

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

# Kaoru Mansour: Offerings of Nature, Art and Spirit

Meher McArthur

January 4, 2016



"Trumpet Flower #120" by Kaoru Mansour, 2015; Mixed media on canvas; 42 x 72 inches

*Asian Accents: This article is part of an ongoing series that explores the diverse range of artistic influences from Asia in the arts and culture of Southern California.*

# BRIDGETTE MAYER GALLERY

In her studio in Tujunga northwest of Los Angeles, Kaoru Mansour is surrounded by trees. In her garden, the branches of loquat and lemon trees hang heavy with fruit for much of the year, thanks to Southern California's almost yearlong warm climate. Birds perch on the limbs, grateful to rest their wings and nibble at the berries and other natural offerings among the trees. Mansour recreates this sense of abundance in the natural world around her in her ornate collage paintings, particularly in her recent series entitled "Sonaemono," the Japanese word for an "offering." In Japan, the word has been traditionally used to denote the offerings of food and drink made at temples to Buddhist deities, domestic altars dedicated to family ancestors, and at Shinto shrines to the higher beings or *kami* that have long been believed to inhabit and control natural phenomena. In her collages, which depict trees laden with fruit, birds perched on the branches, bowls heaped with fruit and other foods, Mansour explores both the lavish offerings we receive from nature and the food we offer back to the spirits within our natural world, reminding us of the intimate relationship we enjoy with the natural world around us.

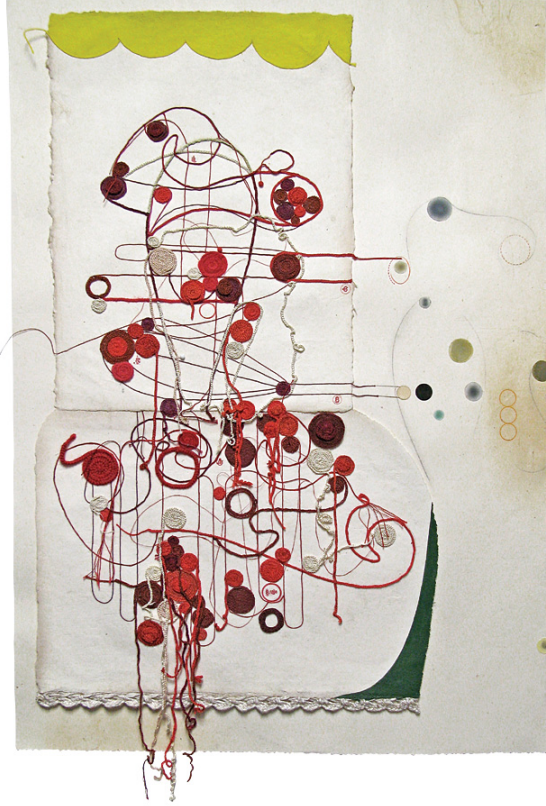


"Bird and Kiwano" by Kaoru Mansour, 2015; Mixed media on wood panel; 20 x 20 inches

Mansour's collages are built up of multiple layers of pigment and collaged details on wooden panels and canvas. She begins the process by coating the surface of her panels with layers of acrylic paint, allowing raku-like crackles to form and create an ancient patina onto which she overlays her natural scenes. In many of the works in this series, she employs gold pigment for the background, evoking the gold leaf that has been the ground for Japanese screen paintings for many centuries. In these traditional folding screens, and in Mansour's panels, the gold not only serves a decorative function adding to the rich, sensuous appearance of the painting, but it elevates the subject -- the trees, fruit, leaves, birds -- to something revered, sacred and even mystical. In Japan, nature has always occupied center stage in art and literature, and its various

# BRIDGETTE MAYER GALLERY

elements are rich in symbolism, from the ephemeral cherry blossom to powerful and poignant irises and resilient pine trees. All have been portrayed symbolically and even iconically on the gilded screens that graced temples, castles and the residences of the aristocracy. We are shown a similar treatment in Mansour's botanical panels.



"Rocket Apron" by Kaoru Mansour, 2012; Mixed media on paper; 39½ x 27½ inches

When Mansour began creating art professionally 23 years ago, she was not seeking to evoke the paintings of Japan's great artists. Mansour (née Kaoru Hirose) grew up in rural Japan, amidst lush forests and rich greenery and developed a love of nature that has remained with her since. Although she worked briefly in Japan as a self-taught graphic artist in the middle of the 1970s, she left Japan in 1979 to pursue a career as a jazz singer in New York. While in the U.S., she also became interested in pursuing the visual arts. She moved to Los Angeles in 1986 and enrolled at Otis-Parsons art institute, where she fully embraced a Western art education. After her studies at Otis, she was strongly influenced by Western Abstract Expressionist artists, and for years, her work was largely abstract, exploring color, geometric form and mark making. Her fascination with botanical imagery began in earnest about 20 years ago after the birth of her son. "I wanted to make art that would sell," she admits today. "I discovered that pictures of plants, trees and flowers are one of the most popular genres among art collectors." Since she had always had a profound love of nature, the choice to focus her artistic skills on creating botanical collages was a very satisfying one.



# BRIDGETTE MAYER GALLERY



"Biwa (Loquat) #101" by Kaoru Mansour, 2015; Mixed media on canvas; 42 x 72 inches

Gradually, as Mansour experimented with motifs, composition and pigments, her works started to acquire an increasingly Japanese rhythm, in the thoughtful balance of motifs with areas of empty space, and a Japanese tone in the choice of subject matter -- a solitary crow or finch on a branch evoking the screen paintings of such artists as Maruyama Okyo (1733-1795), or details of pendulous tree branches reminiscent of the screens of Sakai Hoitsu (1761-1828) and other Rimpa-style artist of the 18th and 19th centuries. Yet, the artistic techniques she employs and the botanical subjects she selects are firmly rooted, as it were, in the soil of Southern California.

In a recent exhibition of her "Sonaemono" series at the Heather James gallery in Palm Desert (though March 2016), her unique East-West approach to botanical collages is exquisitely apparent. In her collage entitled "Biwa (Loquat) #101," Mansour has applied printed images of loquat branches laden with rich yellow fruit to the crackled, acrylic surface. Interspersed among the leaves and fruit and hanging down from the tips of each branch are tapering clusters of balls formed of gold leaf and concentric polychrome circles, which lend a Klimt-esque magical tone to the composition and reinforce the suggestion of abundance and divine presence. Slender threads arch across an empty background to spatially connect the branches, and two piles of golden offerings on the ground below balance and anchor the overall composition.



"Olive #150" by Kaoru Mansour, 2015; Mixed media on canvas; 32 x 72 inches

# BRIDGETTE MAYER GALLERY

Another work in the series, "Trumpet Flower #120" is a similarly balanced and even more elaborate treatment of a flowering tree. Featuring delicate ornamental details that mirror the pendulous trumpet flowers, it not only implies abundant offerings but festivities and celebration. In a more reserved work, "Olive #150," Mansour honors the gifts of the olive tree, depicting its branches twisting and dancing in the air above two piles of gold and black offerings. The offerings are framed on one side by the curved suggestion of a moon, and in the background are the same thin, arching threads, a remnant of her earlier abstract mark making.

In a number of other works in the "Sonaemona" series, such as "Bird and Kiwano," the tree is merely suggested by the same curved hanging threads. In this work, a bird is perched on one of the threads and it looks around as if to check whether it is being watched. Below the bird hangs a dish containing a horned melon (Japanese: *kiwano*), a luxurious offering to the spirit world perhaps. Just as it is difficult for the bird to resist the offering of the luscious fruit below, so too is it hard for viewers to pull our eyes away from Mansour's artistic offerings -- her sumptuous and spiritual works of collage.



"Plum and Stone #101" by Kaoru Mansour, 2015; Mixed media: 44 x 54 inches