

Art in America

Published June 16, 2016

All Gold Everything: Mika Tajima's Public Art

By Sam Korman



View of Mika Tajima's *Meridian (Gold)*, 2016, in Hunter's Point South Park, New York, pressurized water vapor system, networked LED bulbs, real-time gold commodity indexes, custom analysis program, wood, pigment, sculpted resin, 20 by 144 by 144 inches. Courtesy 11R, New York, and Taro Nasu, Tokyo. Photo Yasunori Matsui

Mika Tajima's *Meridian (Gold)*, 2016, resides in Hunter's Point South Park along the southern portion of the East River waterfront in Long Island City, Queens. The public sculpture, which will be on view through Sept. 25, was commissioned by nearby SculptureCenter in collaboration with its teen outreach program Public Process and the city's Art in the Parks initiative. In spite of the work's unmonumental stature—it is a stout, square, hot-tub-like structure cast in resin—the fuchsia cube is immediate, exuberant, and almost vulgar against the dull gray paving stones, galvanized steel fences, and sun-bleached wooden benches that surround it. The sculpture emits a cloud of mist from

Art in America

a wood-paneled central basin, and LED lights illuminate the vapor with gradients between cyan and magenta. The lights are synced to the price of gold, and the fluctuating colors register the live shifts in the value of the precious metal.

Tajima is the subject of a profile in the June/July 2016 issue of *Art in America*, and the article succinctly discusses her interest in the gold market. As William S. Smith writes, “When the world feels good about the economic system, the price of gold drops as investors place their capital (and their faith) in potentially more profitable financial instruments. When the inevitable crisis arrives (and many of those instruments are revealed to be elaborate illusions), the price of gold shoots back up.” The futures market value is an apt barometer for a collective mood, a matrix that reveals confidence (or lack thereof) in geopolitics and the global economy.

The dark-stained wooden cavity at the center of *Meridian (Gold)* evokes a sauna at a sci-fi spa, though the slightly nefarious synthetic colors trouble calm reflection. It also harkens back to the formalist tradition of Tony Smith or Barnett Newman’s *Broken Obelisk* (1963-67). While I stood by the sculpture, the mist dissipated a spectrum from warm to cool. I had a hard time determining which color represented the top of the scale and which was the bottom. Visiting during the day, I should warn, made it difficult to differentiate between the LEDs and the ambient glow from the sculpture itself, diminishing the work’s overall effect. A quick search of #mikatajima on Instagram quickly assuaged my initial doubts: images of the sculpture at dusk showed it glowing against the Midtown skyline like a contained disco.

In the light of the sunny Saturday afternoon of my visit, a young girl splashed around, yelling to her mom, “I could do this everyday!” Another young boy screamed, before he watched his father demonstrate the mist’s harmlessness. Menacing economic associations were sublimated into innocent joy, parents eagerly taking pictures of their kids happily drenching themselves in the puddles in and around the sculpture. This scene catalyzes the complicated relationship between *Meridian (Gold)* and its immediate context—both residential and financial. It is not all grim determinism.

Hunter’s Point South Park was built on a former industrial site. It embodies a style made fashionable by the High Line in downtown Manhattan, and imitated in urban renewal projects in the Rockaways, Brooklyn, and other post-industrial sites throughout New York City. Here, concrete and steel are interspersed with native flora; human-scaled grass or cement mounds punctuate amoeba-shaped lawns; boxy loveseat benches are twisted to focus occupants on different views; an open pavilion provides shade for cafe seating and concessions serving seafood and beer. Its design is based on

Art in America

ergonomic and asymmetric principles, and though full of people, the park conjures a CAD drawing. Like Tajima's sculpture, the site's notional relationship with the history of the area functions as a barometer of the present. The residents in the newly built "affordable" housing around the park prefer some thoughtfully placed remnants of the neighborhood's industrial past and nominal nods to sustainability: renderings of the area's manufacturing past have become a motif signifying the invigorated real-estate market and gentrification.

The United Nations, Chrysler, and Empire State buildings are all visible from *Meridian (Gold)*. The sounds of traffic on FDR Drive and the construction on the American Copper Buildings directly across the river collect in a low vibration. The residential skyscrapers are faced in their namesake material, and the left tower hunches over a slight bend around the twenty-fourth story while its taller twin mirrors this posture in reverse. The ACB boasts a sky bridge connecting the towers, which will also house a spa, a lounge, and an infinity pool, a perfect parallel to this installation.

Tajima's sculpture, which sometimes appears like an ersatz element within the finely articulated design of the park, stages a metaphoric transaction between public and private spheres: the speedy fluctuations in the gold market play out in a shifting array of public exchanges with the work. Much like the ACB, *Meridian (Gold)* translates our ever-changing relationship with value (and labor) into an intoxicating lightness. They both create spectacles of leisure, the former floating dozens of stories above the ground. But, like the dampness imparted by *Meridian's* mist, questions persist: what happens when the lease expires, or if the contract is breached? On the fencing surrounding the ACB construction site, posters say, "The future is coming. Sorry, it's not for sale." They continue: "Leasing Office Opening Fall 2016."



View of Mika Tajima's *Meridian (Gold)*, 2016, in Hunter's Point South Park, New York, pressurized water vapor system, networked LED bulbs, real-time gold commodity indexes, custom analysis program, wood, pigment, sculpted resin, 20 by 144 by 144 inches. Courtesy 11R, New York, and Taro Nasu, Tokyo. Photo Yasunori Matsui