



The Oneness of an Endless Universe

A Conversation with **Mariko
Mori**



BY JAN GARDEN CASTRO

Mariko Mori has the tact of a Swiss diplomat and the drive to pursue ambitious artistic goals. Her work, which promotes oneness and global consciousness, explores universal questions at the intersection of life, death, reality, and technology. She has had solo exhibitions at venues around the world, including the Royal Academy of Arts in London, the Japan Society in New York, and Espace Louis Vuitton in Tokyo; and her work features in a number of important collections, including the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris, the Fondazione Prada in Milan, the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago, the Israel Museum in Jerusalem, and the Museum of Modern Art in New York. She received the Menzione d'onore at the 1997 Venice Biennale (for *Nirvana*) and the Japan Cultural Arts Foundation's 2001 award for an Artist and Scholar in the Field of Contemporary Japanese Art. Her work has also been included in biennials in Venice, Istanbul, Sydney, Shanghai, São Paulo, and Singapore.

Mori first earned widespread recognition for *Wave UFO* (1999–2002), an interactive installation that debuted at the Kunsthhaus Bregenz in Austria and was subsequently shown in New York with the Public Art Fund and included in the 2005 Venice Biennale. Mori's large sculpture, *Sun Pillar* (2011), was the first work for her Faou Foundation, whose mission is to install art symbolizing the high goals of human civilization on six continents. In 2016, the second permanent work, *Ring*, will be installed above a waterfall near Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Our conversation followed Mori's public discussion with Princeton astrophysicist Paul J. Steinhardt, an event sponsored by Sean Kelly Gallery in conjunction with the exhibition, "Mariko Mori: Cyclicscape," March 21–May 2, 2015.*

Opposite: *Ekpyrotic String III*, 2014. Aluminum, paint, and lacquer, 77.31 x 77.31 x 42.125 in. Above: *Cyclic XI*, 2014. Aluminum, paint, lacquer, and mirror-polished stainless steel, 48.125 x 55.06 x 59.375 in.



Ring, 2012. Lucite and stainless steel cables, 3 x 49.5 in. diameter.

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Jan Garden Castro: *Could you talk about your Faou project to create six places of natural beauty worldwide? What is your vision?*

Mariko Mori: Our mission is to install site-specific permanent installations on each of the six continents to share the concept of oneness. Each work will honor a different aspect of nature on earth, landscapes inherited from many previous generations. We hope to pass this natural beauty on to future generations. From prehistoric times, our ancestors have created monuments such as Stonehenge and the standing stones, the Easter Island monuments, and Native American totem poles. We would like to extend this tradition of symbols that will unite humanity.

JGC: *Can you share specifics about the site in Japan and the progress in Brazil?*

MM: We began with Miyako Island in the Okinawa Prefecture, where they have continued a tradition, unchanged since the 13th century, of worshipping nature. They have hundreds of rituals annually and mythologies based on sun and moon gods. I wanted to honor and revitalize the local culture and also to share the concept of rebirth that I found at prehistoric sites. The sun and the solstice were important elements; the winter solstice signals the rebirth of nature,

with spring beginning again. I also wanted to honor the local mythology specifically in *Sun Pillar* and *Moon Stone*, which symbolize the marriage between the sun and the moon. Of course, the beauty of the surroundings is the key, and we hope that people will interact with the work and will discover that we are not only a part of nature—we are nature.

JGC: *How is the Brazil project going?*

MM: Very well. We are part of the Celebra cultural project for the 2016 Rio Olympics. We found a waterfall surrounded by magnificent landscape, located just 1.5 hours from Rio de Janeiro and easy to reach. It is called Petropolis. The production has already started, and we hope to install everything prior to the Olympic Games next year. The monumental sculpture, called *Ring*, will be installed over the waterfall.

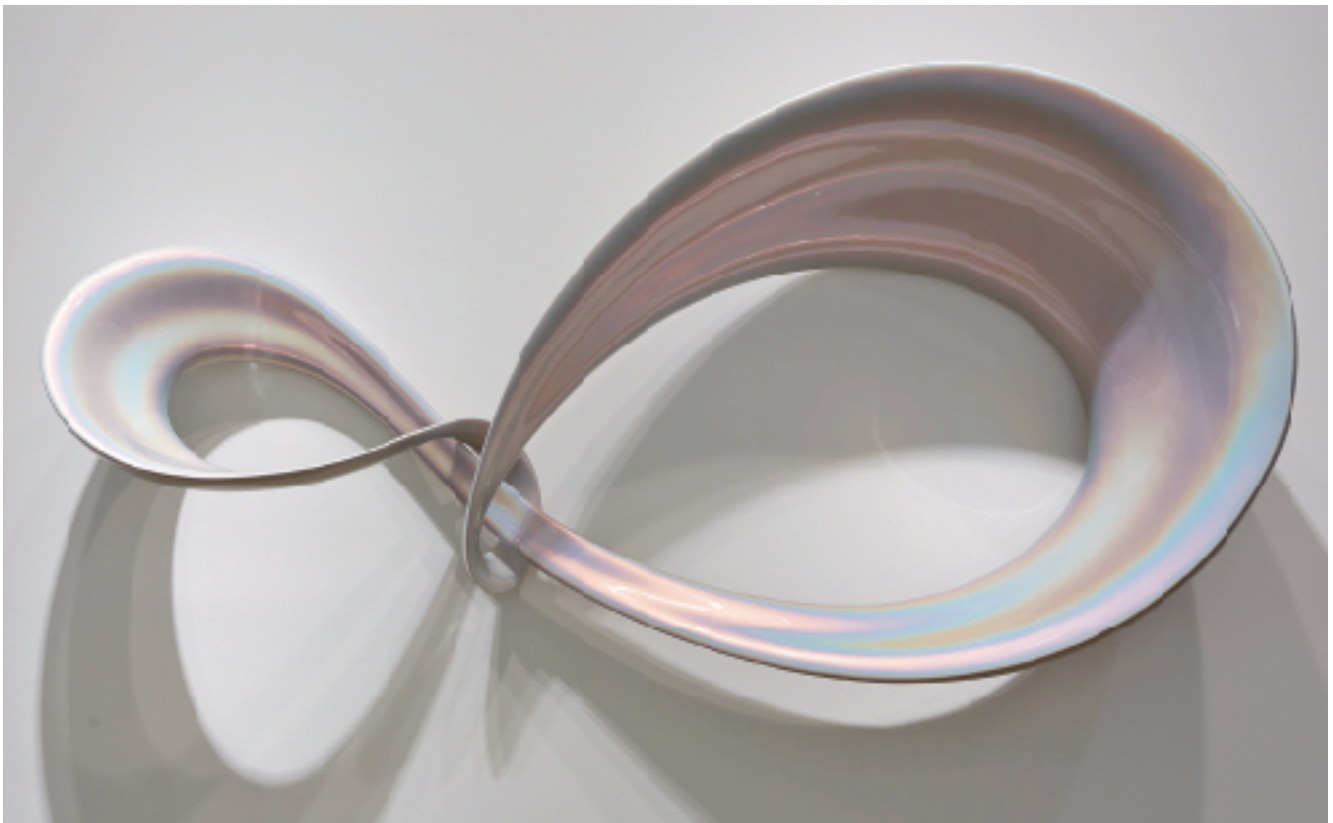
JGC: *Do you have the four other sites picked out yet?*

MM: Some of them. We have selected a site in Western Australia and one in South Africa. The European and North American sites have yet to be determined.

JGC: *You began your career photographing yourself and others in faux corporate settings. What triggered your transition in 1999 to the origins of culture and particle physics?*

MM: The earlier work was a social criticism of the position of Japanese women, and it also focused on the simulacra of reality created by computer games. In 1996, I started to use the iconography of Buddhism and Shintoism, which is the traditional culture of Japan. Then, in order to depict the philosophy behind it, I realized that I no longer needed to use my own body in my work and that I needed, instead, to express deep consciousness in a more abstract way. The work became more architectural on the outside to house people inside it.

Ekpyrotic String II, 2014. Fiberglass, paint, and lacquer, 39.75 x 78.75 x 18.125 in.





Top: *Sun Pillar*, 2011. Layered acrylic, 157 in. high. Bottom: *Moon Stone* (video still of work-in-progress), 2015.

Then, by searching for deeper consciousness, I began to relate it to science, which led to the idea of dark matter, dark energy, extra dimensions, primal particles, and the discovery of neutrinos.

In 2003, I started to research prehistoric cultures in order to find out more about how our ancestors understood themselves to be deeply rooted in nature, a belief reflected in their monuments and archaeological sites. I wanted to bring their message to viewers, while, at the same time, incorporating and reflecting on new scientific ideas available today. Through this mixture, I proposed to bring together ideas of oneness and connectivity and rebirth.

JGC: *You combine the insights of early cultures with the discoveries of physics and astrophysics, focusing on neutrinos, supernovae, and the possibility of infinite renewal—as in the title of your exhibition “Cyclicscape.” To give form to your theories of continual rebirth, these works involve design, engineering, intuition, and CNC and other fabricating processes. Could you discuss your process for developing the forms in the “Ekpyrotic” series?*

MM: It starts from a sketch; then my production team applies the program that creates different endless forms like the Möbius. From that, the forms are produced; in some, two Möbius strips are connected, and in others, it’s one that circles around. I then select the most successful 3D forms and send the files to our fabricator to produce the physical work.

JGC: *These works were done in aluminum?*

MM: Yes, cast aluminum. We use special paint with holographic effects, which is produced by Lechler in Como, Italy, but the work is fabricated and painted in Madrid.

JGC: *How did you develop the paint?*

MM: I used this paint in *Wave UFO*, but the special colors were developed in Lechler’s laboratory for this project.

JGC: *It’s a beautiful, luminescent pearl-gray pink that changes color in the light. It really seems like you can look into it and see other worlds. How do you choose when to use fiberglass, aluminum, or bronze?*



TOP: RICHARD LEAROYD, © FAOU FOUNDATION, COURTESY SEAN KELLY, NY / BOTTOM: © FAOU FOUNDATION

Wave UFO, 1999–2002. Brainwave interface, vision dome, projector, computer system, and fiberglass, 194 x 446.5 x 207.875 in. Interior and exterior views.

I noticed that most of the sculptures in your “Infinite Renew” exhibition at the Espace Louis Vuitton were fiberglass and those in “Cyclicscape” were mostly aluminum and stainless steel.

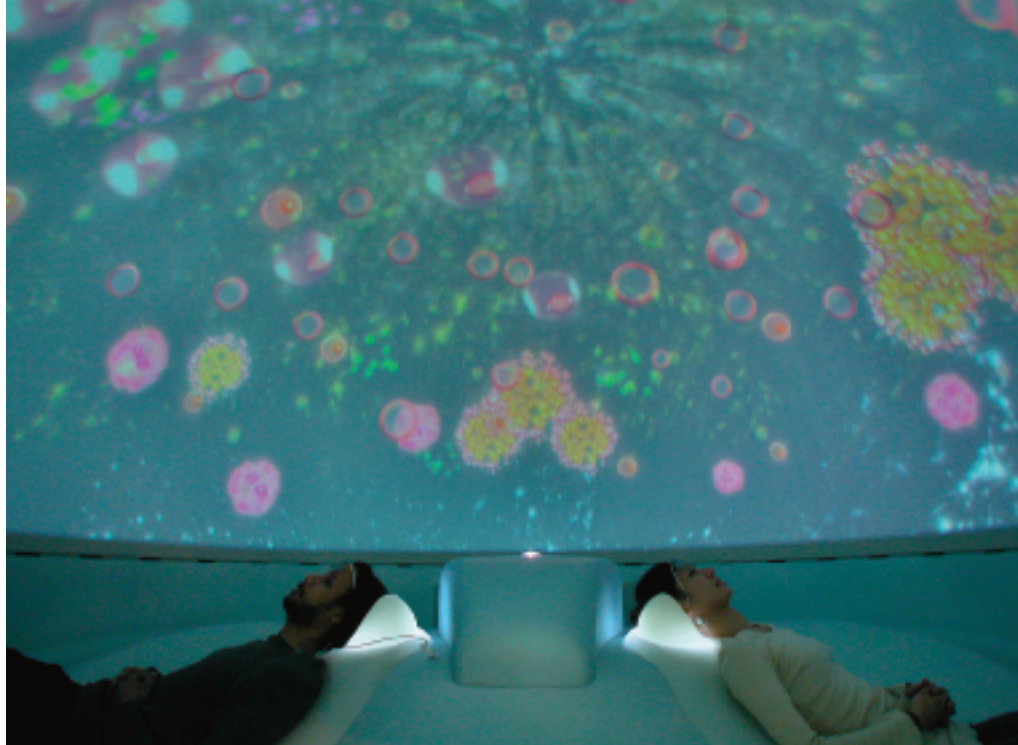
MM: The *Infinite Energy* sculptures were fiberglass because they had to be really light; at the same time, each one had to seamlessly connect 10 modules per spiral. It was all hung, because Japan has earthquakes, and I designed it so that nothing touched the floor. Aluminum is good for its lightness, but cast bronze would be better because of the flexibility of the material. I used aluminum for the outdoor work at Sean Kelly, and I hope to do more outdoor public sculptures from the “Cyclic” and “Ekpyrotic String” series.

JGC: *Your idea of multiple parallel universes seems to go further than what physicists and astrophysicists have proven, but Paul Steinhardt points out that artists have infinite imagination. Is your theory of eternal renewal based on science or faith?*

MM: The idea that inspires me from the extra dimensions and parallel universe theories is that you can expand not only visible space, but also invisible space. Also, there is no limitation on time with the theory of Endless Universe. Expanded time is a cycle of trillions of years from the Big Bang to the next big bang. What I like to promote and share is the idea of oneness. Even though space is so large, we are all connected, and we are part of it. Even though we are individuals and different from animals and plants, we came from the same origin, and share 99 percent of our DNA. The idea is that even though we see differences, our life energy is identical, equal, and connected. To do that, one part is to honor nature. I share that vision through my sculpture and photo paintings.

JGC: *What is your advice to artists today?*

MM: Artists today are privileged to have freedom and time to themselves. We are producing our work on behalf of everybody. There’s a crystal of all the thoughts and all the phenomena of today; at the same time, something is inherited from the past,



which is necessary to pass on to the future. We are not only doing this for ourselves but on behalf of the world. I hope younger artists will remember this. Significant art from the past is still communicating with us because we can transcend time and space through art. We hope our work can also communicate to future generations.

If ego drives you in the wrong direction, instead of oneness, you become selfish. But you can ask ego to cooperate with you to be connected and to achieve oneness.

Notes

* Their discussion focused on the cyclic model of the universe. According to a Mori press statement: “This model of an endless universe challenges the Big Bang theory by proposing that two branes (dynamical objects which can propagate through space-time...) collided to cause the Big Bang. Occurring in multi-dimensions of the micro-world, even smaller than primal particles, the collision of two branes can take place at any moment and in any space. The theory concludes that our universe is not the only one but part of a parallel multi-universe, with an eternal renewal of energy.” See also Paul J. Steinhardt and Neal Turok, *Endless Universe: Big Bang and Beyond* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2007). Thank you to the Sean Kelly Gallery and staff, to Mina Lee, and to Mariko Mori.

Jan Garden Castro is a writer based in New York.