

PRESSBOOK

Maria TANIGUCHI

The Artling

January 2017

ON THE WALLS: AN INTERVIEW WITH MARIA TANIGUCHI

Jan. 16, 2017 by Christina Chua



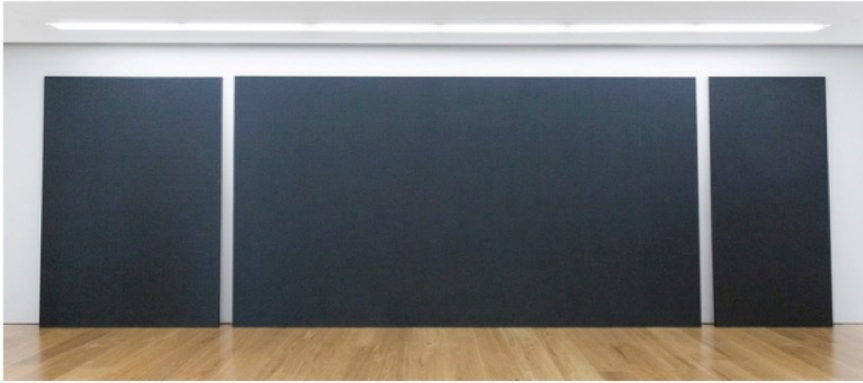
Installation view of Maria Taniguchi's exhibition at Galerie Perrotin, Hong Kong, 2016 (Image courtesy of the artist and Galerie Perrotin)

Our phone conversation was at first punctuated by stops, stumbles and reroutes. Maria Taniguchi's highly abstract work was at once a thick matrix and at other times, a thin membrane, and I felt the need to return and return again to certain points in her practice, in her process, in the space between her lines.

It was only when I surrendered a strictly formal interpretation, and when I yielded to the ebbs of a more mercurial construction, that I began to glimpse it. Thus, slowly and surely, things began to unravel to a rhythm and a logic, completely her own. The interview became a permeable opening into the artist's unusual mind, and how this durational painting project — the large and leaning, black and grey “brick paintings” for which she is most well-known — yawned out of its fabric, stretching their patterns onto her very skin.

Chantal Wong admitted in Leap Magazine that it's very difficult to talk about your work, that it's "intimidating and impossible to decode, like a brick wall keeping people out". I imagine this is because the first impression the brick paintings give is one of a cool formalism or minimalism. The monochromatic palette, and the insistent repetition immediately reminds me of such an inheritance. Does your work reference that lineage at all?

I can see why you're reading that into my work, but actually I don't see my work as coming from or inheriting any kind of lineage from the Minimalists. I admire many of the works associated with minimalism, but I never studied any of them, and I'm not seeking to align my own work within that category. The brick paintings are my way of materially creating an inner logic.



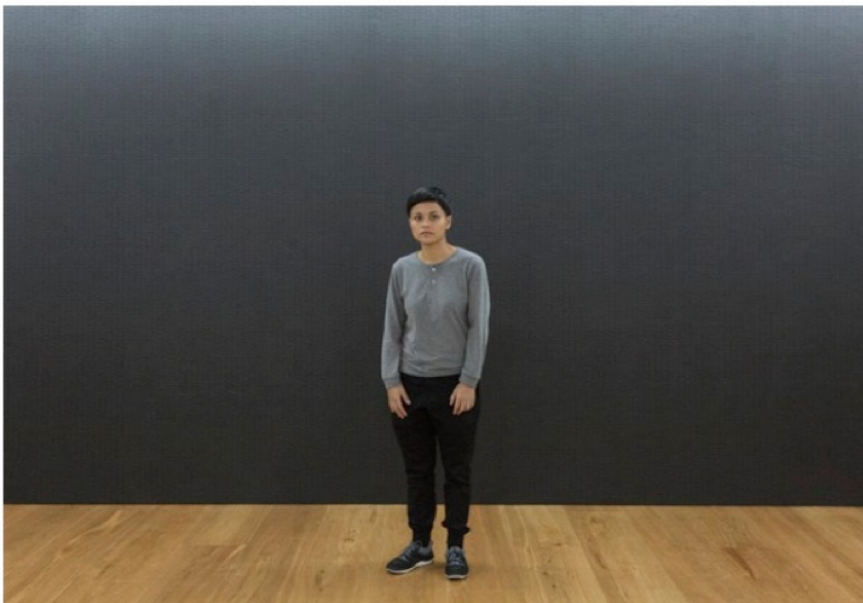
*Installation view of Maria Taniguchi's exhibition at Galerie Perrotin, Hong Kong, 2016.
Image courtesy of the artist and Galerie Perrotin*

Can you describe the internal logic of that system?

In the beginning, constructing the paintings was about creating a system for thinking, and then somehow this system insinuated itself into the larger practice. The paintings are the largest body of work that I've made so far. Over the years they've become more like an organic entity, and a kind of nervous system or an armature for the rest of the work. I see a lot of my sculptures as almost like reflections that are built into the same logic as the brick paintings.

In your own words, they "form the walls of a mental house, something that serves as architecture to contain or to hold, and in that sense, to articulate." On the one hand, you have an architectural logic that is constructed upon the basic unit of a line or brick — the foundation upon which everything else holds. And on the other, you speak of something organic, the way muscles relate to each other like reflexes.

Yes, and the contradiction is important. I began the project thinking of all of these things — skin, pattern, system, architecture. And then, like what you've mentioned about insistent repetition, the process of repeating making giant paintings made of tiny little bricks, and painting thousands of bricks over a number of years — this process insinuated itself into the larger practice organically. It's not a plan. It ceases to be a plan.



*Maria Taniguchi with one of her brick paintings.
Image courtesy of Galerie Perrotin, photography by Ringo Cheung*

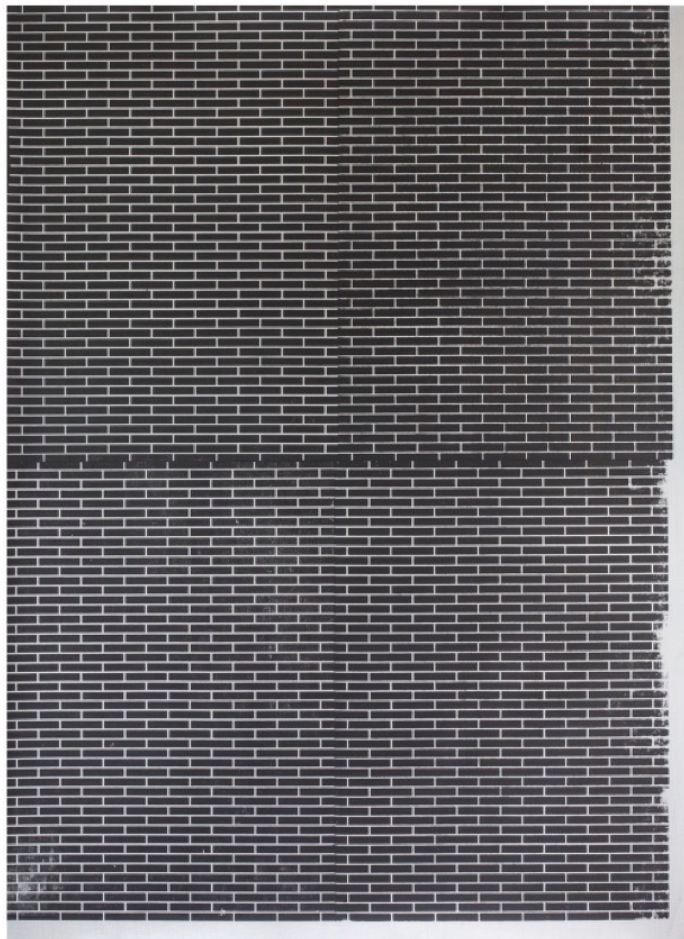
What is your process like, step by step?

These paintings come in different sizes. But most of them are very large. The largest size is about the size of my living room, as all of the paintings are made in my living room. Materially, they are paintings. They are paint on canvas. All the paintings are painted horizontally.

First, the canvas is stretched on a large wood board that is on the floor. And then, a layer of grey is put over the canvas. And then, this brick pattern — this brick matrix is drawn on top of it with pencil. After the brick pattern is drawn, I then start from one end to the other, to paint in each brick with black acrylic using this technique that's kind of like painting watercolour. It's proportions of one pigment basically. It's what gives the impression of depth for the surface because it's not a completely black surface. There are differences between the tones of each individual brick in the painting.

And if you notice, there are patterns on the surface. These patterns are because I've worked on them for several different days. Some days, I'm very into working on them so I spend maybe 15 hours painting, and it registers a whole solid block of colour because nothing changes — nothing about the process changes. But maybe the next day, I've left some of the paint out, it dries a little bit, and some of the water leaves the pigment. It's a lot darker, and I use that.

I'm not very scientific. I don't measure pigment and water to achieve an exact ratio that I thought of in preparation for making the painting, because I'm not making an image. I'm just going through the motions. I just let the paint dry, or when it's too dry to work with, I add more water. And so, the cycle starts again. The paint is a little bit thinner, so the bricks look a little bit greyer, and so on.



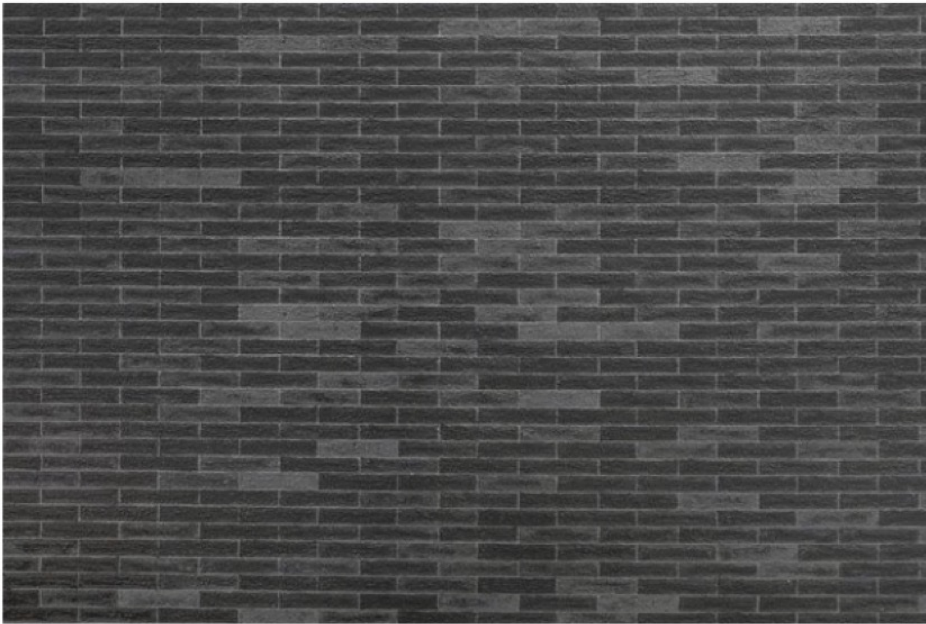
"Untitled" (2014) by Maria Taniguchi

Acrylic on Archival paper / Unique Work / 114.3cm x 83.8cm / 45.0" x 33.0" / US\$ 5,000

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Your process does illustrate this contradiction or this push and pull between a systematic construction and a reflexive intuition, in the way that you are building the same unit, while going through the automatic motions of paint application. I think that's why it's hard to talk about your work. You have to twin two completely different modes of working and thinking.

Yeah, I think that's right. That's what creates a kind of friction — though I don't quite know how to describe it. An artwork is always kind of an in-between thing. It always has to be slippery. For me, the brick paintings are really slippery things. They're very wall-like and also very object-like. And I don't hang them, so they're all kind of sculptural. They're all leaning on the wall, which I think might also be kind of funny. It's a wall on a wall.

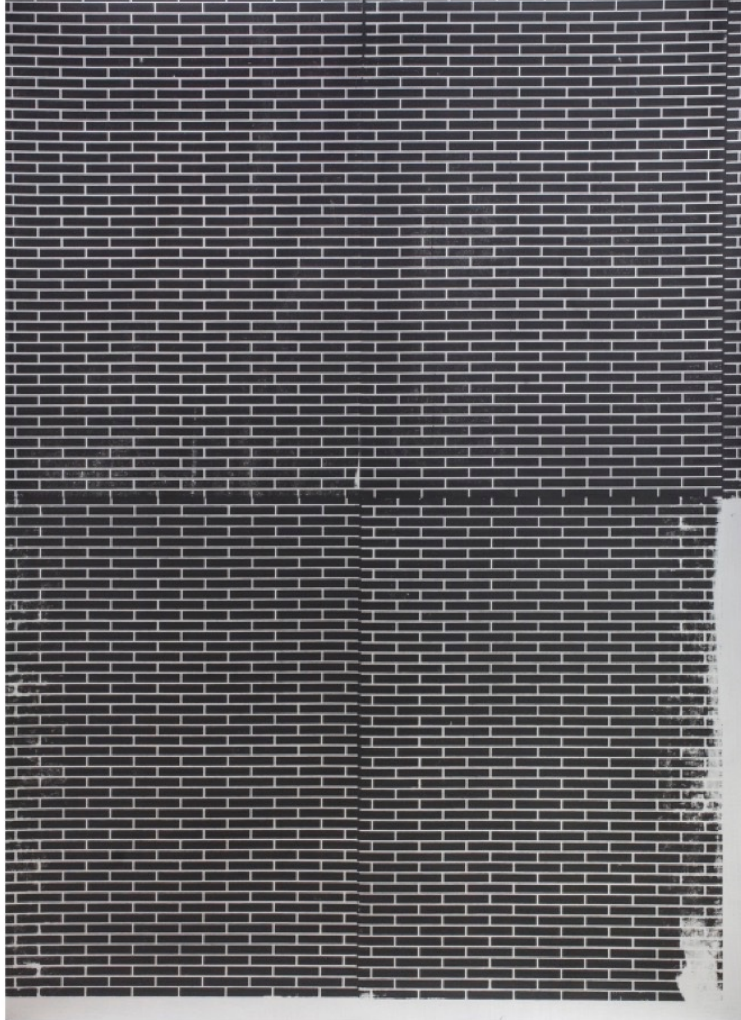


*A detail view of one of Maria Taniguchi's brick paintings
Image source unknown*

What drew you to this particular pattern at the very beginning?

Back in 2008, I was thinking only about this brick surface as a pattern that could be distributed throughout different surfaces, where the pattern remains constant, more like skin.

The pattern was also about construction, registering time and labour. And it was lots of little parts making a similar large part, because I see the brick paintings as modular things. This long-term painting project is making one big work that I suppose is never going to be put together, but it exists in my head, kind of like a graph.



"Untitled" (2014) by Maria Taniguchi

Acrylic on Archival paper / Unique Work / 114.3cm x 83.8cm / 45.0" x 33.0" / US\$ 5,000

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There are many things that you are saying this brick painting project is like — like skin, like a graph, or as it were, like paper.

Yes, it's not thick, not heavy. It's actually more light. It's not a solid thing. But it's also sculpture. It's also painting. So there are a lot of things that are completely contradictory.



*"Fountain Model 1" (detail) by Maria Taniguchi, 2016, plexiglass, UV resin, pump and PVC tubing.
Image courtesy of the artist and Galerie Perrotin, Hong Kong*

This is a far conclusion from what we began with — the thick “brick wall” that would otherwise deflect the viewer! Let’s talk about one of your sculptures. For your debut solo exhibition at Galerie Perrotin in Hong Kong, you exhibited “Fountain Model 1”, which similarly is translucent, permicable, or something more literally slippery.

It's a study after an irrigation system, as fountain. It's actually the second sketch that I've made while thinking about the Balara Water Treatment Plant in Manila. The first sketch is a short story that is coming out in January. It's a commissioned work for Heman Chong's book project, where he asked four people who normally don't write fiction to put in stories, works of fiction.

But really, *"Fountain Model 1"* is more like a drawing. It is me trying to “draw” in an abstract manner, to recreate a system of flows of the plant itself, or the feeling of invisible water that's rushing around underneath your feet as you walk around it. The treatment plant is inside a forested area, a park called Balara Filters Park. And you don't actually see any water obviously, because it's all pipes underground.



*The Balara Water Treatment Plant in Manila
Image courtesy of Manila Water*

Why the interest in this water treatment plant?

Patrick Flores, the curator of the Jorge B. Vargas Museum at the University of the Philippines approached me to work on a site-specific project for Balara. I was studying in the University of the Philippines and never realised that it was within walking distance from me.

Patrick's research has a lot to do with the geopolitics of water. At first, I thought it was a little bit random for him to approach me for this Balara project. But then I realised that I had actually worked on a very distinct kind of art deco object which is the Philippine jeepney, the public utility vehicles that came from leftover, post-war American military vehicles. Similarly, Balara is very much an American project. When it launched in 1940 after some years of planning and construction, the Philippines was still under American occupation, despite having, since 1935, a commonwealth government in preparation for independence. Many government agencies were created with American supervision (and patterned after their own), including the Metropolitan Water District. The souvenir bulletin published in 1940 for the launched registers an all-Filipino Metropolitan Water District board, with inclusion of a couple of American names of the consulting engineers.

The Balara Water Treatment Plant was constructed in 1938. It's a water filtration complex. Half of Metro Manila's water is filtered there before it's distributed through to roughly 7 million people. They process 600 million litres of water per day in that plant. The park used to be popular way back in the 70's. It used to be more like a leisure complex. They had all these leisure facilities for the water filters' staff initially, and then they opened it to the public. People would go swimming in the swimming pools, or watch plays in the amphitheatre, for example. I think nobody gives much attention to it now, except the small community at its outskirts, and the company that runs it.

The story that I wrote for Heman is based on my visiting the various points of interest, and the landmarks within the filtration complex. Somehow, I try to weave the story in with certain sculptures I have done in the past. There's a kind of commingling of fictions and realities in the story.

I'm not sure if "*Fountain Model*" necessarily will result in a bigger work or a work that ties these things together...



Fountain Model I by Maria Taniguchi, 2016.
 Image courtesy of the artist and Galerie Perrotin, Hong Kong

Considering the work alongside your brick paintings, however, I can see how you are naturally drawn to a water treatment complex. It's a very ordered system, but at the same time it conducts this continuous flow, and it is that kind of fluidity that acts as a membrane throughout your own practice.

That's right. It's a highly systematic mode that's handling something very organic.

Will you continue the long-term project of building your brick paintings?

I don't know! I'm very... what's the term for "likely to drop something at a moment's notice" — not capricious, but more like impulsive! I know it's a bizarre thing to hear from someone who's been doing it for 8 years.

But that's when you know it's completely reflexive!

Yeah, I'm doing it now with only one assistant, because I loathe to share it with anyone else. I can't, because it's not about replicating — it's about me making it.