

Jordan Alexander Key (b. 1990): “Nachi no Taki (那智滝), On the Inkjet Scrolls of Tomohiro Muda (32-bit) compressed,” a Black-MIDI Dance (electro-acoustic)

Premier: November 18th, 2019; Gainesville, Florida, Harn Museum of Art, University of Florida

Audio Recording: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sSDnzEu9gPg&t>

Commissioner: The Harn Museum of Art and the University of Florida
Choreographers: Maria Garcia & Emma Wedemeyer
Music Composition: Jordan Alexander Key
Backdrop Art: Tomohiro Muda



Jordan Alexander Key:
“Nachi no Taki, a Dialogue with Tradition”

Visual meditation on my process of dialoguing with past forms through present media (painted ink vs. inkjet, silk vs printer paper, acoustic vs. digital, etc.). Herein one sees a synthesis of Muda's inkjet photo of Nachi Falls, a hanging scroll of Nachi Falls from the Kamakura period (13th-14th century) - very reminiscent of Muda's photo - and my own modernist abstraction, knitting the two together.

"Nachi no Taki (那智滝), On the Inkjet Scrolls of Tomohiro Muda" attempts to sonify the artistic conversation between tradition and modernity present in the work of Tomohiro Muda. This works uses sounds that are fundamentally acoustic and "human" generated as well as sounds that are fundamentally digital and "computer" generated, juxtaposing the "real" and "unreal," the "possible" and "impossible," the "human" and the "super-human" to comment on our present position in the creation of art, a position that grapples regularly between "tradition" and the future. Shall we always make art that is only possible under human hands, only perceptible given human eyes, only audible to human ears?

Can a visual artist dream of something only constructible given augmented eyes or hands? What if a dancer could choreograph given a super-human, augmented body? Can one compose music impossible to perform given just human performers, and yet still have it not only

performed but capable of speaking to human audiences? Such questions have been asked before and have been explored deeply. However, we still manage, despite the overwhelming capability to reach beyond our human limits, to only make things that speak directly to our human capacities (often even below such capacities).

In many incalculable ways, tools like the inkjet printer and the wave audio file have revolutionized our world. If used thoughtfully, they can also revolutionize our art, giving us creative facilities never before possible. Similarly, used unthoughtfully, these technologies and others like them are only blunt tools. The culture of “blunt tool” that has emerged around digital printing and digital music, likely due to their present ubiquity and low threshold of utilization, has in many ways stigmatized their use in artistic pursuits. Not everyone thinks this way, but many do.

Is it more artistic to paint or to take a photo? Is it more artistic to take a photo with film and a fancy, specialized camera or just your smart phone? Is it more artistic to sit tediously in a dark room and develop your film using specialized chemistry or to simply print off a photo on an inkjet printer?

Similarly, is it more artistic to write a piece of music by hand or to digitally engrave it on your computer? Is it more artistic to compose a piece and have it played by a human performer or simply press “play” on your laptop and let the computer make all the music for you? Is it more artistic to write music using acoustic sounds or digitally generated sounds?

Now, you might be a liberally minded person and think that all of these are equally valid and equally meritorious, but it is unquestionable that many people (even very liberally minded) will have an aesthetic biased for the former rather than the latter option in each of these suggested dichotomies. Many will find that a photo taken with film and traditionally developed is more meritorious as photography than a digital photo, taken with a modern smart-phone camera, and “developed” via a modern printer. Similarly, many will find that digital music performed by a computer is less meritorious, less serious, less artistic, less emotive, less “whatever you might be searching for in music” than its human performed, acoustic counterpart.

Tomohiro Muda’s scroll begs these same questions and debates; this is modern, perhaps subversive, art disguised in the traditional, specifically a hanging silk scroll. Perhaps one recognized that this work of visual art clearly must be a photo and not a painting, but, even so, some might (given enough space between themselves and the work) think this work is painted using a traditional brushed ink. If one should recognize that this work is a photo, then does it lose value or artistic merit as compared to when you thought it painted? Once you realize that the photo is simply “printed” on normal paper rather than meticulously developed from film onto specialized photograph paper does it lose artistic merit even further? Perhaps this seemingly unceremonious and “sneaky” presentation masked by the outwards appearance of tradition now appears almost heretical. Maybe it is. But why should it be? Why might it be? Is it still beautiful? If not, why? If so, then what does this tell us about our obsession with the “traditional way” to do things; are they necessary if not perhaps hindering? What more could we manage should we recognize the super-human power afforded to us through the tools and technologies we’ve made, should they be used with care and consideration?

As I hinted at before, the same questions and controversies embodied in Muda's work exists in music. An example close to any composer is the use of a tool developed in the 1980s and 1990s: MIDI or Musical Instrument Digital Interface. "MIDI Sounds" are instrumental sounds constructed from the combination of simple digital waves on a computer and then audiated using speakers. If you listen to a video game soundtrack from the 1990s, you will hear the stereotypical sound associated with MIDI. MIDI can be useful for composers because one can write music and hear a synthesized approximation of the music before ever handing the piece to a human performer. So, rather than having to clunk out your work at a piano or waste a performer's time by asking them to read your drafts, you may, in the privacy of your own studio, sonify your music before anyone else hears it.

The "problem" with MIDI, however, is that it often sounds "canned" or "hokey," only the palest imitation of the actual instrument and human performer. A MIDI Mozart Symphony will unlikely sound as nice to you as the "real" thing. Thus, MIDI is often seen simply as a tool for the composer, and its sound is often mocked because of its inability to "be human." The *actual* "problem" with MIDI, however, is not the "canned" nature of its sounds, but the ends to which it is only ever put: approximating acoustically possible and acoustically intended music. Of course this problem lies not in MIDI itself, but in those who intend to utilize it.

For a silly analogy, if you wanted to have pizza, but I didn't have the resources or time enough to make you a pizza, I could give you a jellybean flavored like pizza (yes, these do exist). However, anyone versed in pizza would know that this candy is a sad imitation of the actual food. However, if there was never any hope that you could get pizza in the near future (maybe even ever), the jellybean might be a blessed substitute, at least to understand and have the impression of something that could be.

So, would I say that jellybeans are terrible on the virtue of only the pizza flavor? Similarly, would I say that pizza is terrible based solely on the jellybean imitation of it? No. Judging a candy entirely on its attempt to imitate something wholly different from candy is silly. We should rather judge the virtue of the candy based on its own terms and *all* its possible capabilities, not only one – perhaps sad – use. Similarly, we should judge the merits of pizza based not on the jellybean imitation, nor should we judge the merits of pizza based on one actual example – say anchovies from Little Caesars Pizza; there are many kinds and makes of pizzas with innumerable possibilities and combinations of toppings in the universe. Try as many of these possibilities as you can before making an ultimate judgment. Anchovies from Little Caesar's Pizza is probably not the best representation of the potential of pizza either.

In this analogy, the jellybean is MIDI and the pizza is music with its variety of genres and instrumentations. While MIDI might be a poor substitute for music ultimately written for acoustic instruments and human performers as well as each's limitations in mind, MIDI has all the capabilities of a computer to realize whatever you might imagine, things that lie well beyond the limitations of acoustic instruments and human hands, fingers, lungs, brains, et cetera. So, I argue that we should measure the "virtue" of MIDI-music based not on its approximations of acoustic music, but on music written specifically with MIDI in mind. Similarly, we should judge acoustic music only after its acoustic realization, not only merely on its MIDI imitation.

Interestingly, genres of MIDI-music have emerged, despite much criticism of the genre. One popular genre of MIDI music in the popular music industry is known as “Black-MIDI,” which realizes the capability of MIDI to play hundreds, if not thousands, of notes per second, resulting in entire pop songs of 3.5 minutes containing within themselves millions, if not billions, of notes. In some of my latest electronic works, I have attempted to bring MIDI-music, inspired by some explorations of “Black-MIDI,” into the “classical” arena, writing “orchestral” music that lies between the “real” and “unreal,” the “human” and “superhuman.” There are things within this and other works of mine that sound clearly “real” and possibly “human,” but these are mixed with things likely well beyond the capabilities of either people or their acoustic instruments, but well within the capabilities of computer assisted sound generation.

Tomohiro Muda’s work, printed with an inkjet printer, might initially, without close inspection, engender some of the same criticisms of someone who chooses to write music with MIDI. “Is it art?” “Aren’t they just being lazy?” Well, my argument would be that both are art inasmuch as care and consideration went into the creation, no matter the tool; furthermore, if care and consideration were a part of the process using these tools, then there was likely no “laziness” involved. What is (or will be) interesting in the implementation of such tools is how they are used to meaningfully compliment their particular efficacy rather than highlight their inability to do the job of a perhaps wholly different tool.

Thus, "Nachi no Taki (那智滝), On the Inkjet Scrolls of Tomohiro Muda" is a work that is human and MIDI, both possible and “impossible” at times, reflecting on the intersection of tradition and innovation - of our past, present, and possible future methodologies of expression - challenging the critiques of “inhuman” tools to be expressive and “artistic,” asking how we might move beyond our present human limitations to imagine things heretofore beyond our reach - impossible to accomplish - but which might one day be “human” and “natural.” Consider that at one point in our not too distant past, things as simple as shoes were “unnatural,” now you likely don’t give a second thought to the skyline of New York City or an entire library of books printed with inkjet printers and marvel at how beautifully “unhuman” we have become.