

Kelly Akashi: Encounters September 30, 2023 – May 5, 2024



Kelly Akashi, *Wedged Life Forms*, 2021. Travertine, cast lead crystal. Courtesy of the artist; Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York; and François Ghebaly Gallery, Los Angeles.

Seattle, WA (September 12, 2023)—The Henry Art Gallery at the University of Washington is pleased to announce *Kelly Akashi: Encounters*, a commissioned exhibition featuring all new work by the Los Angeles-based artist.

Known for sculptures and installations that emphasize the reciprocity of touch, Kelly Akashi's practice centers on the tactile properties of physical materials. Originally trained in photography, Akashi brings the medium's concern with questions of time and truth to her sculptural work across a diverse array of media, including wax, bronze, fire, glass, silicone, and rope. Drawing attention to the fluidity and interconnectedness of her chosen media, Akashi aims to capture the tension created by using materials in ways that work against their typical definitions—glass that reacts like a soft pillow, dirt that functions like stone, wax that substitutes for permanence.

For the exhibition at the Henry, Akashi continues her ongoing explorations in the mapping of time to locate humankind amongst other consciousnesses that have thrived along the earth's timeline. *Encounters* extends that consideration even further to incorporate astronomical time in concert with geological and biological scales, highlighting the vast shifts of incremental interpretation required to grasp these distinctions. For example, we might consider human life spans in decades or trees in hundreds of years; as the scale expands to geologic time in millions or astronomical time in billions, the idea of what is a meaningful span of existence changes dramatically.

As the title *Encounters* suggests, in this exhibition Akashi engages the phenomena of how different bodies—human, botanical, earthen, galactic—meet and collide with one another. The video filling the back wall of the gallery is comprised of clips/vignettes of different kinds of simulated astronomical bodies. The main simulation depicts a galaxy collision based on scientific data that postulates that in 4.5 billion years the Milky Way (our galaxy) will collide with Andromeda (the closest galaxy to us). On the floor of the space is a series of “folded earth” sculptures, created onsite in collaboration with the University of Washington’s Ceramic and Metal Arts department. An extension of the artist’s rammed earth constructions, these undulating layers of fired clay engage earth in a more open, meandering, and porous way, recalling a range of referents: tectonic shifts, hills and valleys, the organic swell of the ground beneath our feet.

Atop these stacks of ceramic forms perch bronze sculptures of hands, always the artist’s own, that cast a momentary gesture into perpetual existence. Each piece creates a unique record of the slow-changing human body and enhances recognition of its inevitable mortality. Some of the hands hold delicate porcelain forms, modeled after origami techniques. Born in Los Angeles, Akashi is of Japanese descent, and her relationship to her culture of origin has always been fraught. Her father, also American-born, experienced the shameful internment camps enacted on the family by their own country during World War II. Despite this, origami was an art Akashi learned as a child and it became a way she could engage with her culture that did not involve language (she does not speak Japanese, neither did her father).

Woven into the sculptural presentation are cast glass blackberry branches, the delicate material contrasting with the solidity of the bronze, while enhancing the fragility of the porcelain and the ceramic forms that support them. While Akashi has previously worked with different parts of the blackberry anatomy, this deliberate selection here was inspired by the Pacific Northwest region, and the complicated love/hate relationship that exists with the blackberry plant: it is both a source of delicious nourishment in the fruit, but is also an invasive species whose rapidly growing, impenetrable thickets can outcompete native plants and tree seedlings, as well as habitats for wildlife. This duality of a lifeform both fierce and nurturing aligns with the material and temporal dualities that are ongoing concerns in Akashi’s work.

Surrounding the sculptural installation are a selection of crystallographs, a camera-less photographic process wherein the artist grows crystals on film and prints enlargements of these forms using traditional darkroom techniques. These prints are also solarized, a new addition to the crystallograph process for Akashi, though a technique with a long history in photography. For Akashi, the crystalline images invoke a conversation with other works referencing earth as a material, where the different visualization and scale of these terrestrial materials creates a feedback loop between the various organic elements. Deftly combining and contrasting scale, time, and material, Akashi’s *Encounters* create a crucible for the vast possibilities inherent in connection and collision. These outcomes may be simultaneously painful and nurturing,

destructive and constructive, ephemeral and eternal, fragile and indestructible. *Encounters* invites the viewer to consider the precariousness of their own material body and life, seeing concurrently both the insignificance and the preciousness of one's existence in the scope of the universe.

Kelly Akashi: Encounters is organized by Shamim M. Momin, Director of Curatorial Affairs. Generous support is provided by Tanya Bonakdar Gallery.

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