

ArtSeen

Kelly Akashi: *Mood Organ*

By Ann C. Collins



Installation view: *Kelly Akashi: Mood Organ*, Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York, 2020. Photo: Pierre Le Hors. Courtesy the artist and Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York / Los Angeles

A bronze orb the color of cocoa powder stands about as tall as a person in the center of the gallery. Lumpy and wrinkled like a peeled orange, it rests in a shallow steel basin. Slow streams of water leak from tiny perforations along its sides, tears that spill down its curvature, leaving dark traces as they fall. *Weep (2020)* is the centerpiece of *Mood Organ*, Kelly Akashi's show at Tanya Bonakdar Gallery. The exhibition takes its title from the 1968 novel, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* by Philip K. Dick, a post-apocalyptic tale in which devices called mood organs allow individuals to set the type and intensity of emotion they would like to have at any given moment. Yet *Weep* undermines this vision of personal control, embodying instead an unending feeling of sorrow, a huge lump of sadness carried within despite attempts to monitor outward expression.

Five wooden pedestals lathed in patterns drawn from electrocardiograms

of Akashi's heartbeat surround *Weep*. Bronze, steel, and marble casts of the artist's hand rest on each, nestling, pressing, caressing, and pawing glass objects. Taken as a whole, the sculptures transform the gallery into a comforting space in which emotion is met with compassion, and need not be dialed down. The space becomes a place of retreat in which the distance between art and viewer is charged with a quiet inviolability.

Or so it seems. Like all New York galleries, Tanya Bonakdar has closed its doors in compliance with Governor Cuomo's Shelter-In-Place restrictions, instituted in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. *Mood Organ* can now be seen by appointment or on the gallery's website, which provides hi-res images of the installation as a whole, as well as selected works from the show and a virtual publication. In his renowned 1935 essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," Walter Benjamin argued that photographs and other reproductions of art fail to provide the viewer with the experience of the *aura*, the energy emitted from an artist's work. Benjamin predicted that mass circulation of such images would undermine the purity of being in the physical presence of art. Looking online at images of Akashi's show with this in mind gives rise to feelings of longing: the images evoke—yet do not deliver—what it is like to stand in the open space of the gallery, free to circle the work, stepping closer to it at will. Viewed through a socially-distanced lens, Akashi's installation is mesmerizing, taking on an almost fetishistic significance. The hands cradle and explore the surfaces of her glass objects without regard for whatever pathogen might be lurking in this moment of rabid hand-sanitizing.



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In *Symbiosis (2020)*, the fingers of a bronze hand sink into a plum-colored bubble of hand-blown glass, which changes its shape to accommodate the pressure of touch, cradling the hand while maintaining its surface tension. In *Cultivator (Metamorphic) (2020)*, Akashi's hand rests palm-up on its base, smoothly carved from Nero Marquina marble. Glass fronds topped with crimson and white flowers wind around thumb and fingers. An amber blossom rests on an outcropping of wood on the pedestal below. The title implies a nurturing of life, but this association is tempered by the stone's funereal black hue. *Porous Paradigm (2020)* features a stainless steel hand which reaches up to hold a perforated glass ball aloft, fingernails digging into the holes. The ribbons of glass that form the ball give it a sudsy appearance, which contrasts with the solidity of the steel hand. There is a gracefulness to the juxtaposition of delicacy and heft, yet the pairing elicits anxiety, as Akashi seems to suspend us in a moment just before the glass bubble pops.

Upstairs in the gallery, Akashi sets a table with eight glass vessels shaped with bosomy lumps in *Triple Helix (2020)*. The vessels range in color from pink to green to sepia to orange, and their shapes refer to Pre-Columbian urns. A quartz bell, which reportedly sounds a low frequency vibration when struck, hangs overhead. Such bells are used to mark time. In this case, the bell connects the present moment to the past, the urns serving as a reminder of the inevitable completion of life.

Akashi's "Cell" series of glass sculptures features variations of a branch-like form, which she hangs from ropes, stands on a pedestal, or lays on the floor. In *Armored Cell (2020)*, a silky gold cord hangs from two ceiling beams as a frosted glass branch, antler-like in appearance, hangs tied in its center. In *Vitreous Cell (2020)*, a clear branch lies on the floor in a tangle of knotted rope. Will these shoots continue to grow and bloom, or will they be choked by the encroaching cable? This is a question that preoccupies us, and one we will continue to ask, here with our noses pressed up against the glass.