

**Maria TANIGUCHI**

*Under the skin*

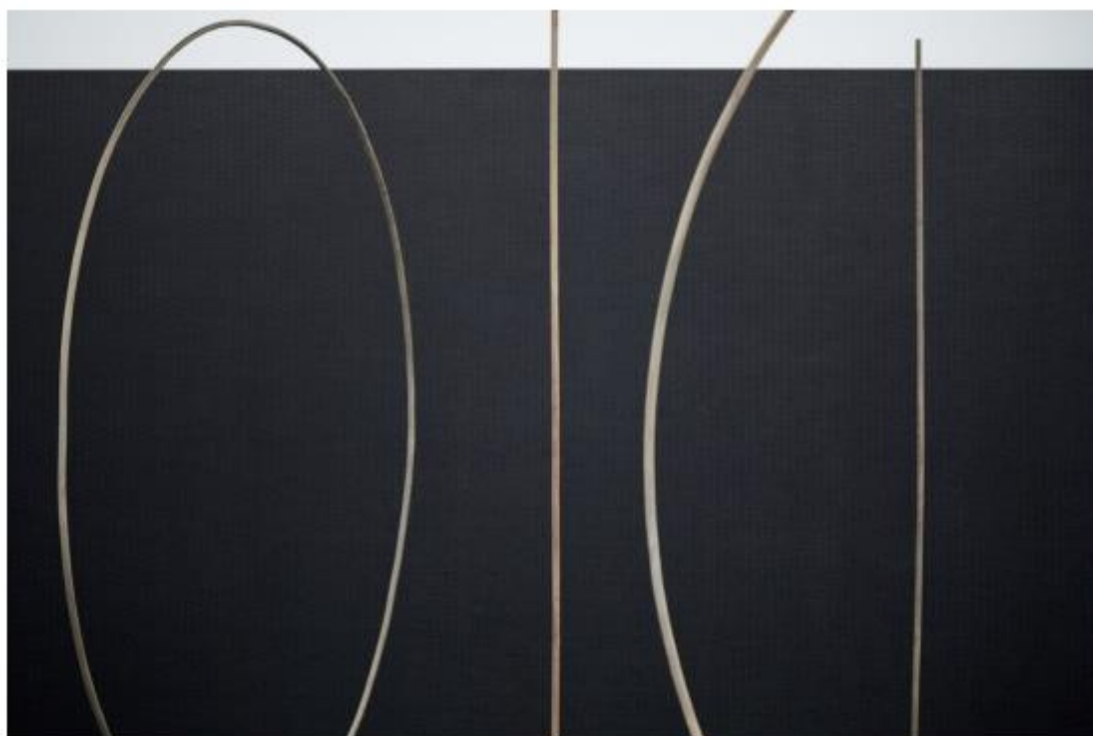
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# ART IT

Maria Taniguchi

UNDER THE SKIN

By Andrew Maerke



**All images:** Unless otherwise noted, installation view at Taka Ishii Gallery Tokyo, 2017. Photo Kenji Takahashi, courtesy Taka Ishii Gallery.

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Born in 1981 in Dumaguete City and educated at the University of the Philippines in Manila and Goldsmiths in London, Maria Taniguchi is one of the Philippines' most promising emerging artists, having already taken home the Hugo Boss Asia Art Award in 2015. Best known for her ongoing series of "brick paintings," in which tiny brick patterns are executed on massive canvases that are propped against the walls of the exhibition space, Taniguchi has

exhibited at galleries around the world, and been included in important group exhibitions like “Globale: New Sensorium,” curated by Yuko Hasegawa for ZKM Centre for Art and Media, Karlsruhe, in 2016; the 8th Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art in Brisbane in 2015; and “Don’t You Know Who I Am? Art After Identity Politics” at M HKA, Antwerp, in 2014. Featuring a selection of brick paintings and a new sculptural installation made out of thin, hand-carved wood, her current exhibition at Taka Ishii Gallery, Tokyo, is Taniguchi’s introduction to the Japanese art scene. ART IT met with Taniguchi prior to the exhibition to learn more about her work and practice.

[“Maria Taniguchi”](#) continues at Taka Ishii Gallery, Tokyo, through May 20.

**Interview:**

**ART IT:** Previously you’ve described the brick paintings as a way of thinking. Can you talk more about what it means to think through these particular works?

**MT:** It didn’t immediately occur to me that they had that possibility. When I started in 2008, the first brick paintings were more about skin, cladding. I was interested in this idea of a surface that could cover anything and take the shape of whatever it was wrapped around. The attraction of the brick pattern was that it’s also very analog, and anachronistic, evoking notions of labor and value or labor and process. Initially I happened to make one at this awkward scale – about 10 feet tall but narrow – so that it became almost part of the room, and then I experimented with different approaches to the surface, for example by incorporating the outlines of different forms or creating silhouettes with the same brick pattern. But since I was also interested in sculpture, I was fascinated by the architectural dimension, and decided to explore it further by producing more works at the same scale. Through the repetition and creation of multiple brick paintings over time, I eventually came to the realization I was making something that could exist as one big work, and that the activity of painting could be totally indivisible from a process of thinking.



**ART IT:** There's a contradictory dynamic in the work between flattening and objectness, first in the flattening of bricks into a two-dimensional pattern on the canvas, and then in the exposure of the canvas's three-dimensionality by having it lean against the wall of the exhibition space. There are also different shifts in orientation that occur between production and reception, as I understand that you lay the canvas flat on the ground when you work, but it gets propped up when it is on display. Do you ever think about flatness and orientation in relation to the work?

**MT:** I think there is a deferral of dimensionality between the brick pattern and the container or the field of the painting. The brain's recognition of the heaviness and solidity of brick is contradicted by the flatness of the surface, so it kind of makes one or two stops elsewhere before recognizing that it's just paint and cloth. In a way the sensation is deferred and spread out to the field that holds the brick cells.

I like the shifts in orientation. I'm the only person who sees the painting when it's flat on the ground, and even then I might not really be looking at it. I work in my studio/living room where there's hardly any space to prop it up, so I normally see the whole painting for the first time only once it's in a larger space. And since it takes up so much space, it's almost like a second resident in the house. I have a little cot that I put on top of it, and I lie on it to paint, but I also end up reading or writing emails or taking phone calls while I'm there, so I'm doing a lot of other things as well. People ask me how I keep making the paintings all day every day when it seems so repetitive and monotonous. Is it like meditation? It's really not. The painting is not yoga or meditation or any form of detachment from the world. I take it as an opportunity to absorb information. For example, I always look forward to painting time because I associate it with pleasurable things, like reading or podcasts or listening to the news – if that can be called pleasurable.

So the painting itself is almost like a loft or an extra space. Even my dog recognizes it as an extra space. She usually walks around it, but when I'm on the cot she sees it as a cue for her to access this extra room, and she loves it. Sometimes when I'm working at my desk she comes and taps me on the leg and then runs straight onto the cot on the painting, which I take as an indication that she wants to be part of this very concentrated moment. She never disturbs me when I'm painting but instead lies beside me, watching or snoozing.

**ART IT:** How do you understand the body in relation to the work – both your own superimposed on the flat surface during the painting process, and also the body of the viewer sharing the space of the work in the exhibition? I noticed most pictures of your works have people standing before them – obviously to give a sense of scale, but also seeming to communicate an interdependency between viewer and work.

**MT:** Yes, the photos that circulate tend to have one or two people standing in front of the works. In part that's to provide a sense of scale, but I also find it extremely interesting that when I paint I am on top of the painting with maybe just two inches of foam between me and the surface, and people recreate the exact same relationship when they come to look at the painting up close. They are almost in the same position as me when I'm parallel to the painting on the ground, but it just so happens that in their case they are vertical mirrors – and maybe even in some instances imitating the same axis as the painting. The paintings are

not leaning on the wall at an extreme angle, just a few degrees – as far as it can go without tipping forward, so it's at rest, but also a tiny bit precarious.

**ART IT:** On the other hand, in always repeating the same pattern, the brick paintings suggest a negation of “content” or subjectivity. For example, it's not really possible to read your background or identity from the work. Is that intentional?

**MT:** The brick paintings fundamentally deal with questions or artistic problems that have consistently appeared in my work in general – issues I started considering 10 or 12 years ago. Many people see the brick paintings in relation to the process painting that's very established in parts of Asia, from Dansaekhwa in Korea all the way back to mandalas, while other people find sci-fi associations in them. In fact, with its black floor, the space here in Tokyo feels a bit sci-fi. It reminds me of the black ooze floor in the film *Under the Skin* (2013), with Scarlett Johansson as the alien predator. The first thing I thought when I saw the floor of the gallery space was, oh, it's going to be black on black. Actually, when we were discussing the exhibition, the gallery staff gave me a printout of the black monolith from *2001: A Space Odyssey*. I'm not sure why they sent it to me, but I thought it was funny because, although I don't remember exactly, I think the monolith was some kind of weird storage device – right? Maybe I'm just making it up, but I feel it connects to my work because I personally think of the brick paintings as repositories for gestures and signals. The monolith in *Space Odyssey* is a technological device but also seems to be a living entity, almost organic in its presence. In a similar way, the brick paintings have to do with the external mechanization of the body but also something inside, something precise but also mysterious and biological, like relations in a nervous system.

**ART IT:** It's interesting to think about the brick paintings in the context of skin and production, because skin is constantly reproducing itself, cell by cell, so a never ending series like this is not so dissimilar to the way that a profusion of skin constantly emerges from us.

**MT:** Absolutely. Particularly during periods when I'm painting one big painting after the other, I feel this sensation of merging with the painting or dispersing into the paintings, and that could also describe the sensation of pleasure I get when I'm making them.



**Above:** *Figure Study* (2012-13), installation view. **Below:** *Untitled (Dawn's Arms)* (2011), two-channel HD video, monitors, plywood, 23 min 7 sec, color, with sound. Installation view,

“Don’t You Know Who I Am? – Art After Identity Politics,” at M HKA, Antwerp, 2014. **Both:** Courtesy Maria Taniguchi.

**ART IT:** Your other works seem to be more self-referential. For example, the video-installation *Figure Study* (2012-13), which shows two men digging up earth that is then turned into a clay object that is presented alongside the video, is in a sense a video about making an object that both necessitates and comments on the video.

**MT:** It has something to do with video being sculpture, and increasingly these days the other way around – sculpture enmeshed in the technical and sensorial dimensions of video. It also has a lot to do with the brick paintings. Somehow the other works become reflections of the brick paintings. It may sound a bit weird since matte black surfaces are often associated with the absorption of light, but painting a single pattern over a number of years does tend to create its own logic that then inevitably recreates itself elsewhere – for example, in other works embodying the same logic of the work thinking about itself being made, or in materials thinking about the process of becoming things.

**ART IT:** But in terms of physical relations the videos are almost diametrically opposed to the brick paintings. At least in *Figure Study* and *Untitled (Dawn’s Arms)* (2011), you are about as far away from the work as possible – since you are behind the camera filming the people who are doing the work, digging the earth or carving the marble figures.

**MT:** That could possibly have to do with a reiteration of distance. I approach video as a kind of viewing frame or observatory that allows you to examine or be forensically conscious of the subject. The “frame” of the video installation is a tool for articulating a double distance for the person encountering the video that is installed as a sculpture. I like this idea of putting these multiple filters between the work and the person who approaches the work. There’s a kind of distortion between the viewer and what is being seen, even if it’s right in front of you.

**ART IT:** Is that what is happening with the hanging wood sculptures in this show? Are the “1” and “0” or “1” and “0” shapes of the works necessarily meant to evoke digital code?

**MT:** There could be a touch of that, in the sense that we are all children of the binary order – especially me: I was born in the 1980s. But I think this is more my attempt to occupy this space differently. I’m not referencing much outside the work. It’s not meant as a comment on technology or an homage to the neo-concrete artists of Brazil. In a way you could even say the work was made as I was installing the show, in response to the problematics of the space and thinking about how this particular work could direct the viewers in the space. For example, with all these paintings on the walls here, it’s easy to predict how people will move around and circulate, so I wanted to have something that would create small ripples in the space as they enter – to make them move differently from how they would if there were no obstacles. It was almost like a little experiment, because there’s only so many ways to fit a giant painting into the room, so I wanted to put something in between, like an intervening field.



**ART IT:** Especially with the straight rods, it looks like the wood has warped. Did that happen in the Philippines according to the properties of the wood, or did it happen after the wood was brought into the new atmosphere in Tokyo?

**MT:** As you say, when wood travels – especially very thin wood such as this – and when something is newly made, you always need to give it room to shift a bit. In this case, the movement started to happen in the Philippines. I'm not an expert with wood or a wood worker. I wanted the circumference to be extra thin and for the wood to be hand carved. I had a lot of discussions with the people who helped me make the sculptures, and they asked me if I would like to use rattan, for example, which is more inclined to being bent, but of course that would be completely different. The sculptures are made specifically of Java plum wood, from a tree that grows in various parts of the tropics and subtropics. My mother used to eat the blue fruit of the Java plum when she was pregnant with me – so much so that her teeth were stained blue most of the time. There's something about the gestation period that fascinates me – although here maybe more in terms of thinking rather than the biological process. Anyway, I think this might be the first wooden sculpture I've ever made. I was a bit concerned there would be too much action in the wood, but I think it's nice that it's a bit squiggly. It looks more like a drawing in that sense. And there's a bit more vibration because of the movement of the wood as it hangs in the space.



**ART IT:** Do you see the brick paintings as also having a certain “vibration”?

**MT:** Each brick cell is painted individually with varying mixtures of black and water on a gray field. More water means that more gray comes out, and these areas tend to be lighter, so some of the brick paintings are more luminous than others and might register more movement on the surface. It’s hard to tell what I’m painting when I’m painting since the proportions of water, paint, humidity are arbitrary, and when I finally do install, I’m always half-waiting for that gestalt moment where I discover I’ve accidentally painted a bird or a face.

**ART IT:** You’ve said previously that the brick paintings are not particularly related to minimalist painting or minimalism, but it’s something that keeps coming up when people talk about your work. Over the years, have you thought about what it means that people keep seeing this connection?

**MT:** Yes, people ask me about it, but the minimalists were never a reference for me when I was studying art. The people I really liked then were artists like Paul Pfeiffer, whose work deals a lot with media and representation. It would be facetious if I were to say that there is no relationship there, but it’s not important to me.

**ART IT:** How about in terms of the art history in the Philippines? Are there any artists or movements you respond to, whether positively or negatively?

**MT:** I saw your interview with Lav Diaz, which was pretty funny because a friend of mine who was part of a panel on Lav Diaz’s filmmaking talked about my work in terms of duration. So that’s interesting. Otherwise, I think there’s a lot of conversation about identity formation in the Philippines, which of course relates to the history of colonization. So there might be a part of the work that tries to engage with this conversation about addressing the creation of a self, even if it’s just an artistic self, or an artistic method. But I don’t want to talk about identity in terms of the usual tropes for talking about identity, like the idea of emancipation from certain norms. As far as I go, I see myself as someone who’s just painting in a room with my dog.

Maria Taniguchi: Under the Skin

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