

CULTURE / ART

New Naoshima museum bets on Asia, not the West

BY THU-HUONG HA
STAFF WRITER

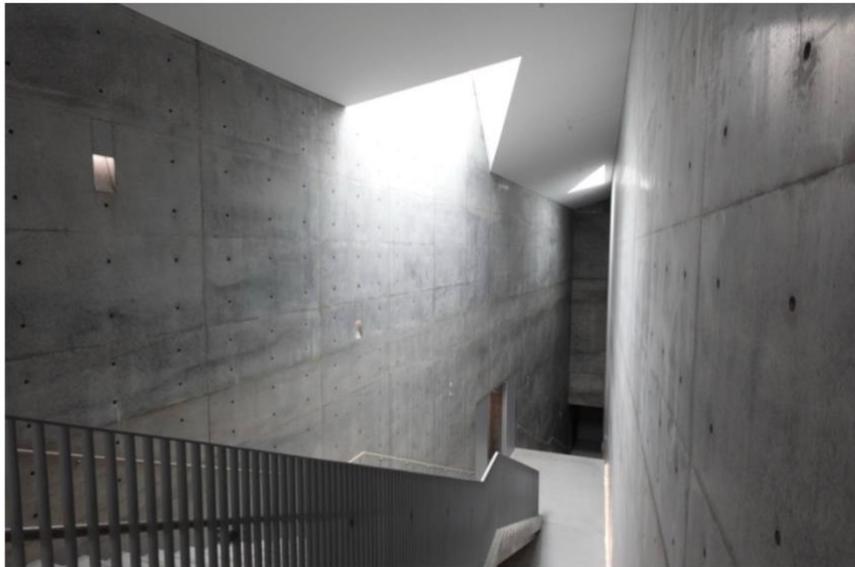
🔗 SHARE/SAVE Jun 5, 2025



Detail of Takashi Murakami, "Rakuchu-Rakugai-zu Byobu: Iwasa Matabei RIP" (2023-25) | THU-HUONG HA / © 2023-25 TAKASHI MURAKAMI / KAIKAI KIKI CO., LTD. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

NAOSHIMA, KAGAWA PREF. – A flight and a bus or several trains, a line, a boat, another line, a bus, a walk and 96 stairs is all it takes to get to Naoshima’s newest art sanctum. Benesse Art Site Naoshima in the Seto Inland Sea, popularly shortened to just Naoshima or “the art islands,” is a veritable art theme park of six museums and 22 spaces across four islands. Last week it welcomed a new member.

The building, imaginatively named Naoshima New Museum of Art, opened May 31. Tadao Ando, Naoshima’s inextricable architect, designed the space, making the museum his 10th contribution to the art site. Three floors of about 3,200 square meters of gallery begin at ground level and descend into the hill on which it rests. Architecturally the museum feels very much same-same as the rest of Naoshima, with a humble facade that looks out over the lesser-used Honmura port on the east side of the island.



The staircase in the new Tadao Ando building creates a single line through the museum. | THU-HUONG HA

Unlike other Naoshima museums, whose collections are permanent, the new museum will change periodically, with the first update scheduled for February 2026. The new museum opens under the directorship of Akiko Miki with the exhibition “From the Origin to the Future,” which contains installations and site-specific works by 12 living Asian artists. This is an important departure from the rest of Naoshima; the roster that’s made it famous — Yayoi Kusama, Claude Monet, Walter De Maria, James Turrell, Hiroshi Sugimoto — skews heavily white and Japanese — although the new museum is consistent in that it’s still predominantly male.

The art site is jointly run by the Fukutake Foundation and Benesse Holdings, which were both founded by the Fukutake family. The vision for the art islands originally came from Tetsuhiko Fukutake, but when he unexpectedly died in 1986, his son, Soichiro, took over and presided over the island’s cultural transformation over the next several decades. The billionaire publisher turns 80 this year, and the new museum, which draws from his collection, may well be his swan song.

“I started the Asian collection based on the hypothesis that the era of the West, of Europe and America, was coming to an end, and that an era of Asia would begin,” Fukutake told the press. “And now, it feels like the times are actually heading in that direction, so I feel like it was the right decision.”

Benesse signaled its commitment to the region in 2016, when it moved its ¥3 million Benesse Prize from its home at the Venice Biennale to the Singapore Biennale, with a new focus on Asian art. Works shown at the Naoshima New Museum of Art include past winners of the prize.



Pannaphan Yodmanee, "Aftermath" (2016/2025) and Henri Dono & indieguerillas, "Consciousness of Humanity: a Journey to the Center" (2024-25) | THU-HUONG HA



Detail of Pannaphan Yodmanee, "Aftermath" (2016/2025) | THU-HUONG HA

On the first floor, Southeast Asian artists make statements about religion, harmony, colonialism and memory.

"Aftermath" is an intricate and expansive mixed-media mural installation by Thai artist Pannaphan Yodmanee. The 11th Benesse Prize-winning work explores Buddhist cosmology using rocks and found objects. The artist paints traditional Thai art motifs directly onto stone and displays stupas below, while figures who seem straight out of Buddhist hell look on. Moving right across the mural, horse-backed Europeans shoot at loin-clothed natives in an endless cycle of suffering.

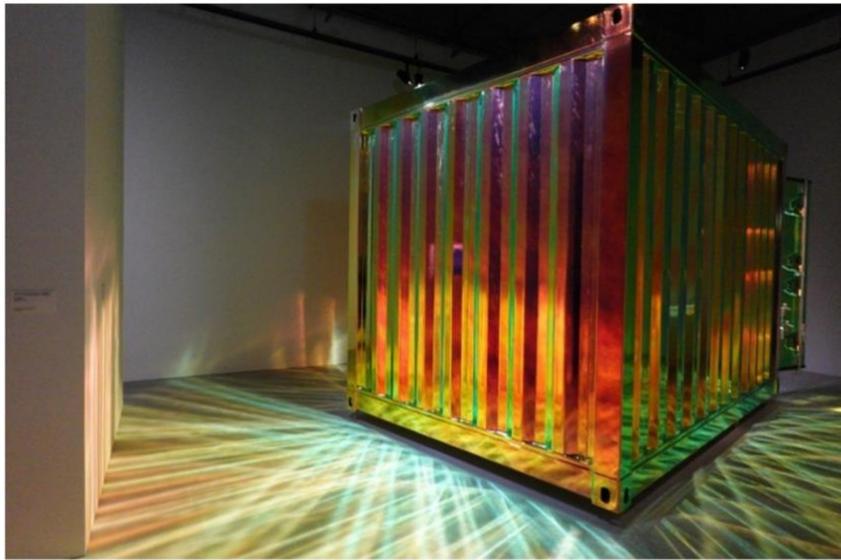
Indonesian husband-and-wife pair indieguerillas, comprising Dyatmiko "Miko" Bawono and Santi Ariestyowanti, collaborated with established Indonesian artist Heri Dono for seven pieces that make up the installation "Consciousness of Humanity: a Journey to the Center." Bright cartoon-like acrylics on wood draw on imagery from traditional Javanese puppet theater. The figurative illustrations were originally meant to be a public art work connecting a mosque and a church, says Bawono. But the commission didn't work out. "(The government) preferred a more neutral work with only shapes, like circles and triangles," he says, adding that he's glad their vision could be executed on Naoshima.



Do Ho Suh, "Hub/s, Naoshima, Seoul, New York, Horsham, London, Berlin" (2025) | THU-HUONG HA

One floor down is a gallery containing Do Ho Suh's "Hub," an ongoing series that's brought the London-based Korean artist to global renown. Suh creates to-scale fabric and steel replicas of rooms and spaces he's lived in in Seoul, New York, Berlin, among others. For this iteration, he adds the hallway of a house from Naoshima, connecting it to previously made spaces. Though other works in this architectural series feature detailed fixtures like stoves, toilets and radiators, the ones here appear as one extended hallway, connecting place to place to place, smooth and nonspecific.

On the lowest floor are three provocateurs of Japan's contemporary art world. Makoto Aida's newly commissioned "Monument for Nothing — Red Torii Gate," part of his ongoing project of the same name, critiques Japan and its leadership. A distorted torii gate sculpture looms over the space of the gallery, covered in low-res images collected from the news over the past three decades, a period in which Japan's economy has suffered and its birth rate has declined. The faces of Japanese politicians, with appearances by U.S. President Donald Trump and Steve Jobs, adorn the gate. One image shows former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe wearing his infamous "Abenomask," while another shows him flanked by other former heads of government and cracking up. Thin sprouts rise up from all over the deformed figure, intended to represent hope for Japan's future — but they only manage to make the form look even more grotesque and diseased.



Chim ↑ Pom from Smappa!Group, "The Sweet Box: Michi in Transit" (2024-present) | THU-HUONG HA

The artist collective popularly known as Chim↑Pom shows elements from its Michi (as in, "street") work in Tokyo's Koenji neighborhood, part of their "Sukurappu ando Birudo" ("scrap and build") project. Documents, sofa parts, hoses, pipes and other debris from the demolitions of the former Parco building in Shibuya and Kabukicho Shopping District Promotion Association building are squashed into a box reminiscent of a shipping container, in a statement on Japan's constant construction and rebuilding.

Stretching between the two works is Takashi Murakami's 13-meter-wide "Rakuchu-Rakugai-zu Byobu: Iwasa Matabei RIP," based on Iwasa Matabei's Edo Period (1603-1868) National Treasure screens depicting life in Kyoto, which the artist has updated since 2023. Finally, 99 life-sized wolf sculptures in Cai Guo-Qiang's "Head On," which has traveled all over the world from its debut in Berlin, now live on Naoshima as part of Fukutake's collection.



Cai Guo-Qiang, "Head On" (2006) | THU-HUONG HA

After the subterranean wolves, there's respite at the museum cafe. Breezy at the same time that it feels slightly weighted by the sea air and charged by the energy of trees tossed by the wind, the space contains a newly commissioned work by Indian artist N. S. Harsha.

Harsha seized the chance to work on the cafe. "I really like when art is positioned in a place where it's not exactly a museum, it's at the threshold," he says.

"Happy Married Life" consists of panels telling three stages of a story about a wedding. "It's been a longtime idea of mine to get a microscope and telescope married. I wanted them to get married. It's time!" the artist says, chuckling. It's playful and joyful — Harsha's name means "happiness," so it sort of goes with the territory, he says — but the work also represents a union between what he sees as two components inside each of us, internal and external visions.

That cheer is somewhat at odds with the depictions of suffering and political critiques on display throughout the rest of the museum, but it's a nice moment of whimsy against Ando's sleek, spare monochrome.

It's worth noting that the new museum is one of the few art spaces on Naoshima that allows photography. Perhaps that's why the museum leans a bit too heavily on large-scale, Instagram-worthy crowd-pleasers. Which is unfortunate because the mix of critical Japanese works and works by younger Southeast Asian artists makes the Naoshima New Museum of Art otherwise a welcome addition to the larger Western-focused Benesse complex.



N. S. Harsha, "Happy Married Life" (2025) | THU-HUONG HA

Most of the indoor Naoshima spaces have long had a no-photo policy, which allows for more actual art-viewing, as opposed to the kind of look-at-me-looking-at-art experience that has become the norm at clogged art shows. One has to wonder if the new photography policy is pandering in a way Naoshima has largely been able to avoid (with the exception of its famous pumpkin, the rare public artwork that has its own self-governing line).

Fukutake's shift to Asian art is more than a lofty vision of the world's future creative center — it's a shrewd commercial move for the tycoon who's already completely remade the island and region. Takamatsu Airport serves daily low-cost flights to and from Seoul, Hong Kong, Shanghai and Taipei, making Naoshima an international weekend getaway that's as convenient (or inconvenient) from East Asia as from Tokyo. Streets of old-style Japanese houses are wedged in with cafes catering to foreign tourists, and a quiet slope is quickly interrupted by visitors shouting to each other as they fly by on motorized bicycles. The ferries and long queues are filled with the bustling excitement of languages from around the world, people holding up their phones, ready to look and be looked at.



The entrance to the Naoshima New Museum of Art displays its oddly hard to read logo. | THU-HUONG HA