

Midori Hirose
Of the Unicorn
(and the Sundowner Kids)



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MCA
MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART
SANTA BARBARA

MIDORI HIROSE

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Since antiquity, the legend of the unicorn lives on. The famed creature of assorted powers has taken many twists and turns, spanning centuries and continents. It has elusively flitted about religious, scientific, political, and cultural realms, associated with myriad beliefs and values. According to accumulated lore, antidotal properties were attributed to the unicorn's horn; sightings of the unicorn have prevented wars; its presence in court cases has determined guilt or innocence. Enthralment with unicorns persists today, drawing a multitude of old and new associations, visually represented in film and television, fashion trends, the tech industry, and works of art. Midori Hirose is fascinated by this storied animal's perpetual vibrancy—how a magical being, apparently quite rarely if ever actually seen, nonetheless endlessly and so vastly intrigues the human imagination. During our early conversations about her exhibition at Museum of Contemporary Art Santa Barbara (MCASB), Hirose's mind was on the unicorn—as an allegory of a past that continuously disappears and reappears in varying formations, is



reconstructed and reinvented, questioned, and contested, depending on who is telling the story, all the while remaining a vital part of our present.

Hirose, a multidisciplinary artist based in Portland, OR, considers her broader practice “a meditation on the theme *Never Not Here*.” Her work often revolves around ever-present unseen or undervalued aspects of our world, whether mystical or not, that possess a remarkable power or inspire wonder. In past works, she has experimented with various materials such as wood, acrylics, and sand, to observe the transmutational shifts of basic things into those more precious, and the elements of surprise or mystery that may be revealed along the way, which are sometimes not visible to the naked eye. In others, she incorporates hidden details to generate playful moments of discovery, requiring viewers to physically rotate or bend their bodies around the works, or wait a little longer until something unexpected happens. In her more recent site-specific installations, similar to those created for this exhibition, Hirose seeks out unnoticed or obscured meaning in the everyday, by delving into the microcosms or substratum of communities. With utmost openness, the artist immerses herself in a new place, perceiving its essence through readings, walks, chats, attending events, meeting local artists, and also taking in the area's colors, weather, smells, and flavors. Simultaneously focused and open-ended inquiries produce a diverse range of encounters and impressions, offering Hirose lesser-known personal and collective stories as points of departure for addressing broader social topics, and revealing significant yet often under-recognized aspects of a place or situation.

In *Of the Unicorn (and the Sundowner Kids)*, Hirose asks, “What are the things that constantly surround us, support us, enrich our lives, or inform our history, yet we may take for granted or don't appreciate in our everyday lives?” Considering that we are, as she describes, “kids to the earth,” her exhibition also prompts us to consider in what ways do larger systems—such as the planet's climate, and human spirituality—which lie beyond our complete perspective, which we cannot fully grasp, influence us? And how might we bring necessary recognition to such things and systems to better our coexistence with them? Hirose warns, “Inundated with the constant stream of nows, we are often unable to see the *Never Not Heres*.” Nowadays it is nearly a given that prolonged experiences of exploratory wandering, deep noticing, inventive creation, and taking the long-view have become utterly impeded by a rapid-fire lifestyle. Between a prevalent obsession with efficiency, a surfeit of media channels, and the commodifying of everything, human attention is all the more dedicated to the enticement of screens and demands of clocks. As we navigate these changes, creativity and imagination help us think more critically about the society we want to build. This is a crucial impetus behind Hirose's work, particularly in her community-engaged projects that take a spirited and inquisitive approach to the importance of dealing with these issues. The exhibition originates from her desire to carve out opportunities for spontaneous adventures that allow us to delve beyond our habitual purview in order to look closer at the environment around us, unearth new stories that tell us about our surroundings, and call into question previously held judgments that form our perception of reality.

Hirose's works of art in the exhibition comprise a kind of walking tour of her fantastic journey into a new place—the city of Santa Barbara, CA—from the position of an outsider with the poetic language of an artist, presenting what she considers some of the city's more noteworthy monuments. The room-sized installation of her four newly commissioned sculptures trace the artist's explorations into the mythologies, historical accounts, ecologies, and communities of Santa Barbara. She asks, “What exists in Santa Barbara that holds it up—makes it unique—but also is somehow camouflaged by the everyday? What are the magic qualities of this city that are never not here?” The works on view emerge from a series of conversations and excursions with Santa Barbara residents over the course of Hirose's visits to the area. Meetings with an anthropologist and ethnobiologist at the Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History, a botanist, a fire department employee, a Chumash elder, a motel manager, and several artists, combined with Hirose's more abstract sensory impressions of the landscape, inform her conceptualization of various objects in the exhibition. Together, the work offers timely narratives about this city, touching on issues such as immigration, indigenous reality, and climate change. Entering Hirose's temporary parallel universe of the city at sunset, we are reminded that despite the constant changes over time occurring in our environment, as the lighting shifts and the seasons change, a magic always remains.

- Brooke Kellaway



Interview with Midori Hirose

Libby Werbel (LW): Tell me a bit about your experiences visiting Santa Barbara.

Midori Hirose (MH): It felt really fluid. I made sure things weren't forced. I approached Santa Barbara with an almost childlike view, with purely open thoughts about what I was going to be observing and looking into. The people I met were so gracious to talk with me about their lives. That was a hugely important part of my experience and why I was drawn to creating this work.

LW: I see the work you do as a kind of portraiture. Often the role of the artist, on a broader scale, is taking into account the world around us and interpreting it. It seems like your work involves more in-depth inquiries into specific aspects of a community to reveal the details that support it and create the quality of a place, but might be less visible or not experienced by people on an everyday basis. This exhibition at MCASB is presented as multiple small sculptures that make your personal artistic portrait of Santa Barbara. Through it, mysticism, humor, and complicated histories are present. Even the color is an aspect of the portrait, can you speak to that?

MH: When you walk into the gallery, your first encounter with the exhibition is this peachy color. It's based off of one of the colors of the sunsets I saw while in Santa Barbara. I was interested in how making something monochromatic can make aspects of things disappear, while making other aspects more visible. Applying one color source to each sculptural element within the exhibition and to the environment is about how to bring recognition to things that are present but you have to look a little closer to see them.

LW: Will you talk a bit about the subject-matter you chose for the sculptures?

MH: The first piece you come across in the exhibition is based on FNU Yenni, who lives in town and runs a motel. She immigrated here from Indonesia, works seven days a week, and is into spending time with family who are very important to her. She is a huge part of the community. When I came to stay at her motel she said it was her first time meeting an artist, so she was very excited. We got to talking and she invited me to go to the French Festival downtown. Which was unusual for her because she rarely took people out, or went out herself, so it was a wonderful experience to be a part of. I made the portrait of her wearing the beret we got from the festival. The beret spins on a motor—its basically her thinking cap—her thought process of what's going on in her everyday life. Although her bust is stationary, her cap is continuously circling.

The two sculptural pieces mounted on the wall facing one another are of a reproduction of a Chumash swordfish headdress pointing towards a hand, and vice versa. I came across the headdress while visiting with Dr. Jan Timbrook, Curator of Ethnography at Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History. In Chumash oral stories, the swordfish was the human of the sea. The swordfish headdress was ceremoniously worn in prayer and dance, to connect with infinite unknowns. The hand is modeled from the hand of a Chumash elder, Ernestine Ygnacio De Soto, who I got to know on one of my visits here. At 79 she is not retired and is eventually going to be



displaced due to a new housing development. When asking her about her circumstances, her main concern was where the animals and trees would go? We revisited a part of her present and past. The depiction of her hand pointing to the swordfish headdress indicates an honoring of the past by continued connection. There is unseen energy through this connection. The spirit of the people that lived here before is magic for me. Touching nowhere. But here.

The acorn soup basket was woven by Jan Timbrook. Jan has a personal interest in Chumash basketry, and is reviving the tradition with basket weavers in the community utilizing indigenous plants from Santa Barbara. I learned how strong and amazingly resilient these baskets are, and how they were used to make acorn soup. Acorns, which I started collecting on my visits here, are prominent in Santa Barbara, and are historically a staple to survival in this region. The sculpture of the acorns spinning inside of the basket represents this depth of valuable knowledge about these and other abundant local resources in Santa Barbara.

LW: With these works, you also seem to be looking at the ways in which history and museums are the keepers of objects—often objects that aren't necessarily theirs, but they are still responsible for them at this point in time, so how is that story told, how does it evolve? And what does reciprocity look like at a time when people are really starting to think about the way artifacts are ending up in museums? We understand that Chumash culture needs to be more present in museums, as well as the current community represented, and they need to be in conversation with one another.

What also stood out to me about the basket is how you came to learn about its significance through your discussions with Jan, and also her role in making the baskets in the displays. This made me think about hidden labor in museums—all of the hands and work that goes into an exhibition. Under-recognized labor, in general, is an important concept that your exhibition addresses—with this basket, with the portrait of the woman you met at the motel, also with the reference you make to the year-round tireless efforts of the local fire department. Can you talk about the piece that relates to this last part—the sculpture of the air conditioning unit?

MH: This came about last summer after I met Mike Eliason, Santa Barbara Fire Department's public information specialist, and learned more about Santa Barbara's history of fires and sundowner winds. One of the things he talked about was how as a society we've moved into areas that were not inhabited before, without really realizing or being fully prepared for the natural consequences, whether it's increasingly hot weather, or fires that could go through areas where housing is developed. How do we survive in these spaces today? For me, the work is creating a visual dialogue of this issue.

LW: So the air conditioner is your meditation on humans' response to heat: this small inanimate object has made it possible—easier and more comfortable—for us to live in hot places. And it also becomes this symbolic reference to manmade wind in relationship to natural winds that push fires through the region. You conceived of this work before the recent Santa Barbara fires this past December, and now it's all the more timely. So clearly a part of the current identity of this place.

Will you talk about how your choice of material for the works plays a role in the exhibition?

MH: The sculptures were made during my residency at FORM—a 3D printing foundry in Portland. I was drawn to their technology that uses a super fine sand-like powder. I imagined the sand that makes up the beaches of Santa Barbara—all of these little particles, each containing stories and memories. I also thought of sand in an hourglass, measuring the passing of time, and wanting to be able to stop and contain a moment through these sculptures.



Midori Hirose, *Of the Unicorn (and the Sundowner Kids)*, January 28-June 3, 2018, is organized by Museum of Contemporary Art Santa Barbara, in collaboration with Portland Museum of Modern Art.

Curators: Brooke Kellaway and Libby Werbel

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*This exhibition is part of MCASB's **Bloom Projects Exchange Series**, conceptualized by curator Brooke Kellaway. The exhibition series takes place in the museum's Bloom Project gallery, a space that for over a decade continues to feature new commissions and experimental projects by regional, national, and international emerging or under-recognized artists. The series presents solo exhibitions focused on programmatic collaborations with small-to mid-sized alternative art organizations in cities across the globe. While bringing increased visibility to vibrant yet less broadly known artistic contexts, the exhibitions generate dialogue on innovative and localized approaches to display, communication, publishing, and audience development. A focal part of the series is public programming that involves critical discussion amongst Santa Barbara artists and arts professionals on articulating the necessity of new or expanded arts initiatives; and considering various factors that influence how these initiatives emerge and endure, notably in regions outside of major artistic centers, as is our town.*

*The winter/spring 2018 **Bloom Projects Exchange Series** exhibition features a collaboration with Portland Museum of Modern Art (PMOMA), an alternative art space founded in 2012 by Libby Werbel and located within the stairwell and basement of Mississippi Records.*

Image Credits

Cover: Sculpture included in Midori Hirose's installation at Museum of Contemporary Art Santa Barbara: *Of the Unicorn (And the Sundowner Kids)*, 2017, Polymethyl methacrylate, electronic components, paint, Dimensions variable. Courtesy the Artist

Inside, left: Ernestine Ygnacio De Soto modeling her hands for Midori Hirose's 3D scan, as part of the artist's development of works for this exhibition, Santa Barbara, CA, 2017; and Jan Timbrook, Ph.D., Curator of Ethnography at Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History, with Midori Hirose, 2017. Photo: Libby Werbel

Inside, right: Midori Hirose, working at her residency at FORM, a 3-D Foundry in Portland, OR, 2017. Photo: Mark Hayward; FNU Yenni, at the reception desk of Town and Country Inn, Santa Barbara, CA, 2017; and Visit with Mike Eliason, Santa Barbara Fire Department's Public Information Officer, 2017.

Back cover: Libby Werbel, PMOMA director, pointing to the sunset colors using a found lobster antennae with Midori Hirose, Arroyo Burro Beach, Santa Barbara, CA, 2017.

All photos by Midori Hirose except where indicated.

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