

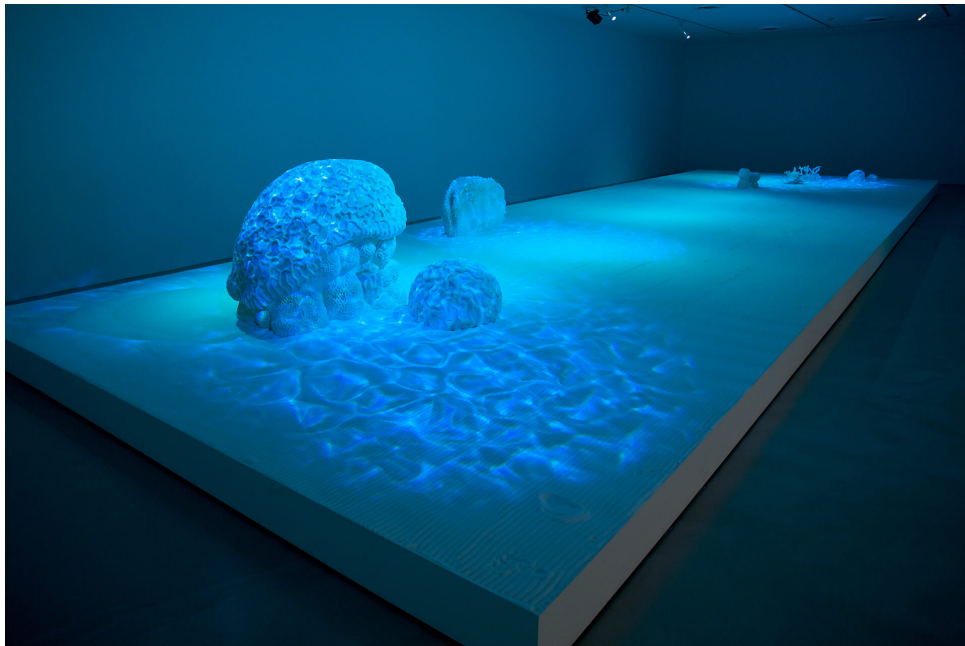


# Ken + Julia Yonetani discuss varied inspirations from folklore to film culture

As they prepare for their exhibition at Mizuma Gallery in Tokyo, the Yonetani duo discusses the delicate balance of narratives embodied within their work.

by Shraddha Nair | Published on : Sep 10, 2020

When the COVID-19 pandemic broke out across the world, essentially shutting down all industries in a state of panic and despair, the irony was not lost on artist duo Ken + Julia Yonetani, who were in the midst of launching a new exhibit which examines micro-organisms and their impact on our ecology. We sit cozily in our large cities, in our skyscrapers which nestle within our vast built environments, paying more attention to the larger and bigger-than-ever - than we do - to the invisible architecture of our (not so) perfectly balanced environment. Today we witness the silent overtaking of the world as we know it, as it has been brought to its knees by a minuscule enemy. As we slowly get back on our feet, the art world begins to awaken from its anxiety induced slumber and the Japan-based artists once again have the opportunity to bring their apropos work into the fray.



*Sweet Barrier Reef (2009) is made using sugar, vegetable gum and polystyrene foam  
Image: Courtesy of the artists and Mizuma Gallery, Tokyo*

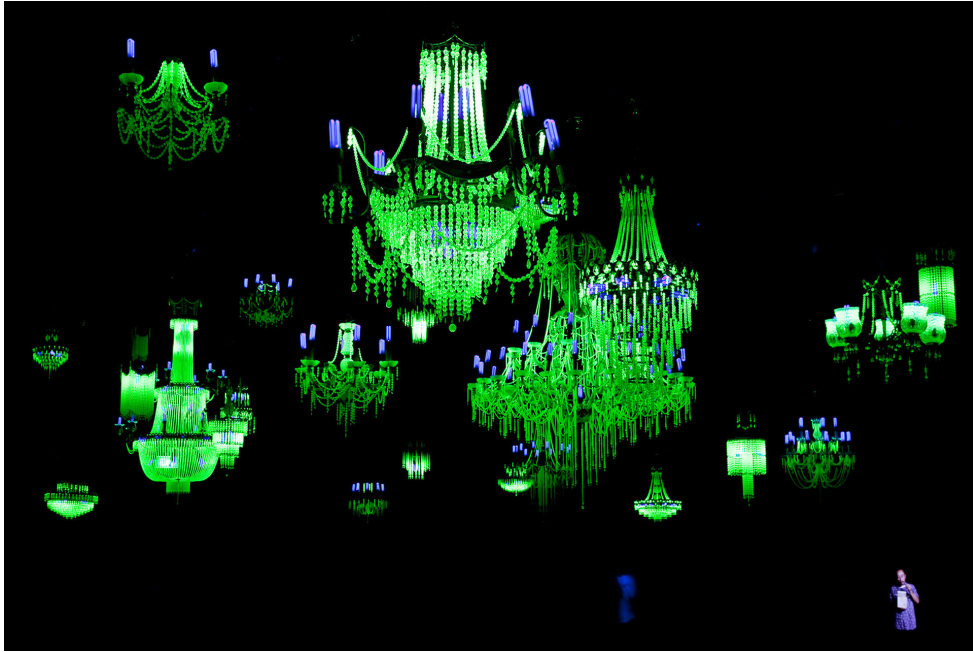
“We became interested a few years ago in trying to produce our own food, since so much of our work was about agricultural production. Through organic farming, in the last several years

we have held a strong interest in the microbes that lurk under the ground in soils, and came to the realisation that whether it be microorganisms/virome in our oceans or the microbiome/virome of our own bodies, billions of microorganisms and micro agents (viruses) coexist in a symbiotic relation with other organisms and are vital to maintaining global systemic balance. The title of the work, *Dysbiotica*, is a term we made up from the term 'dysbiosis', which is defined as a breakdown in the balance of microbial systems. We see it as meaning the age of imbalance in these systems," the duo explains, emphasising the crucial need for these biological networks.



*The Last Supper* (2014) on view at Abbaye de Maubuisson in France  
Image: Courtesy of the artists and Mizuma Gallery, Tokyo

The internationally acclaimed artists balance parenthood and organic farming from their mountainside hamlet, originally a Samurai hideout, in the countryside of Kyoto. As they perfect this balancing act in their personal lives, they work similarly with regard to their art, balancing a myriad of themes in their singular style. From ancient folklore to futuristic technologies, social and environmental issues, the Yonetani pair builds a conceptual spectrum in every installation they create. They elaborate upon their influences in a look at *What the Birds Knew*, which was on display at Mori Art Museum in 2019, "What the Bird's Knew was the first work we ever made from uranium glass and was a response to the Fukushima nuclear reactor disaster of 2011. It was inspired by the Australian indigenous "Green Ant Dreaming" story that holds that if the area is disturbed, a large giant green ant will emerge and ravage destruction on the world. This site was mined of uranium in the late 1970s, a significant portion of which ended up in Japan. We are interested in so-called 'folktales' because they are an important way in which indigenous knowledge has been passed down for millennia. They are often based on geological, historical, and philosophical modes of thought which are intrinsically connected to the land and to intricate structures of knowledge. Modern society has unfortunately too often dismissed such messages or warnings. The closest thing we have to such oral tradition is perhaps the creative impulse embedded within cultural expressions, which at their greatest tap deep into our collective subconscious psyche. The work is titled *What the Bird's Knew* after Akira Kurosawa's 1955 movie of the same title (also known as *I Live in Fear*). Was the fear of nuclear holocaust that permeates this movie a reaction to Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the nuclear tests of the 1950s, or a kind of premonition of Fukushima or even some other unknown future nuclear disaster? Maybe it was all of these things at once".



*The Last Supper* (2014) on view at Abbaye de Maubuisson in France  
Image: Courtesy of the artists and Mizuma Gallery, Tokyo

While there is some repetition in their use of uranium glass, the artist's work with a wide range of materials creating a diverse portfolio of aesthetics. "Uranium glass (often known as Vaseline glass) has in fact been used for over a century, in glass decoration, jewellery, and ceramic tiles. Displayed with UV or black light, it shines a fluorescent green: at once beautiful and eerie. Most uranium glass these days is made with depleted uranium, a by-product of the uranium enrichment process. The material of the work is therefore a direct by-product of producing nuclear powered-electricity and nuclear weapons. It connects our consumption, in this case of electricity, back to its environmental impacts, something we like to focus on conceptually. This is often why we work with lots of varying materials: the material invites the viewer to alternative ways of connecting - to a site, to the environment, to a community, to the past, and even to a sense of spirituality. By embodying a material relationship to the world around us, to something beyond an empirical nominalism, our perceived destiny becomes intertwined with the destiny of the world and universe. Our work seems to take a direction that is exactly opposing to the contemporary, digitalised world. We still think it is important however to remember that knowledge is only gained through all five senses, and of course your sixth sense, intuition. Get away from the internet, feel the sun, smell the earth, taste the soil, understand its importance to your health and thought processes through your microbiome".





From their ongoing exhibition *Dysbiotica* at Mizuma Gallery  
*Image: Courtesy of the artists and Mizuma Gallery, Tokyo*

*Dysbiotica* opened at Mizuma Gallery in Tokyo on August 27 and will remain open until September 26, 2020.



A portrait of the artists Ken + Julia Yonetani  
*Image: Courtesy of the artists and Mizuma Gallery, Tokyo*