Aki Sasamoto on Dung Beetles and Her SculptureCenter Solo Show By Juliet Helmke — September 15, 2016



Aki Sasamoto, preliminary research image, 2016
(Courtesy the artist)

Aki Sasamoto likens the experience of being an artist to the existence of the dung beetle. “My daily life basically consists of schlepping things from one place to another,” she told Artinfo recently in a discussion about her new installation at **SculptureCenter**. The artist’s first solo exhibition in a U.S. museum counts this manure-loving bug as inspiration, alongside such practical objects as shoe boxes and washing machines. She explains how these items come together in “**Delicate Cycle**,” opening September 19.

How did the show come about?

Ruba Katrib, the curator, approached me about doing something in the basement space at SculptureCenter. That was a little daunting from the start because it’s an extremely unique environment to present art in, to say the least, with the brick walls and long passageways. I knew right off the bat that I had to either go super site specific or almost ignore it. I had to make that choice right away. And I really like taking the quirks of a space into account. So that was the beginning, I was like, OK, I’m going to use the space thoroughly, and match the object to it.

What was most daunting or exciting about working in that space?

The exciting thing was that there’s a narrative already in there, structurally. I became so interested in the flow of the space — the fact that it can go from A to B and also B to A. There is no set linear way of navigating it. So I thought that each area should have its own center but relate to the space next to it, or following it.

Tell me about the different sections.

In one, very narrow corridor, there is a series of five arches, and I wanted to do something there that used the length and also the repetition. I ended up putting up different colored lights — like theater gels. I installed this huge ball of white bed sheets that catches the light. I was thinking about this after I went to a concert where the singer was wearing a white dress and the lighting person in the theater seemed to be having so much fun. It kept changing — one minute it had the look of a sunset, then it changed to like, sexy disco time, then to a cool blue, metallic feeling. I come from the theater world and I just love working with lighting designers to change space. So I wanted to do something with that in SculptureCenter. That was the early inspiration.

And then the ball is the concept. At the same time I was thinking about these insects who roll dirt into balls — dung beetles — and how much, to me, that feels so related to the activity of artists! [Laughing] I feel like my daily life basically consists of schlepping things from one place to another all the time. Like, material, artwork, tools, and so on. Being an artist, for me, is just like being a dung beetle. I was thinking about that kind of movement.

So to make the dung with this clean, white bedsheet, I'm kind of confusing the world about what's clean and what's dirty; what's precious and what's not precious. I use these materials, that are daily objects, but then all of a sudden when I put a narrative, and feelings, into it, it becomes something else. All of a sudden it's artwork. And it's kind of funny to me how these things happen.

So then another corridor has a lot of shelves. I kept thinking about the dung beetle; about workaholic beetles; and the “hoarder” character in life who just keeps picking up things, and so that section I filled with hundreds of shoe boxes. About 400 of them. I actually have a shoe fetish. I love shoes. I was thinking about that. About how I can be obsessive about them — looking at them, smelling them.

What is it about shoes for you?

Probably in the end it's their functionality, but it's also the social associations with beauty, status, and so on, that I'm interested in. For me, it's that they carry me through my work day, through all my days. It's kind of like... bread, you know? And then I wanted to collect them, but for the show I didn't want really to have connotations of the human figure. I like the body and the concept but I don't necessarily like the human body as a shape. So I was trying to talk about shoes, but not talk about people. To focus on the hoarding aspect. That's how I settled on the shoe boxes instead of shoes.

And then following on from this idea of cleanliness, I've installed a number of washing machines in a section as well. It feels like a laundromat.

You're doing a series of performances for the show, which are all sold out.

Well, they'll be presented in a narrow corridor so the capacity is very small!

What's your plan for them?

I don't really have a plan for them. Usually I don't write out what I'm going to do, but rather, on the first day I'll just start and see what kind of thing comes out of it. A lot of the movements are already written in the sculpture. So if I have a huge ball... what can I do, you know? So that's how I use the installation. But it's not like, a prop to be used. The sculpture itself just inherently has the possibility of movement.

The audience, too, will have to move through and try to make sense of why this is one connected installation. That will require them to weave different metaphors contained in the space into one narrative, and I'm so interested in how individual people do that.

And you have a talk coming up at the School of Visual Arts, part of the Art Writing MFA's lecture series, on September 29. Can you reveal what you'll be speaking about?

Actually it's related to the work at SculptureCenter. One of my main sources or points of research has been a book called Fabre's Book of Insects. It's a literal and metaphorical reference for me. So I thought it would be interesting to bring this raw material and see what I can talk about. In the installation, when I'm not performing, there's a video work playing where I read some excerpts from the chapter on dung beetles. For me, when you separate this text from the area of science, it becomes so metaphorical. So I'll be bringing that to SVA and talking about the material.