

ANNE
 DE VRIES UTA
 KARL EISENREICH
 NAWROT LEI
 SAITO
 RODERICK
 HIETBRINK NHAT
 VU DANG
 TEMPORARY
 STEDELIJK
 (4)

LEI SAITO

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L'HISTOIRE DE DEBUT
DU MONDE, JUSQU'!
LA MOITIE

Lei Saito (b.1980) wanted to live in Paris. She had never been, but she just knew that she had to be there. In Japan, where she was born, she followed a university program that included management, sociology, French – a lot of interesting things, but not what she felt was right for her.

In 2003 she went to Paris on a scholarship. Her plan was to become a curator. She started to study art history. She smiles. 'At that moment I was actually more interested in contemporary art, so often I didn't go to school at all. I just pretended to be attending. Every morning I took the train towards the university – and sometimes I really did go to classes, but a lot of times I changed platform and went to the Louvre or Centre Pompidou and all the other wonderful museums. For months I explored the streets of Paris all by myself. I was a bit lost, but very happy. In hindsight I think this was an excellent way to study, to cultivate my eye.'

On one of those strolls she stumbled upon the École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts de Paris. 'The door was open.' Deeply impressed by what she saw inside, she knew: this is it. She applied for the relevant course and was accepted. Artist Annette Messager took her under her wing and Saito was given absolute freedom for three years. 'It's difficult to say what I learned there exactly. Annette was more of an artist than a teacher. She never gave concrete advice, she just said: "Carry on like that." I think just the fact that those big artists were there in school – you could easily pass by and talk to them – was very inspiring. It was like a dream. We could do whatever we wanted. I made installations and objects, sculptures. I used food and everyday objects as material, because I needed to realize ideas immediately, and things like food or cotton swabs were always available.'

On completing her art education the question arose: what's next? 'This is still a mystery to me: making money, finding a gallery. How does that work?' She sent applications for competitions, residences and places to exhibit, without success. 'I didn't have a studio – quite literally no space. So my work got smaller: little drawings, tiny, tiny books.' But all that changed when she arrived at the Rijksacademie in Amsterdam, as indeed did a lot else in Saito's life and work. 'It was difficult. I loved Paris so much. Amsterdam was cold, the canals were frozen. And the Dutch food was so strange to me! The first year I just went from my house to the Academy and back again. I didn't go to other places, I didn't see the city.'



Caravane
Cinéma (2007)



Coton-tiges
architecture
(2008)



Winter Donut
(2010)

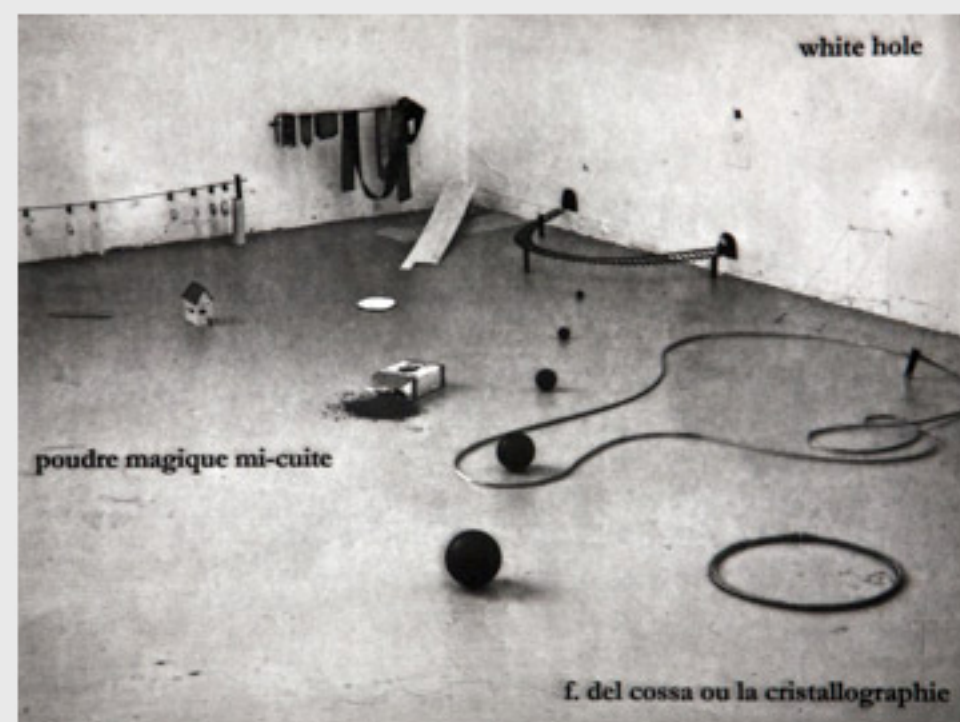


The Party (2010)

Her concentration on small works in her final period in Paris was replaced by a focus on large installations and sculptures. From gentle, sweet and colorful, her work switched to black. 'No, not sad. Serious. More real. Before, I worked to visualize a concept. The concept came first. For example, I assembled a catalog about six international artists. I wrote their biographies, and showed photos of their work. It all looked very nice and real, but it was all fiction. The artists didn't exist. I sent the catalog to 200 world famous curators as a Christmas gift. I wanted to make a statement about the way people deal with art: they look at a catalog and talk about an exhibition as if they were there, but they didn't actually see anything!'

She has now turned her back on such conceptual stuff. 'I want to make something real. The work itself must have a meaning, it shouldn't be a representation of something else. That's quite popular now in contemporary art: you have to read the text before it becomes interesting. But that's just the concept. The work itself doesn't give you anything. I'm sick of this distance. I want my work to survive on its own, not to be a representation of anything other than itself. If my work doesn't mean anything to people, then it doesn't mean anything to me. That's why I'm so interested in materials now: they speak for themselves.'

Her interest in contemporary art has lessened over in the last few years. She now embraces the history of art, which she wasn't interested in before. 'I went to Italy a lot, where I saw the fifteenth-century frescos. Those paintings are their meaning. I love the works of early Renaissance painters, Italian painters like Masaccio, Francesco del Cossa and Paolo Ucello. They influenced my work a lot. Sometimes I find an Italian painting that has exactly the ambiance that I want to create in one of my installations, as happened with my installation The Party. Sometimes it's exactly the other way around – I discover a painting that has elements that also appear in my work. No, it's no coincidence.' She shakes her head. 'I think it's a sign that my intuition is not random. It actually makes sense.'



Mode d'emploi /
détails (2011)

white hole
 poudre magique mi-cuite
 F. del cossa ou la cristallographie

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This installation is made up out of objects that appear repeatedly in Saito's works: a small house, a rolling pin, a donut, a ball, an egg. 'This time I wanted to make them out of more serious material,' she says. 'Before, I was using tissue, or paper - easy materials. I wanted to make it all more real. I chose alabaster, because I have wanted to use that for a long time. There are a lot of beautiful objects in alabaster. It's used a lot in the stories of the Arabian Nights.' The objects are showcased on a black stage, which seems to emerge from the wall. 'Intuitively I combined the alabaster with blackboard. Later I discovered that the chalk that is used to write on a blackboard contains the same material as alabaster, calcium sulfate (CaSO_4) - that was all the proof I needed that alabaster and blackboard belong together.'

This work carries the title *L'histoire de début du monde, jusqu'à la moitié*. Saito wrote the title in gold leaf on the wall. 'The story of the beginning of the world, up until the middle,' Saito explains. 'But the French word *histoire* also means history. And we can also read it as saying it's not the story, or the history, that is halfway, but the beginning that occurs only in the middle. I really like this phrase's ambiguity.' The sentence is the name of the work, but this is an artwork that stands on its own. 'Words are not physical. They are transparent, we cannot see them. But because I made them out of gold, it's as if I've made a ghost put on a coat. The symbolic meaning remains, but now the words have a physical significance.' As an independent artwork the sentence on the wall also has a name: *Title*.
(CS)



L'histoire de début du monde, jusqu'à la moitié (2011)
300 x 280 x 150 cm
Alabaster, blackboard
Photo: Willem Vermaase

