



September 21 [Sat] - October 26 [Sat], 2024 Closed on Sundays, Mondays and Holidays. 11:00–18:00 [Sat. -17:00]

Cooperated with Tomotaro Kaneko, Takamitsu Ohta, Organized by ARTCOURT Gallery (Yagi Art Management, Inc.), Sponsored by Mitsubishi Estate Co., Ltd., Mitsubishi Materials Coporation, Mitsubishi Jisho Property Management Co., Ltd.

Inside and Outside the Membrane

Dancing Heart (1973) is a work imbued with an approachable sense of humor. A piece of paper with Imai's name written on it bounces atop a speaker that emits the sound of Imai's heartbeat. It prompts the question: is it the speaker or the paper that's dancing? The vibrations of the speaker's diaphragm link to our auditory perception, which seems to be like the beat of one's heart. The paper often drifts to the edge of the speaker, sometimes falling off, requiring the viewer to put it back in position.

Our impression of the piece might shift if we consider Imai's own reflections, likely shaped by observing the work over time:

“The sounds we hear are usually from something other than ourselves—sounds from the external world. These are sounds outside our skin, which we think nothing of when we hear them. However, the sound inside our skin, no matter how aware we are that it is our own heartbeat, strikes us as strange. It's like that scene from the old *Astro Boy* animation, where he opens the door to his chest.”¹

In *Astro Boy*², the door is portrayed as a vulnerability; when open, the machinery inside his chest becomes exposed. There is a certain allure in *Astro Boy* revealing his weak spot by opening the door. What does the beat of an exposed heart sound like?

The inside and outside of the membrane is a recurring theme in Imai's work. In his first solo exhibition at age 17, Imai presented both rectangular and irregularly shaped relief works stretched with white fabric creating bulging convex forms. Underneath the cotton cloth of the first of those works were discarded speaker units. The curved, taut white surface evokes the lustrous sheen of skin, marble, or white porcelain. The white surface has a more biological quality in his *White Event* (1965) sculptural series, in which a motorized rod pushes up against the white rubber that stretches over the rectangular frame.

Imai's *On the Table* series, which began in 2008, features dancers performing beneath white cloth stretched over a table and can be seen as a self-homage to his work with white membranes from about 50 years prior. The book *On the Table: Performance in Book* (Kinohanasha, 2010) presents frame-by-frame photographs of the performance, giving readers the sensation of peeling away layers of skin with each turn of the page. The title of this exhibition, *Inside and Outside the Membrane*, is drawn from Imai's writing about this work.

Following his participation in the 1970 Osaka Expo and the dissolution of the Gutai Art Association in 1972, Imai has increasingly turned to photography, video, and sound as modes of expression, in step with his contemporaries. His first photographic work, *SQUARE – glass/grass* (1970),

involved placing a square pane of glass in a grassy field and photographing its transformation over time. As the glass pane pushes down against the grass underneath, the moisture exuded by the grass condenses gradually turning the glass into a white, clouded surface that reflects the sky. Thereafter, Imai began his exploration of the relationship between transparency and opacity, between reflection and what lies beyond the surface through photography, television, and video.

When *Dancing Heart* and *SQUARE – glass/grass* are viewed side by side, the former aligns with the circulatory system and the latter with the respiratory system. Sensory perception is in the domain of the nervous system. Imai's use of diverse media can be seen as an attempt to probe beneath the skin and expose what lies within. Across his works, the impression of a white membrane carries an allure reminiscent of the moment *Astro Boy* opens the door to his chest.

1. Imai Norio, et al. “Questionnaire.” *Design Quarterly*, No. 14, Summer 1976, pg. 114.
2. *Astro Boy* is a pioneering Japanese manga and animation created by Osamu Tezuka in the 1950s to 1960s about an incredibly powerful and intelligent robot boy set in a futuristic world.

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