

Components of Human Folly: A Conversation with Jacob Hashimoto

by Victor Cassidy | 6 May 2019



Infinite Expanse of Sky / Superabundant Atmosphere, 2008–09. Vellum, silk, bamboo, wire, and wood, installation view. Photo: Michele Alberto Sereni, Courtesy Studio la Città, Verona, Italy

When Jacob Hashimoto entered the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, he planned to become a Minimalist painter like Robert Ryman, Brice Marden, or Agnes Martin. At one point, he ran out of ideas and just sat by his easel. His father counseled him to keep going to class until his brain kicked back in and to start doing something with his hands, like making model airplanes. Hashimoto chose to build kites, and soon he began to hang tiny kite forms on steel wires in front of his paintings.

He created his first installation in his apartment after completing school in 1996. For about a year, he handcrafted 1,000 small, circular forms in bamboo, vellum, and thread. Well-connected people saw this work and—long story short—Hashimoto ended up installing a much larger version, *Infinite Expanse of Sky (10,000 Kites)* (1998), at Chicago's Museum of Contemporary Art. Now grouped with artists such as Maya Lin, Tara Donovan, and El Anatsui, Hashimoto continues to assemble large, ceiling-hung installations that recall relief sculpture and wall works that look like three-dimensional paintings. Composed of countless small paper and wood kites, circles, ellipses, hexagons, or squares strung together with long threads, his works

create deep space (or the illusion of it), with parts seeming to advance or recede. In his installations, he lifts sculpture from the floor to fill surrounding space, so that viewers cannot see the entire installation from any single vantage point but must move around and through it to absorb what's there.

Victor M. Cassidy: You started with abstract landscape painting and used your layered technique to pull painting off the wall and into the viewer's space. Next you leapt into installation. When you made your first installation in your apartment, were you experimenting with ways of shaping space?

Jacob Hashimoto: I was thinking less about space and more about how viewers tended to interact with the work. Sculptures reference you physically in a way that painting often does not. I was interested in shifting the responsibility for establishing a viewpoint to the audience instead of dictating what people were seeing. I wanted to give them a more substantial experience than standing before a painting at a fixed point—telling them that these are the things the artist wants you to see, how you're supposed to read them, and that these



The Eclipse, 2017. Paper, screenprint, bamboo, wire, and cotton, view of work as installed at the Palazzo Flangini, Venice Biennale. Photo: Michele Alberto Sereni, Courtesy Studio la Città, Verona, Italy



Superabundant Atmosphere, 2005. Silk, bamboo, and Dacron, installation view.
Photo: Courtesy Jacob Hashimoto Studio

are things that optimize your experience. I was trying to get away from the conventions and restrictions that come with working on canvas to see where the sculptural environment could take us. It was related to painting, but not quite painting.

VMC: Cloud forms have been major elements in your work ever since *Infinite Expanse of Sky (10,000 Kites)*. Did they come from the mountainous Pacific Northwest where you grew up?

JH: They do. There was a big sky in Washington. When I moved to Chicago, all I could see of the sky were little flutters of clouds moving across the windows between buildings. If I looked straight up in downtown Chicago, I could see clouds scudding past. That was my relationship with nature. The move to Chicago was really tough for me in terms of my reaction to the environment. When I looked up at those little patches, those little rectangles of sky, there was nothing between the clouds and myself. The clouds started to follow me. A sense of freedom set them off. Building cloud-like installations was a meditation on getting out of the city and back to nature. Ironically, ever since I started making them, I've been living in cities—first Los Angeles and now New York.

VMC: After *Infinite Expanse of Sky*, you outsourced much of the hand labor in your work and used 3D computer modeling to design new sculptures. Industrial methods save time and deliver identical forms, so how does accident enter your work nowadays?

JH: Those changes didn't really decrease the amount of work that I do. As the pieces got bigger and more



Skyfarm Fortress (detail), 2014. Paper, bamboo, acrylic, and Dacron, dimensions variable. Photo: Cesar Arredondo, Courtesy Jacob Hashimoto Studio

complex, my practice became more complicated. Everything was just more. The work that I do on each piece is still enormous. Accident is present throughout my working process because I do all of the assembly and major drawings that go into each sculpture. I can make a mistake drawing, have a happy accident, or discover something about how I do things—that becomes part of the process. Accidents are constantly happening. It's how each kite, each module, is assembled. My process has an intuitive, organic character—the components of human folly.

VMC: *Superabundant Atmosphere* (2005) made particularly effective use of its space. From a distance, it looked like a billowing cloud that filled most of the gallery and vanished into its back end. Close up, it dissolved into rows of kites with profiles like thin slivers. From a passageway behind, visitors could see

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Never Comes Tomorrow, 2015. Steel, ABS, wood, vinyl stickers, and Plexiglas, installation view. Photo: Michele Alberto Sereni, Courtesy Studio la Città, Verona, Italy

VMC: Superabundant Atmosphere (2005) made particularly effective use of its space. From a distance, it looked like a billowing cloud that filled most of the gallery and vanished into its back end. Close up, it dissolved into rows of kites with profiles like thin slivers. From a passageway behind, visitors could see black vertical lines—the threads that held the kites. How did you design these effects?

JH: I planned very little of it in advance. I had an idea of the shape and knew that we were going to start in the back corner at the ceiling. After hiring assistants, I got on a scaffold and hung pieces up. Since I could not touch every single element, I functioned like the first violinist in a chamber orchestra. I played my own part and trusted that my assistants would contribute independently. A lot of different voices went into the final composition.

VMC: In the spectacular Skyfarm Fortress (2014), colorful, patterned, cloud-like forms floated up by the ceiling, accompanied by a large rectangular column and small squares collaged with grass shapes at floor level. This marked a bold departure from your white cloud pieces. Do you try out new forms and concepts in your wall works and then translate the successes to your installations?

JH: At a certain point, I realized that I could continue making huge, minimal cloud sculptures, but they weren't challenging me enough. Because the wall works are smaller, they have more adventure in them. I used them to develop a huge visual vocabulary that I deployed in *Skyfarm Fortress* to bring something new to sculptural installation. Earlier versions of *Skyfarm Fortress* were a little more organic, but by the time the piece went up in the gallery, it was really precise and hard-edged. At that time, I was moving toward a digital world—nature in XYZ coordinates. I was really excited about the relationship between the organic language that I'd been working with for a long time and this new, or newly available, digital frontier that I was discovering.

VMC: Never Comes Tomorrow (2015), one of your most wildly imaginative installations to date, is also very narrative. You call it a “fetishized space object that spoke, to me at least, about sci-fi optimism, magic, idealization, and inexactitude.” What the hell does that mean?

JH: The title comes from Sun Ra, and the work is a sort of self-portrait built out of all the stuff that's shaped my aesthetic and narrative sensibility over the years. *Never Comes Tomorrow* is a mashed-up collage of references to music, bike racing, Minimalism, conceptualism, fetishism, and armchair politics. It's built on a cubed, three-dimensional grid that conjures Sol LeWitt, but at the same time as it references Minimalist abstraction, it's so much more wonky—nothing really lines up in any defined system. The whole structure, which isn't predicated

on a finite conceptual system, refers to LeWitt and even Judd, but because it uses their achievements as building blocks rather than as ends in themselves, it illuminates something about the practice of growth through disrespect. Two big steel cones or funnels like wormholes stretch through the piece and bind it end to end. They're open-celled constructions, with lenses or gels in them that make them feel like Tiffany lamps or stained glass windows that have been imploded. The whole thing is stuck together with stickers and screws, resulting in something like a black hole machine of memories and ideals—a past vision of a new future.

I was interested in how I got to where I was. I used stickers for years as a kid. When I was 12 years old, I made a sculpture that had stickers all over it. The graphics and tiny stickers come directly out of the wall works. I started sticker-bombing the work and created a much more complex visual. The trumpet-shaped element on the front of the piece represents a black hole.

VMC: This is one of your first pieces with a narrative to it.

JH: The cloud pieces have an implied narrative. *Never Comes Tomorrow* does the same thing, but it's much more specific in terms of its reference points. The monochromatic sculptures almost embody a distilled narrative about landscape. You know the relationship of image to object, which is something that artists were concerned with for a large part of the 20th century.

VMC: You have galleries on both U.S. coasts and in Chicago. Since 2002, the Italian dealer Studio la Città has shown your work every other year, published handsome exhibition catalogues, and made European connections for you. You have responded to this support and encouragement by doing your most imaginative, challenging installations there.

JH: It's true. We started working together in about 1999, and I did my first show with them in 2000. I've had a show there every two or three years since. Hélène de Franchis, the owner, is an amazing old-school dealer of the kind that you never see anymore. She found me when I was very young. When we started out, I was making very experimental work and

living hand to mouth. We showed all over Europe, but rarely sold work or made money. I'd come back to the U.S., take a day job, make new work, return to Europe, and show it there. Madame de Franchis was always very interested in just how good the projects were, how innovative. Even if my ideas seemed crazy, she always got behind them. It was like having a workshop where I could test my ideas.

The audience in Italy is really engaged in watching me fail or succeed. That makes Studio la Città a great place to work. We're doing a new show in 2019, and I'm trying to figure out how crazy a sculpture I can make. It's nice to find people who will take risks with you. I'm hugely thankful.

"The Heartbeat of Irreducible Curves," Jacob Hashimoto's latest show at Studio la Città, opened on May 4 and runs through November 9, 2019.

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