

THE DENVER POST

FRIDAY, MARCH 9, 2007

VISUALARTS

Beneath the surface, a wealth of meaning

Illusion and transformation. Repetition and ritual. Humbleness and refinement. Metaphor and personal history.

By Kyle MacMillan: Denver Post Fine Arts Critic

Illusion and transformation. Repetition and ritual. Humbleness and refinement. Metaphor and personal history.

These qualities suffuse the quiet, visual poetry of bronze sculptor Yoshitomo Saito, an exciting new addition to the Denver art scene who is showcased through March 17 in a solo exhibition at the Rule Gallery.

If some of his works appear at first to be minimalist, distilled to the barest elements of form, color and material, closer study reveals they are anything but. They carry an array of outside meanings overt and covert.

All are rooted in some way in the Japanese-born artist's rich personal and cultural history, and all are his attempts to answer the questions he constantly asks himself, none more dogged than: "Why objectmaking? What is an art object?"

However simple and straightforward these sculptures might seem on the surface, they are in fact deceptively rich and complex, operating on an engaging multiplicity of formal, conceptual and metaphorical levels.

This depth helps explain why Saito has built an international reputation, with reviews in *Art in America* and *Sculpture* magazine and works included in the collections of the Oakland Art Museum and de Young Museum in San Francisco.

At the heart of this exhibition is the title work, "108 Blue Cranes," which consists of 108 1-foot squares that stretch at eye level in a single line running along a 100-foot wall and spilling onto a back wall.

It is a stunning sight, a rare melding of art and space that is made possible by the sleek gallery's long, narrow shape.

Each square appears at a glance to be a painted canvas meant to look like a bronze surface with a blue-green patina, an effect some artists have tried to achieve with metallic paints.

And indeed, Saito acknowledges that this 2005 work was inspired in part by monochromatic paintings of David Simpson that employ such an approach. But Saito decided to turn the illusion inside out.

Using a mold of a canvas, he created cast-bronze wall pieces that look surprisingly realistic, complete with the fabric's textures and folds along the sides.

Though each is essentially identical, Saito allows the natural

effects of the casting process - scratches, hollows and blemishes - to endow each square with subtle yet distinctive differences. Unlike many artists who rely on commercial foundries to realize projects of this kind, he does all his own casting. Each work is unique. There are no editions.

The work's insistent and in some ways comforting repetition mimics the 108 blows traditionally given to bronze bells on New Year's Eve in the Japanese Buddhist tradition to ward off bad spirits.

The title is derived from two very different sources. It rhymes with the artist's favorite jazz album, John Coltrane's "Blue Train." And it relates to the origami cranes that are often given in Japan as wishes of health and happiness.

The piece was driven by an unspecified bad incident in Saito's life, and the ritualistic fabrication of the 108 largely identical components was an attempt to achieve a sense of catharsis. This history can be sensed in some distant, unconscious way.

The kind of illusion, even deception, found in "108 Blue Cranes" runs through everything in this show, from a group of three pillows on the floor to a wall covered with flat, unfolded boxes and containers in myriad shapes - all highly realistically cast in bronze.

"Faking and lying are an interesting trait of the animal kingdom to me," Saito writes in his artist's statement. "While I dislike deception, I find the language of 'faking artistic' thought provoking as a theme for sculpture."

The notions of deception and the creation of art from the ordinary reach their subversive apex in "Untitled (Starry Night No. 1)" (2007), in which Saito has cast a textured reproduction of Van Gogh's famous painting.

Blurring high and low art and illusion and transformation, he has taken what was a kind of cheap, throwaway reproduction of an artistic masterpiece and converted it back to what it was originally - a unique, sophisticated work.

Saito might have only arrived in Denver last summer, but with this exquisite exhibition, he is making his presence felt in a big way.

