

Jervis, John. "Kishio Suga." *ArtAsiaPacific*. no. 91 (November-December 2014): 157–160.

## KISHIO SUGA

WHERE I WORK BY JOHN JERVIS FROM NOV/DEC 2014



The entrance to Suga's studio, with its accumulation of overflowing outhouses constructed of scaffolding and corrugated plastic.

Wandering through a bulky group show in Hong Kong last May, I happened across three painted plywood panels. Each had been drilled through from behind multiple times in a roughly even pattern, covering the entire surface with smallish holes. The top layer of wood had splintered, sometimes in tight, sharp twists, sometimes in large shards that protruded outward, bringing the layer of space in front of the work within its compass. In places, the surface had fallen away entirely, revealing mottled wood that contrasted with the gloss paint. The works were quiet and captivating.

The comparison with my present situation is stark. I'm sitting in a former toothbrush warehouse in a small industrial estate in Ito—a faded yet graceful rural backwater on the Izu peninsula, two trains and a taxi ride away from Tokyo. It's July, there's no air-conditioning and I'm drenched in sweat. Beside me is the Japanese artist Kishio Suga, who created the three intriguing panels. He is coping a little better, despite his 70 years, aided by a small white flannel, containing an ice pack, wrapped around his neck. His old friend and assistant Tsuyoshi Satoh, and his gallerist, Ashley Rawlings, occupy the other seats. We consume cold coffee and rich chocolate cakes, and a laborious but good-humored dual-language interview ensues.

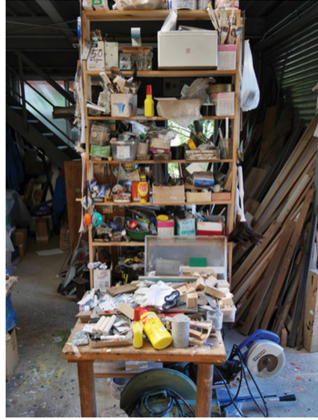
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This spartan warehouse stands opposite Suga's studio of 20 years, and gives him additional space to store his prolific output and experiment with larger installations. It is a recent treat from the artist to himself, along with a Volkswagen Beetle in the same bright lemon yellow that he uses on many of his wall-mounted reliefs. Renewed interest in his career, unleashed in 2012 by his striking re-creations of early installations at Blum & Poe's group show "Requiem for the Sun: The Art of Mono-ha," has provided a substantial financial fillip. A loose gathering of young artists, retrospectively labeled "Mono-ha," literally "school of things," flourished in Tokyo from the late 1960s, exploring the potentials around organic and industrial materials and diverse locations in a raw, minimalist manner reminiscent of both Arte Povera and Land Art. Yet the participants rejected the dominant European perspective that art functions as an expression of the human psyche, aspiring instead to allow their media to speak for themselves. The energy surrounding the group dissipated in the 1970s, but Suga—in wall reliefs and sculptural installations, in ephemeral and transformative actions, and in his writings—has pursued a sometimes isolated belief in the potential of process to express innate relations between objects, sites and individuals. Through restrained interventions, he deconstructs the ambiguities and actualities of prosaic materials—sometimes alone, sometimes in combination—thus revealing their multiple realities and generating an unexpected sense of both universality and disturbance.

The cardboard packages around us contain the fruits of this long career. Most are stacked haphazardly on shelving designed and built by Suga himself. A fitful sorting process is underway: some boxes have old stickers or a little hand-drawn sketch denoting their contents; most are as yet unlabeled. A rare early painting (a medium he abandoned early) dating from Suga's time as an assistant to Sam Francis in Tokyo in 1968 is pulled out for my inspection. Two bold sweeps of red and blue—accompanied by the words "red" and "blue" to denominate the respective fields of color—cover faint pencil markings. A further swath of paint presses against two edges of the work, exploring notions of interior and exterior and of positioning objects within a perimeter that recur in later wall reliefs. Recent works on paper are housed in a frail wooden tower, at the base of which dozens of small timber posts cluster, each with a slim length of bent copper wire stapled to the top—the challenge of encasing these fragile pieces in cardboard seems to have been too daunting.



A collection of works, wrapped and unwrapped, on top of shelving designed and built by the artist in his warehouse.



A table and freestanding shelves covered with studio detritus.

We walk across the road to the studio, passing the industrial estate's modest directory sign. This lists a stonemason, timber yard, metal workshop and car-part factory, while a florid red "K" denotes Suga's own presence—he laughs as he characterizes himself as the local craftsman. The studio is a functional if spacious structure, built to his own design with steel girders, sober industrial claddings and generous windows and skylights. Early in his career, Suga had preferred to work out on the street, creating temporary installations or delivering finished works to his gallery direct. His increasing use of chainsaws and the expense of central Tokyo were significant factors in his removal to this remote location.

The building has already acquired the air of longevity, with its covering of vegetation and its accretion of outhouses and lean-tos, most packed with lengths of timber, twisting branches and rusty T-girders, as well as the occasional boulder obtained from local stonemasons. The interior is similarly replete. On one side of the double-height space is a mezzanine with overflowing bookshelves—his philosophical and theoretical reading is voluminous—and a small blue bedroom. Suga retires here to brainstorm about his work while listening to music, usually the mournful, romantic balladry of Japanese *erika*. But his best ideas, he admits, come first thing in the morning, in those quiet moments when he's shut away in the bathroom, or sometimes in the car, both of which offer a sense of enclosure. The resulting epiphanies will be taken to the studio, the materials on hand examined, and the two brought together in an intuitive, spontaneous way. The mutability of the natural environment, in which he still works on occasion, encourages a certain tenacity in Suga's practice, but the intransigence of the studio forces him toward greater diversity in exploring the possibilities locked up in his materials. It also encourages creativity in the processes to which these materials are subjected, from nailing, slicing, peeling and carving, to drilling, chipping, wedging or even scrumpling.



The studio's interior, with Suga's blue retreat on the mezzanine above and the clutter of his artistic practice below.

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A large pool table—the first thing he bought on moving in—lurks under the mezzanine, but is slowly being engulfed in clutter. The studio now resembles an ancient workshop, with shelves, tables and a large, dusty table saw all piled high with rusting tins, protective gear, recently finished works, tape measures, rolled-up tubes of glue and offcuts of wood. And there are boxes everywhere, containing innumerable varieties of nails, screws, wires, chalks, glues, hooks, hinges and sandpapers.

An impressive collection of woodworking tools hangs off the nails that project from shelf uprights and makeshift wooden boards. Dangling alongside are rolls of tape and bundles of wire and string, and the occasional aged plastic bag or feather duster. Below sit various electric drills, saws and sanders, their cords roughly coiled. A multitude of wood and metal sheets, and lengths of timber, some elaborately shaped, lean against the walls. On the floor, tins of paint cluster on splattered cardboard—many also contain sticks and brushes, presumably now stuck fast. Bags packed with further tins suggest a rapid tidy-up has preceded my visit.



Two recently completed, large-scale, wall-mounted works leaning against shelving in the studio.

All the local hardware stores know Suga, and will proffer new arrivals. He takes pleasure in finding items they don't stock—little L-shaped reinforcement plates had to be ordered from suppliers after his last visit. Discovering new materials can still be rewarding, while unfamiliar combinations produce serendipitous correspondences and juxtapositions. Yet, at this point in his career, he has explored most possibilities already—he now focuses on specific details, and from these he creates works afresh, approaching each attempt as if it were an entirely new experience. In particular, the varied textural qualities of different woods, both natural and processed, remain important to him. He works every day, and doesn't ever feel as if an experiment is wasted. Although he usually has a strong sense of confidence in what he's created, occasionally, when he's not really sure, he will put the work to one side to be reconsidered later.

Before I leave, Suga generously constructs part of a new installation that he is still trying out. It is a fragile henge of short wooden posts, topped by rough lintels consisting of small volcanic stones soldered together with metal. As I photograph him at work, Suga toys with increasing the height by stacking posts and with creating an entranceway lined with additional rocks: a visit to Stonehenge in 2001 impressed him with the timelessness of its stones, yet also with the possibility that they may have encompassed different meanings over the years.

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Finally we listen to some *enka* and I am presented with a signed T-shirt, amid gentle banter. There is perhaps one moment of perturbation when I inquire about the “playful” undertones in Suga’s practice. The translation takes some time, and requires a visit to the dictionary, as the word risks negative connotations in Japanese. On reflection, the description is misplaced. Making visible the multiplicity of qualities and spaces inherent yet hidden in physical materials provides hints as to the nature of reality. Here at Ito, in Suga’s hands, each of these materials becomes something new, yet remains what it has always been.



The artist experimenting with the construction of a new installation in his studio, in front of a finished sculptural relief hanging from a small, mobile display wall. Photo by Tsuyoshi Satoh.