Infinite Expanse of Sky and Superabundant Atmosphere, 2008,
Courtesy Studio la Città © Michele Alberto Sereni

How to Fly Thousands of Kites, Simultaneously, Indoors

THE ART OF JACOB HASHIMOTO

Katya Tylevich talks to Jacob Hashimoto about using traditional kite-making techniques to make vast sculptural clouds of threads, paper and bamboo hang from gallery walls, beams and ceilings

Photography by Alexei Tylevich

I arrive at Jacob Hashimoto's large Brooklyn studio to find the artist hunched over a worktable. He snaps out of his zone upon seeing me, but the three other people working in the room give greeting without breaking concentration. 'They're tying thousands of knots today', Hashimoto tells me, as if the statement needs no further clarification. 'It's for a piece going to Brussels.' Of course, Hashimoto's installations are enormous productions, comprised as they are of hundreds, and often thousands, of small bamboo and paper kites. Site-specific, these works are massive in their physical presence, filling entire rooms and foyers. But they seem biggest in their implications. Like a tension in a room, or a feeling strung between two people, the weight of Hashimoto's pieces is abstract and somehow out of reach. In a conversation that covers his latest projects all the way back to the first kite piece he ever made, Hashimoto considers how his works hinge on both discord and poetics.

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— Tying thousands of knots sounds like a lot of work.

It is, but we do as much as we can in-house. The kites come in a couple of different varieties. The ovals and circles are heat-formed, and we don't actually build those frames here; we use a company in Weifang, China, where dragon kites are traditionally made. For me to make a circular shape from beginning to end by myself takes something like 15 minutes per piece, so it got to the point where I knew we couldn't do it all ourselves. But I can build a hexagon from a pile of sticks in, maybe, three minutes, so that's what the guys in the studio are working on now — hexagons, octagons and different square shapes. We can outsource those shapes as well, but then I find I'm not happy with the symmetry, and we end up having to retie many of them. No matter how much I complain to fabricators, they don't seem to understand the level of precision I'm after. They don't take me seriously until I actually sit down in front of them and show them the very specific way I want the knots done, so that the sticks don't slide. Only then do they see that I know what I'm talking about. I have so much muscle memory from building thousands and thousands of these by myself that I know exactly how I want them made. We also do all the paper work here, once the frames are done, which is a tremendous effort. Practically speaking, it doesn't make a lot of sense that we do so much in-house, but that way we have control over our materials and the guarantee that we're using the very best quality. For example, we need to know where our acrylic comes from, because it has to be page-neutral and acid-free. We do a lot of our own experiments.

— What kind of experiments?

See those samples taped to the window? We're just letting them cook in the sunlight for four months, to see what the UVs do to them. The question is, if you're a painter, do you really need to be building your stretchers? No, probably not. It's more important to spend your time on what goes on your canvas. But it's taken me a while to get comfortable with that thought, because I'm a carpenter at heart. I want to build. I want to know how it's made and I want to know where the material came from. It's hard for me to relinquish that kind of control.

— You have your first UK solo show this June at the Ronchini Gallery in London. Do you have to consider the city as you're working?

I think my job as an artist working with a gallery in such a competitive city — where everything and everyone vies for people's attention — is to create something that forces passers-by to come in. And because the space I'm working with is street level and you can see almost the entire gallery from the front of the building, I'm faced with the danger of people looking through the window then walking on. I have to

Infinite Expanse of Sky and Superabundant Atmosphere, 2008, Courtesy Studio la Città © Michele Alberto Sereni

Silence Still Governs our Conciousness, 2010, MACRO, Museo d'Arte Contemporanea di Roma, Courtesy Studio la Città © Michele Alberto Sereni

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be certain my work is seductive enough to actually bring people through the door. So I'm creating a kind of jungle of paper pieces. To really experience this environment, a person will have to travel through the artwork. It will be a huge installation: wall to wall, front to back, floor to ceiling, and it will feel very different, I think, from my other works, because the space itself is different. I always have to shape to the particular needs of a space, so I never repeat myself — though I do Frankenstein pieces of my older projects into my new ones. Since I own all the big pieces, I have the option of sampling from them.

I started building these kites in my studio to make it through the year. I wasn't very good at first, but I kept making them. I would take them to the park to fly

Descending Yellow Halo, 2008, bamboo, paper, dacron, acrylic, 152 x 114 x 20 cm, Courtesy Ronchini Gallery, Photo Michele Alberto Sereni.B

— Is that a way to increase their longevity?
Well, there's really no way to preserve the original form of any of these pieces, because, again, they're so specific to their locations. But this fact allows me to bring together different components and create mash-ups out of different moments. In this way, the pieces are very much like diaries: I can see how they've changed over the years, and how the process has changed. But I really only reuse from pieces created in 2004 or later. The pieces before 2004 are still close to their original form, and I won't show them unless the room is right.

— What happened in 2004?
I think my work started to become more baroque. The process of installation loosened up, and I started tangling things up to create an element of chaos, which I was now inviting into my work. A lot of my early pieces are still too precious for me to touch. Those are pieces I built in my parents' basement. I had to move back home to complete the first big piece I did at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago in the late nineties ['Infinite Expanse of Sky', 1998/99]. All of my old college friends came through town for Christmas and helped me build this gigantic sculpture in my parents' kitchen. There's a relationship I have with that piece that I just won't have with the new ones.

— How did kites become your medium in the first place?
As an art school student studying painting and printmaking, I would work summers as a studio assistant to the Japanese artist Keiko Hara. She was working with water-based Japanese woodblock printing, and the process required knowing a lot about paper, especially Japanese paper, which is a big part of my work today.

But the real story is that I found myself in my last year at the Art Institute of Chicago having a lot of trouble making work. Up to that point, it had always felt easy to create something, but now that I was looking at graduating and entering the world, I felt an enormous pressure to 'make it happen' and I froze. I remember talking on the phone to my father, who's a writing professor, and telling him: 'I don't know why I even go to the studio every day. I can't do anything when I'm there.'

He said that when his writing students run out of ideas, he tells them to just write the same word over and over again, so that the body is ready when the mind kicks back in. 'Stay engaged', he said. 'You do need to be in the studio every day; you just have to find something to do while there. It can be anything: build model airplanes, or build kites.'

— Why not the paper airplanes, then?
Kites really resonated with me because my father used to build them when we lived in Idaho — tiny kites that we would fly out of his office window on a spool of thread. He never taught me to build them, but I remember all the books we had about kites around the house, growing up. My grandfather built kites, too. They weren't very wealthy, and my dad was always in trouble with my grandmother for cutting up their bamboo chopsticks to build his kites. They didn't have a lot of stuff — this was basically a fork he'd broken. He was cutting up something fundamental and, for them, difficult to replace. To me, it's very poetic and sort of sad, this idea of the need for play versus necessity.

Anyway, I started building these kites in my studio to make it through the year. I wasn't very good at first, but I kept making them. I would take them to the park to fly. At one point, I realized I needed to actually make some paintings since my end-of-semester critiques were coming up and I was going to be in trouble. So in my tiny studio I strung a piece of wire diagonally across the room, and hooked the kites on to it with paper clips to clear the wall for my paintings. I remember looking at those hanging kites one day and thinking: 'I could do everything I want to do with painting, but with these kites.' That was the a-ha moment.

— What were you painting at the time?
I was making field paintings, for lack of a better word. Abstract landscapes. Big, open voids. Very Rothko, Agnes Martin. And it's fine to love Rothko when you're a student, but I understood that if I was going to add anything to the dialogue, or even be part of the discussion, I couldn't keep doing what I was doing. That was a major crisis point for me: I felt I wouldn't get anywhere in the art world unless I changed. But it didn't happen immediately. I waited. I saved the kite pieces that were shaping up in my studio for my first group show, which happened later that year. When the school thesis show finally came around, I showed my paintings and everybody asked me, 'Why didn't you show the kite pieces you made?'

— But it sounds like you already knew you were on to something.
I did. I saw an opportunity to take the sublime and open minimalist spaces of my paintings and extend them into real, physical space. Those first kite pieces were so light, and they were so reactive. When people walked into the room, the kites would move. They would shudder when people approached, then become static when people stood still. They had a natural 'kineticism' that I found to be very poetic. It wasn't contrived. It wasn't a machine built to move, it was just an acknowledgement of a presence in the room.

Jacob Hashimoto is at the Ronchini Gallery in London from the 29th June to the 28th August 2012

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Armada, 2011, Photo Michele Sereni. Courtesy of Studio la Città