

**This week opens "Somewhere Around There", the first NYC solo show by Dallas-based visual artist Nishiki Sugawara-Beda**



Nishiki Sugawara-Beda, KuroKuroShiro VII, 6"×12" (15.24cm×30.48cm), Sumi on wood, 2020

This week opens *Somewhere Around There*, the first NYC solo show by Dallas-based visual artist [Nishiki Sugawara-Beda](#) at [Amos Eno Gallery](#) in Bushwick. Wood panels and scrolls painted with traditional East Asian Sumi unfurl across the exhibition on their own or in groups of four. At this moment rife with overbearing perspectives, Sugawara-Beda's abstractions collect a chorus of spirits to guide viewers through liminal landscapes towards their own understandings.

These works hail from the artist's *KuroKuroShiro* series, which translates to "black and white." Over video chat, Sugawara-Beda said she adopted a monochromatic practice in 2019. "I used to use a lot of colors," she explained. "Each color had a language to me." Five years ago the artist began limiting her repertoire to just a few colors in each artwork, and then just one.

While we typically perceive black and white as the absence of color, Sugawara-Beda believes limiting the shades of Sumi ink she works in actually exposes richer ranges. “Sumi has such a depth in variety,” she said, from tone to temperature and depth. The surfaces she paints lend additional richness, from paper of varying weights to wood with handmade gesso.

Sugawara-Beda’s gestures echo Japanese calligraphy, which she began studying to understand her culture. This traditional practice conveys entire phrases with singular strokes, transcending the practical representative duty of words. Markings don’t just communicate, but embody the ideas they’re communicating. Sugawara-Beda explained, “I digest the meaning, and then transmit the meaning or feeling of that word using that shape of the characters onto paper.”



*Nishiki Sugawara-Beda, KuroKuroShiro T+S III, 40"×20" (101.6cm ×50.8cm), Sumi on wood, 2022*

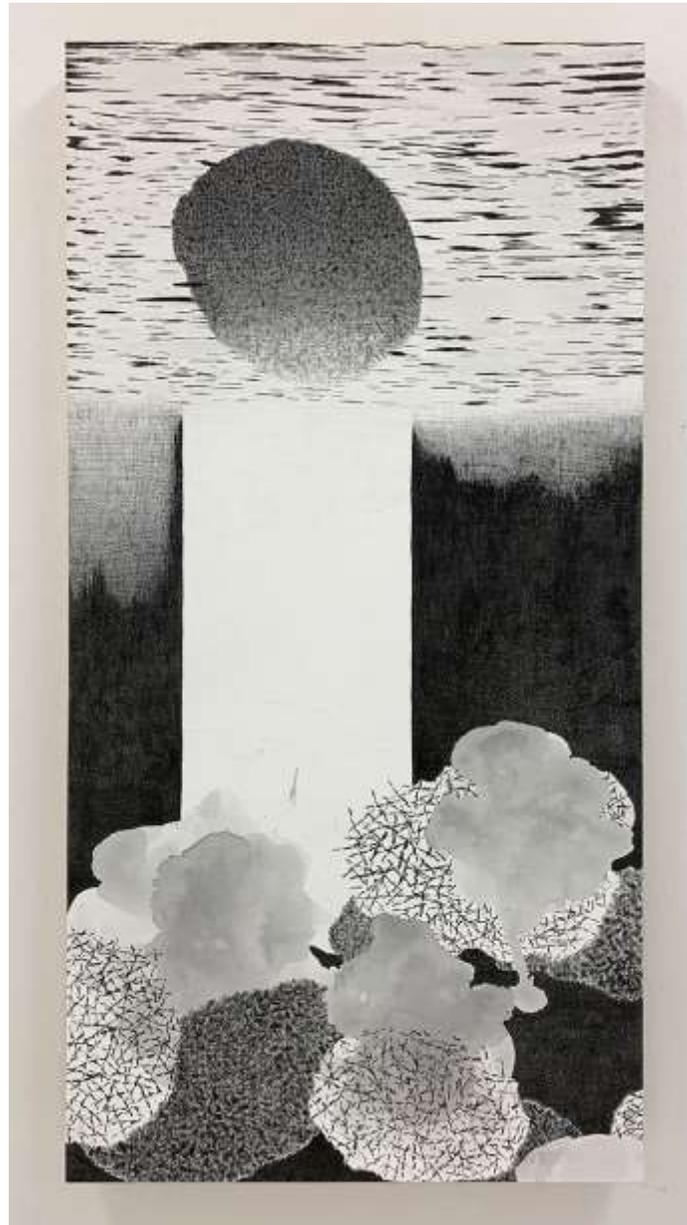


The artist understands authentic gut-level reactions as a necessary component to the act of mark making, but intuition is not just happenstance. It's an ability that can be practiced and fostered.

“You have to be true to that moment so the brush mark will capture its essence,” she said. A Zen Buddhist herself, Sugawara-Beda acknowledged that meditation is an obvious path to better mind-body connections. Still, she finds smell and sound the most potent senses for inducing a flow state, even if she's not burning incense in her studio these days to respect the communal space.

Meditation can be more than five quiet minutes punctuated by an iPhone alarm. “I studied Japanese traditional activities because they're also rooted in mindfulness,” the artist continued. She practices Onkochishin, the Japanese study of the old to inform the new. “By doing that, I'm tracing back the origins of why we establish tradition, that human behavior,” she said.

Some truths really can't be put into words. Not just the profound ones, either—have you ever noticed the complete change in perspective between the first experience in a new place and every subsequent exposure? How would one put that shift into words, when it comes from the cracks between thoughts? Sugawara-Beda's predecessors in Zen Buddhism have grappled with communicating the esoteric for millennia. She cited Zen monk, painter and calligrapher Sengai Gibon amongst her inspirations. His most famous work, *Circle, Triangle and Square*, employs three simple shapes to illustrate the entire universe, where vast infinity is both the end result and very beginning of everything. “To me, abstraction and ambiguity create the possibility for all of us to imagine our own world,” Sugawara-Beda remarked.



*KuroKuroShiro T+S IV, 40"×20" (101.6cm ×50.8cm), Sumi on wood, 2022*

She sees her artworks as landscapes—navigational tools meant to organize disparate elements, borne of the artist’s fascination with conceptual structure and the many ways we use the term *scape*. “In my head there are stories,” the artist said of the scenes across this show. However, she’s titled each work with numbers so her own projections don’t sway viewers from their own understandings.

Sugawara-Beda's distinct gut reactions were formed by her upbringing in Japan, where creation was a family game. When her parents saw a table they liked, they'd buy the wood to make it. The artist recalled how she and her siblings would each get a piece of sandpaper to pitch in. New Year cards were the same story, a woodblock print line where everyone got a few colors. The foreword to Sugawara-Beda's 2021 book *See You There* recounts how her mother's simple endeavor to make a silk cushion cover grew into an entire enterprise, even raising silkworms.



*KuroKuroShiro The E*, 40"×30" (101.6cm ×76.2cm), *Sumi on wood*, 2022

That collectivist sensibility and commitment to material informs her work to this day. Making Sumi is a part of her practice, but at the very least she only purchases from craftspeople she's met.

Formulated historically from soot and animal glue, Sugawara-Beda burns local wood to collect her own soot, distilling the spiritual essence of organic materials and kickstarting the process of making her own Sumi. "There are so many people involved," she said. "By making this, the spirit of the maker is also going into it." Every individual and object incorporated with each successive step introduces a new spirit to Sugawara-Beda's work, culminating with the conversations captured on these surfaces.

Why focus on the esoteric at this time where the material realm's needs are so domineering? Traveling the world and settling down in America taught Sugawara-Beda the intangible yet palpable urgency of communication as she worked through survival English. "How can I communicate with others beyond culture, beyond language and culture and time?" she asked. "We don't have the words to describe, but it's the core of our humanity. It's the place where we can communicate beyond everything." She makes gentle overtures in the direction, but these landscapes aren't precise destinations. They're simply *Somewhere Around There*.

Abstraction is supposedly the purview of feminine energy—the chaotic, the unspoken and undulating. However, so much abstract artwork inadvertently adopts masculine overtones in its exertion of the artist's distinct perspective. Sugawara-Beda's work holds space for many voices, but none more than the viewers'.

— Vittoria Benzine