

Nasher Sculpture Center

An Interview with Noriko Ambe

Curator Catherine Craft talks to *Paper into Sculpture* artist Noriko Ambe about the artist's journey into sculpture.

Catherine Craft: Noriko, you initially studied painting and even exhibited as a painter when you were in your 20s. How did you come to work in cut paper instead?

Noriko Ambe: As I worked, my paintings were getting bigger and bigger, and more and more complex, to emphasize their ideas. I was really inspired by infinite space, but the bigger and more complex my paintings became, the more it felt like I could never reach what I understood as infinite space. So I stopped. And I felt really almost ashamed of myself: What have I been doing here, with such big paintings, showing these in a gallery every year to an audience?

Craft: A real crisis. What did you do?

Ambe: At first, I started drawing lines. Just lines. And I also started doing etchings as like "rehabilitation". Because for making prints, even one line could work, so I didn't need to think about what I should draw.

Craft: Working simply, and at a much smaller scale. More intimate.

Ambe: I went to Italy for a residency program in printmaking run by [the artist] Luis Camnitzer. The first day of the residency, I showed [him] all my works, and he looked at them and said just one thing: What is art for you? And that's the thing I had been thinking, when I had been doubting myself: What is my original? That was my question.

It was a summer residency, and I went three times. The third time, I was on my way, and when I was on the airplane I saw lots of white clouds, against the blue sky. It was really, really beautiful. I felt then I really wanted to melt into the natural world somehow. That I could really disappear—a feeling of freedom I could imagine and that I really wanted to express in my art. I realized that it was a kind of meditative experience. When I got to the residency program, I spoke to Luis Camnitzer about my feeling: I think I found myself, what I want to express, finally.

Craft: And at that point, you had to find a way to give form to what you had realized.

Ambe: Right. Practically speaking, how to express this feeling. So first I used an image of mapping on the paper, with drawing.

Craft: Was that related to your experience of looking out of the airplane, a mapping of that aerial view?

Ambe: Maybe, like a running river draws on the earth. Then I just started drawing, just making lines and lines and lines. I drew them without any rulers or tools, so they're not straight - [they're] slightly curved, [there are] distortions. And I realized, Oh! These natural distortions are carriers of human feeling. This is my originality,



Noriko Ambe, *Inner Water* 2012, 2012. Installation detail with cut paper sculptures *Wave 2*, *Wave 3*, and *Wave 4*. The Warehouse Gallery, Syracuse University, New York.

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lora reynolds gallery

this physicality. They looked like the surface of water or the rings of a tree, and I started connecting with these details of nature. I was so happy when I made the first one that I decided that I would spend at least 10 years on this project and work on it every day, because time is very essential for this work. I thought that I have to spend at least 10 years of my life to figure out what this [project] is, a long time like the way a tree makes a ring each year it is growing.

Craft: When was that?

Ambe: In 1999. And now, it's the 17th year (laughs). After Italy, I moved to New York, because I got a grant, and I was at Pearl Paint, the art supply store, when I saw a very thick sketchbook. I thought, maybe instead of drawing lines, I can cut each page directly, to make a three-dimensional piece. So then I started cutting into this white sketchbook.

Craft: Why were you interested in going into three dimensions?

Ambe: Gradually, I wanted to see the more three-dimensional shape of my work, somehow. I had done a course on bookbinding at The Center for Book Arts to bind my etchings in an artist's book. That was fun, but it felt too complex.

Craft: You wanted something more direct.

Ambe: Right. Somehow, though, I thought I could use the shape of the book. And then I found this very thick sketchbook at Pearl Paint.

Craft: So in a way cutting paper started with a sort of book, a sketchbook. From that first sketchbook, you've gone on to make large works by cutting into stacks of paper. These can be extremely complex sculptural works, with a staggering amount of detail. How did you have the idea for these large works?

Ambe: The size was already getting bigger, and then there was September 11. I was back in Japan, but I had friends in New York. It was really shocking, and I wanted to heal myself. Cutting like praying, I started making this large, thick white paper piece with just excavated lines—like a map, but no borders and no countries: my own geography, white and minimal. "We are emptiness"—that might be related to Buddhism thoughts—made me feel so peaceful.

Craft: You don't use preparatory sketches and you cut everything by hand. How do you begin making an excavation, as you call it? You begin with a stack of paper, right?

Ambe: Yes, the first cut is tiny, the smallest one. I make this cut on the top sheet, and then under it I see the mark, the impression it leaves on the next sheet. I use this as a guide, try to make the next cut a little bigger, move the paper out, then cut a little bigger on the next sheet, and then keep going, to arrive at an excavated piece.

Craft: I want to ask you about another type of work you make from cutting into books. Sometimes these are encyclopedias or atlases, but often they are art books. You've cut into the catalogue of the documenta XIII exhibition and into monographs of works by artists including Gerhard Richter, Richard Serra, and recently Fazal Sheikh. It seems to me that you've selected books about art that you connect to deeply.

Ambe: Yes, in fact I wrote about these works that they are "an offering to the god of art."

Craft: You also wrote that this is "an audacious statement."

Ambe: Yes, but these are the only words that come to mind that are appropriate.

Craft: But the books are not just sculptural material to you. The way you treat them is a response to art that moves you.

Ambe: Yes, cutting books is like collaboration for me. It's important to choose the materials carefully because printed matter conveys a message automatically, as you know. Cutting as a dialogue with each page, I am expressing a new concept by cutting the pre-existing patterns and information in books so as to alter them. And the structure of the book itself is standing on the edge between two and three dimensions like my work between drawing and sculpture. Anyway, since the concept is not so simple all the time. I would rather let my artwork do the talking. I don't want to guide the responses. Me, as an artist, I'm not interested in expressing myself. Artists should be a filter or a medium, with a shamanistic sensibility somehow.