

Painter's Log: Alison Moritsugu turns wood slices into something else entirely

By Robert L. Pincus
ART CRITIC

An artistic epiphany doesn't have to be dramatic. Alison Moritsugu wasn't expecting one when she spent some time at the venerable Yaddo art colony in 1993. It was the middle of December and she was just happy to have quiet time to concentrate on her work.

"I had been painting landscapes on wood panels," she recalls, "but had been looking for a way to make my paintings look more like objects. One day, I looked at the stacks of firewood and saw that painting on the end of a slice of wood would make sense for me.

"There is also a kitschy tradition of painting on log slices, which I like," Moritsugu adds. "I think that these works subvert painting and turn it into something else."

This was the beginning of a development in her art that continues to this day. She is still finding new ways of turning logs into paintings. The oldest examples on view at the Lux Art Institute, dating from 1995 to 1997, form a stack in the corner of the gallery space. They are meticulously

painted scenes, which hark back to the 19th century, and look as if they would happily co-exist in an actual landscape.

The most recent images in her show are done on the ends of small logs, then cut thin and mounted on the wall as "Oval Landscape" (2008). Each small image contains a fragment of a larger scene, and the entire ensemble forms a loose oval – and a larger picture – on the wall.

She lives in New York, in the small Hudson River Valley town of Beacon – once obscure in art circles, but now known for the immense museum space that opened there in 2003, Dia: Beacon.

The locale fits, since her style of painting owes much to the Hudson River School of the 19th century. You see allusions to the likes of iconic American painters such as Thomas Cole and Asher Durand in her work. But where they tended toward the grandiose, she favors modesty and even humility in her approach to nature.

Moritsugu has come to town as the second artist in residence this season at the Lux, which is marking its first anniversary. Nor is this her first project for the venue.

In 2005, she was commissioned to create one of the works for its innovative education program "The Valise Project." The concept: Get artists to create original works of art that double as their own carrying cases, for use in classrooms. Moritsugu's "Field Box," made in 2005, contains small log landscapes, which fit neatly inside an elegantly lined briefcase along with magnifying lenses and measuring instruments. The entire box is an objet d'art.

True to past residencies, Moritsugu is making a new work during her time here (through Dec. 6), and during gallery hours you can stop by and chat with her about her art in progress. When completed, this piece will become part of the show, already on view (continuing through Jan. 3).

Moritsugu's paintings are visually seductive; you can admire them simply as exquisitely detailed landscapes. The most arresting examples are a trio of works that each carry the matter-of-fact title "Tall Sassafras Slice" – with a different Roman numeral differentiating them.

These "slice" paintings extend the concept of the painting as object in a

different direction. They're large, tall surfaces, jagged at the edges. Though Western in style, the structure of these paintings borrows from a different tradition. Each contains a bucolic scene with multiple vantage points on terrain, water and sky.

"They're hybrid landscapes," she says, standing in front of them. "I always liked the meditative, meandering effect, and these works were how I introduced Chinese landscape painting into my art."

Moritsugu, of Japanese descent, was born in Honolulu and grew up on Oahu and Kauai. Her family, on both sides, had been in Hawaii for multiple generations.

She left after high school to study art at Washington University in St. Louis and then earned an M.F.A. at the School of Visual Arts in New York in 1991. But the bond with Hawaii has endured. In 2003, she revisited places from childhood, painting the landscapes and creating ornate frames for them.

"I wanted the frame to evoke King Kalakaua. I was interested in how he used the English trappings of a monarchy but in a Hawaiian way."

The paintings are of fields that housed sugar cane and pineapple, crops virtually gone from the islands.

She adds: "These paintings are already out of date, though, people tell me. These places are more developed."

Last year, Moritsugu exhibited these paintings at the Contemporary Museum at First Hawaiian Center in Honolulu. She also showed "Invasive Repeat" (2007), a motif, digitally printed, that is meant to mimic a large expanse of wallpaper. But she employs imagery as social commentary, picturing plant life that has driven out native forms in vivid colors, while the extinct and endangered plants and birds are seen as white contours.

She is working on a similarly intricate idea, using local vegetation, for her residency, which also addresses the relationship between invasive vegetation and fires. This imagery in progress, like all of her work, is beautifully rendered.

"I probably should have tried to do a more simple project while I was here," Moritsugu says.



Alison Moritsugu is currently making a new work during her residency at the Lux Art Institute and you can view her exhibition, which includes the large-scale landscapes behind her, as well as visit with the artist during gallery hours. *Charlie Neuman / Union-Tribune*