

# MIKA NAKAMURA-MATHER

## THE FLOATING WORD

WEBB GALLERY & PROJECT GALLERY, QUEENSLAND COLLEGE OF ART, BRISBANE  
4–20 MAY 2017

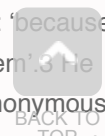
The exhibition's title, *The Floating Word*, riffs on the commonly known Japanese concept of 'the floating world', which refers to the leisure culture of wealthy society in the prosperous Edo period (1603-1868). But here, the euphemism is slightly altered and utilised by artist Mika Nakamura-Mather to refer to the floating, drifting nature of her memories of her childhood home in Japan. It has been over a quarter of a century since she left Japan, and despite her memories waning, her 'sense of belonging [to that home] is growing stronger'.<sup>1</sup>

Positioned in the centre of the exhibition, resting above a low table on five tatami (bamboo mats), are words that appear to literally float inside a set of four masu (wooden sake cups). These floating texts mark the four seasons in antithetical sets; for example, the English word 'winter' is paired with the Japanese character for summer, in reference to the difference in hemispheres between Japan and Australia. The cups prompt an immediate empathy with the bi-lingual and bi-cultural experience, in which one's mother tongue (and mother land) remains a reference but can also fade into the background with time.

*Telescoping (the tyranny of distance) (2015-16)* are multiple text works framed by cylindrical 'lenses' made from bamboo. By looking closely through the bamboo frames, a viewer can read, in English and Japanese, short phrases representing impressions of the artist's first home. The texts represent the four seasons through the five senses, such as 'the smell of spring rain', or 'wind chimes in the evening', and the 'touch of tatami mats'. A viewer must carefully approach each frame, one-by-one, to view the text, demanding a certain amount of time to appreciate each meaning and feeling. Moreover, the compartmentalised presentation of the texts resembles the incomplete and unorganised nature of Nakamura-Mather's memories as they disassemble over time.

For the artist, it is the association made between home and a specific material—wood—that has been the inspiration for most of the exhibition. Wood has a profound importance in historical and contemporary Japan, and, in the artist's words, it holds 'emotional possibilities'.<sup>2</sup> It is an essential structural and aesthetic element of traditional Japanese-style housing, and it is therefore an essential part of Nakamura-Mather's memories of her first home, a wooden house that stood in a Tokyo neighbourhood. Even as a porous and fibrous material, wood is extraordinarily capable of absorbing shock; it is strong, but it is also a material that visibly 'remembers'.

Nostalgia is another strong theme in the works. In wider scope, nostalgia is employed throughout many Japanese arts, from folk singers and poets to contemporary novelists such as Kazuo Ishiguro. In a 2001 interview, the Japanese-born British writer Ishiguro echoes the Japanese-born British/Australian artist Nakamura-Mather's creative interests: 'because of my history, there is a part of me that has an irrational fondness for the textures of memory and recreating them'.<sup>3</sup> He also laments the fact that nostalgia tends to get 'a pretty bad press' in England, his second home, as being synonymous with a vague sense of nationalism.<sup>4</sup> This could likewise be said about Australia. But in Ishiguro's writing, and many parts



of Japanese culture in general, nostalgia is treated as a more innocent expression, especially as it is applied to the seasons. Owarete mita nowa, Itsu no hi ka (I've lost what I saw, some day in the past) is a line from a traditional Japanese autumn song, 'The Red Dragonfly'. For those who delight in nostalgia, there is a beauty to be celebrated in the progress (and loss) of the seasons, which heavily relies on the pleasure of remembering.

When interviewed, the artist agreed that there is a strong sense of nostalgia in her work, which is what gives her practice personal meaning and purpose.<sup>5</sup> As a visual interpretation of her gradual process of forgetting, art works like *The Silent Sadness of Decay Theory* (2017) are a set of photo transfers on wooden supports, rendered in what she describes as autumnal colours.<sup>6</sup> The images are of her childhood home, possibly taken from a family photo album, but left incomplete because of missing squares cut from the timber, or parts left outside of the image's original frame. In their fragility, and in the colours of a season synonymous with old age and the arrival of winter, these works are ready for a nostalgic viewer to gaze upon and think longingly of what has been lost.

## EMILY WAKELING

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**Mika Nakamura-Mather**, *Telescoping (the tyranny of distance)*, 2015-2016. Japanese indigenous bamboo, kyogi paper, natural Japanese mineral pigments, ink, dimensions variable. Courtesy the artist.



**Mika Nakamura-Mather**, *Telescoping (the tyranny of distance)*, 2015-2016. Japanese indigenous bamboo, kyogi paper, natural Japanese mineral pigments, ink, dimensions variable. Courtesy the artist.



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**Mika Nakamura-Mather**, *The silent sadness of Decay Theory*, 2015-2017. Courtesy the artist.



**Mika Nakamura-Mather**, *The silent sadness of Decay Theory*, 2015-2017. Courtesy the artist.

**notes:**

1. M. Nakamura-Mather, *Notions of Home: Constant, Fluid, and Mobile*, Doctor of Visual Art, Queensland College of Art, Brisbane, 2017, p.2.
2. *Ibid.*, p.15.
3. R. Gilhooly & Y. Hani, 'Kazuo Ishiguro: In Praise of Nostalgia as Idealism', *Japan Times*, 28 Oct 2001, See <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/community/2001/10/28/general/kazuo-ishiguro...>
4. Gilhooly & Hani, *ibid.*
5. Interview with the artist, 20 May 2017.
6. Interview, *ibid.*

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