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Artists diverge at new Reynolds exhibit

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Noriko Ambe and Tom Molloy could hardly be more different in their approach to art. Ambe is from Japan, Molloy from Ireland. Both have works on view at Lora Reynolds Gallery this month, and in some ways they embody the stereotypes we have in mind of those island nations.

Molloy's politics hit you over the head. He has assembled and doctored photographs (including those of record covers and President Barack Obama's memoirs) to make his point. Ireland is known for its political issues, and Molloy emerges from that history with an instinctive distrust of authority.

Ambe, on the other hand, makes intricate cuts into sheets of white paper (as well as Yopo, a Japanese "tree-free," waterproof plastic paper), forming them into shapes that call to mind topographical maps, caves, plants and blood cells.

Aside from some subtle flecks of red paint, Ambe's work is all white, playing only with the textures of the dozens (hundreds?) of paper layers, and the shadows that follow the contours and holes.

Speaking from her studio in Long Island, N.Y., Ambe, whose English is quite good, struggled to articulate the feeling behind her work.

"My great-grandfather was a samurai," she says playfully, when asked about her transition from painting to cutting. "It's a metaphor of breaking through something." A slice, rather than a stroke.

There's an undercurrent, she says: the Tao concept of the life force, which links every part of the earth. Ecosystems, creatures, buildings, and our behavior within these systems.

"Our body itself is nature, so we should remember that," Ambe says. And it's important to remember that these shapes and forms are not real topographies, but are very personal for Ambe. They're outlines that trace her emotions and actions.

Her latest work makes a connection to the sea. Last year, she visited the disaster area in Rikuzentakata, Japan, after the March 2011 earthquake.

"The colors on the mountains where the tsunami had reached were divided into two completely different tones," she says. "I could see the water despite its having already receded."

When she returned to Long Island, she continued to observe the ocean. "I naturally tried to enter into a dialogue with it and to immerse myself in it," she said. So, we have work like the stunning "Spring 1" and "Spring 2," large cutouts on broad sheets, hanging on the wall. They recall a leaf, or the digging networks of ants. "At first I imagined a very tiny creature, increasing and growing in the water," she says.

These pieces set a tranquil mood in part because you are rewarded by spending time with the loops, cliffs and lines of Ambe's work. There is a sense of discovery in them. The same is true of Molloy's "Protest," a shelf that sprawls the length of the main gallery, absolutely littered with "approximately 800" protesters in miniature.

Their shapes cut out of the picture, the figures "stand" with signs raised, protesting every issue imaginable — abortion, big business, gibberish. But massed together in a wave of black and white, they lose their message in the multitude. Their tiny size makes the work feel ridiculous, but also important.

Having just come through 2011, the year of the protest, this work feels especially ripe. The same is true of his 2008 work "Flag," a photograph that shows an American flag in its plastic wrapping. A sticker on the front reads "Made in China."

Other work, like "Shake" (various world leaders shaking hands) and "Dream" (Obama in whiteface on the cover of his memoirs), feels more one-dimensional, leaving you wishing that Molloy had an editor. Someone to help him keep that sense of discovery alive.