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How their roots intertwine

A Little Tokyo museum pairs the Japanese flower-arranging art of ikebana with contemporary works.

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ASPECIAL energy was crackling among the ladies refreshing their ikebana arrangements in the strikingly unusual exhibition "Living Flowers: Ikebana and Contemporary Art" at the Japanese American National Museum. In two days, the crown prince of Japan was expected to tour the museum. They wouldn't be allowed here that day, but the very idea that Japanese royalty would see their work had made their day.

Leading the Sogetsu team of five, Haruko Takeichi was in charge of the large installation leading into the exhibition. The women were creating flurries of magnolia tree branches,

sunflowers, and purple and white statice on and around two giant twisting tree trunks seated on the floor. Takeichi took a look over her shoulder. Something wasn't quite right.

She picked up a pair of shears and attacked a cluster of magnolia leaves, ruthlessly trimming several to make them smaller. "They look too crowded," she said. With confident snip-snips, she cut each leaf slightly asymmetrically, emulating the shape of

their compatriots, so that from a distance they looked, yes, natural.

"That's one of the philosophies of ikebana," said Karin Higa, curator of the show, "to shape nature in a more perfect way, but at the same time to make it look natural."

For some time Higa has noted how contemporary art echoes the aesthetics of ikebana -- especially in spatial concerns and the fact that ikebana, generally designed for a tokonoma, a Japanese alcove, is meant to be viewed frontally. She began to collect a list of artists for an exhibition around the idea, eventually coming up with the 20 in this show.

The still-life photographs of [Robert Mapplethorpe](#) were a natural, as was a sculpture for holding flowers by [Isamu Noguchi](#), the late Japanese American artist who had a long affiliation with the Sogetsu school. To these she added American and international artists.

Choosing the ikebana schools was more straightforward. The museum needed schools capable of assigning members to make weekly arrangements during the show's 12-week run, through Sept. 7. (New arrangements are made on Fridays, with "refreshing" on Tuesdays.)

Ikenobo Ikebana Society boasts the oldest history -- 600 years; Ohara School of Ikebana 110 years; and the "upstart" Sogetsu was started in 1927 by Sofu Teshigara, the father of Hiroshi Teshigara ("Woman in the Dunes"), who dutifully retired from filmmaking to run the school when called upon. Given its lineage, Sogetsu is the most free-form of the three schools, with a tendency for dramatic flair.

As Minako Hayashida of Los Angeles' Ohara school pointed out: "These three are also the main schools in Japan."

"This is not about flowers responding to art, but really what these two art forms can say about one another," said Higa. "I want to look at ikebana as an art form and its internal

logic and ways of being, and how that could inform and illuminate contemporary art and vice versa."

Although she did not ask the ikebana schools to specifically create work to pair with the contemporary art she selected, some connections have nicely appeared -- some through serendipity, some through exhibition design conjuring.

In the lower gallery, Andy Ouchi's sculpture "Monstera" is an arrangement of large monstera leaves made of green-tinted steel, seated atop a pedestal. A nearby alcove features a living arrangement of broad monstera leaves, kale and asparagus berries in a shallow bowl by Jose Salcedo of the Ohara school. Hayashida pointed out that this is in "moribana" style, which mandates the use of five elements in a triangular shape.

As part of Anna Sew Hoy's sculpture "Why" -- a giant ball of sisal rope wound around a thick black pole, two black-painted tree branches sprouting like antlers from the top of the ball -- an ominous black shadow has been painted onto the adjoining floor and wall. Higa wanted to call attention to the natural materials being used, as well as the shadow, which she hopes will prompt viewers to note how the lighting of ikebana is also meant to cast beautiful shadows.

The natural world's cycles

WHILE commonalities between the art forms are evident, contrasts also emerge. Ikebana arrangements convey a sense of timelessness, but contemporary art is often concerned with issues of temporality. Included is an installation by British artist Anya Gallaccio, "In a Moment," in which 365 gerbera daisies -- one for each day of the year -- have been woven in a daisy chain hung from overhead poles. Unlike the ikebana, these will not be refreshed, but will droop and wither till the end of the exhibition -- an artful acknowledgment of decay. "I love how you're watching time," Higa said of the piece.

In a similar vein are three photographs from Sharon Lockhart's "No-no Ikebana" series. Over the space of a month, she documented how an ikebana made with a stalk of Brussels sprouts begins to sag and decay. Even more violent is the destruction recorded in "Blow Up: Untitled 5" by Ori Gersht. He has captured a freeze-frame of a flower arrangement being blown up -- literally -- with bits of petal flying out of a cloud of smoke.

The ikebana masters do find the museum project a bit unusual, but they've been happy to participate because they were allowed to follow their own tradition, considered an art form in Japan. "In Japan there's not such a clear separation between art and craft," said Higa. And, like artists, they see themselves on a continuous path of growth. As Hayashida said, "I never have 100% satisfaction."

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