



Co.DESIGN

Vaping Makes Its Way Into Public Art

By Diana Budds — June 17, 2016



“It’s a space where people can contemplate the dematerialization of our world,” artist Mika Tajima says.

This summer, visitors to Hunter’s Point South Park—a relatively new waterfront park in Queens—might spy plumes of pink and blue mist rising from a concrete cube. This piece is called Meridian (Gold), a new installation by artist **Mika Tajima**. Commissioned by the **SculptureCenter**, the piece is, in essence, a large-scale vaporizer that visualizes data through its prismatic puffs. Yes, vaping has infiltrated the art world—literally.

In her work, Tajima, who is based in Brooklyn, explores how we perceive and experience the world around us through design and technology. When the SculptureCenter invited her to create the installation, she looked for ways to create a physical space that would encourage contemplation about what’s happening in our world today culturally. She envisioned a large-scale sculpture that was also a data visualization tool that could quantify our cultural sentiments. The metric she chose? The value of gold.

There’s an undeniable irresistibility to gold and all its flashy, bling-bling glory. It’s a symbol of excess and luxury, one of the most coveted metals, and a monetary unit of measure (aka the “gold standard”). But for Tajima, gold, particularly its price fluctuations, is a barometer for our collective confidence and insecurity.

“Gold captures the worldwide sentiment about the state of things,” Tajima says. **“It’s a unique commodity that’s untethered from other commodities for which supply and demand dictates price; things like a natural disaster or war affect gold prices. When people feel uncertain, they turn to gold as if it’s a steady, safe place [to invest].”**

The square-shaped piece measures 12 feet on each side and has a sunken pit in the center. Though it's fabricated from concrete and teak, the material du jour is actually light. **Tajima compares the piece to a Jacuzzi—but instead of circulating hot frothy water, it has a complex vaporizing system that creates a plume of mist**, which is illuminated by LED lights that fluctuate between pink and blue depending on the price.

To achieve the color shifts—which end up turning the vapor into a prismatic gradient—Tajima worked with a computational linguistics programmer to create an algorithm that translates the changes in gold prices into something tangible. Because the price changes can be very small—sometimes just fractions of a cent—and because they're constantly changing, they experimented with calculations that would accurately reflect the data but would also produce something visible. Every two seconds, the algorithm averages the percentage change in price. When the figure rises, the program communicates over Wi-Fi to the LED bulbs to shine magenta; when the figure drops it tells the bulbs to shine blue. The more dramatic the percentage change, the more saturated and intense the color. Viewers typically see changes every 15 seconds, which could be subtle or extreme depending on what's happening.

“Using light and technology was a natural evolution of exploring how architecture works,” Tajima says of the piece. “Light is a basic element and an architectural device that creates an environment. The technology aspect is something we're all experiencing in our daily lives.

The way Tajima sees it, we're constantly negotiating between physical and virtual space, the material and the dematerialized. “It was a joke in the beginning that there's a parallel metaphor, which is the idea of e-cigarettes and vaping, which is another way of inhaling some kind of substance—it's not exactly smoking,” she says. “In the initial proposal, was thinking about that. **In the age of email and vaping, this is a new kind of sculpture that's doing a similar thing in a weird mediated experience.**”

Beyond finding clever ways to express what's happening culturally, Tajima also wanted to explore what it means to make a contemporary public sculpture. To her, it was less about a hulking monolith that one looks at than building a communal space for interaction and a stage for introspection and contemplation.

“The piece is sited right across from Midtown,” she says. “In my mind, I see this fog mist that's the dissipation of the commodity price of gold, but it also obscures our vision of this financial capital. Maybe people will escape the quantification of our lives and talk to the person in front of them.”

All Photos: Yasunori Matsui, courtesy Mika Tajima

