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Photo Joseph Parra

## **How to address the unthinkable in art**

Interview with: Toshiko Mori  
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*Under the blanket threat of climate degradation, art and science can no longer be estranged from one another. A reconciliation is needed*

### **Toshiko Mori (TM):**

At this point in your career, what are your interests relating to the forest?

### **Donald Moffett (DM):**

It is the tree, the fundamental unit of a forest and the web of ecology that builds out from the tree. When you mess with the tree, a system can fall apart.

In Texas, there's a bird called the golden-cheeked warbler and it has beautiful golden cheeks. It is indigenous to the Texas Hill Country. This gorgeous bird is dependent for its nesting on old-growth junipers (colloquially called cedars). This warbler has been under threat because of habitat loss by a surging people population. This is reckless and objectionable. And it leaves me with the feeling that we've got this all wrong. This bird has an equal right not only to survive but thrive.

**TM:** There is a societal relationship when you talk about people and forestry. We've looked at various approaches to the human management of nature and the forest. I'd like to know your thoughts about this and how it might be best done.

**DM:** Well, I think it comes down to hardcore land conservation: conservation for the purpose of a rich ecology, which at times can rule out our participation. Maybe we can walk in the forest if we're really careful and ethical, but there are other parts of the system that, frankly, exclude us. It's an attribute of the forest that those systems, without us, are allowed to operate. And that's why I say it seems like hardcore land conservation is top of the heap, for me, so that the forest can produce and reproduce on its own terms, unrelated to our needs. We'll see.



**TM:** So how does the forest relate to your artwork?

**DM:** There's a component to my practice and history that has shades of advocacy and even activism. This component has taken an extremely sharp turn towards the environment in the last ten years. I'm building another exhibition for New York that will dive deeper in this direction. I think art problems and environmental problems require new languages. I know they do. It takes all disciplines to grapple with the central problems of our day – and the hopes of our day. So the new show will be a further development of an unknown visual language, frankly. It's all an experiment and full of risk.

We're hoping to bring some people of different disciplines together in the gallery for the purpose of discussion – blurring boundaries, as you've highlighted in April issue. Art and science can no longer be bluntly described and estranged from each other under the blanket threat of climate degradation. I'm for reconciliation. So there will be an attempt to speak art and science in the same room. It's not easy to build an alliance where whole forms are so different. However, it's more than possible and it's been done historically.

**TM:** We are quoting E.O. Wilson in our manifesto: the theory of Half-Earth. So we are also attempting to include scientists in the conversation. Could you describe some of your ideas for the show? You displayed *The Overstory* by Richard Powers at your last show. How did it relate to the work?

**DM:** It's just one of the great novels of the last decade, in my opinion. It does what a great book can do: it opened up possibilities for me. Powers did such a masterful job of looking at the environment, describing trees and building characters that interact in a spectacular constellation of ethos and pathos. It is a certain kind of call to action. Equally mind-blowing, and a very specific call to action is *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* by Amitav Ghosh. It's about creatively inventing a new language to tackle the great derangement

about climate change. He lays the task at the feet of writers to create and imagine a language of solutions because creativity and imagination are not attributes of the political class. It was easy for me to transpose this appeal into the studio. I asked, "Okay, here's your challenge: how do you do it in art, in the form of art, to address the unthinkable?" I don't think there are issues that are more important than nature and its health.



**TM:** It's so universal. It's everybody, every generation, every part of our world. It's critical.

**DM:** What I would like to bring to this conversation, and to this issue, is an open consideration of ecology; one where people are not at the centre, or even considered. We were just mentioning this forest without people, and I think that's an important topic even within an architecture and design magazine. How do we stand back from nature, somehow throttling our egos, to respect and protect as we make what we make?

**TM:** I think the perception is slowly changing, even among architects and designers. We're asking how many new chairs we need, or how many new buildings we need. Is it better to extend the lifecycles of what we already have? There is a disciplinary shift. But not all artists are thinking like you are.

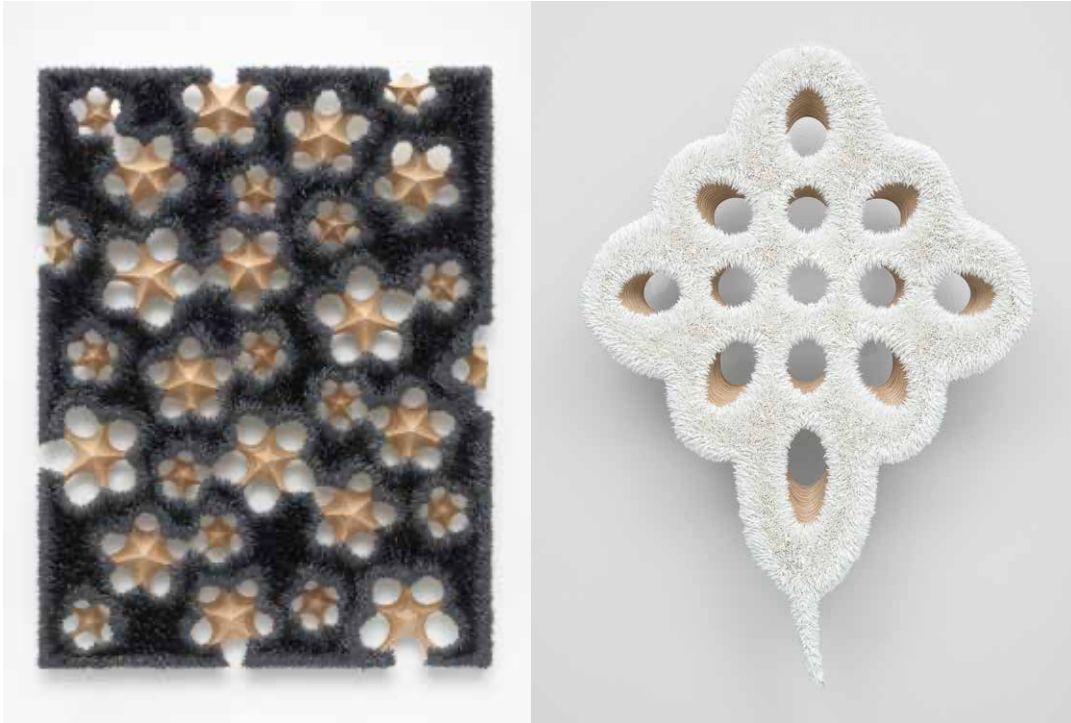
**DM:** No, not yet, generally. Art often operates a little behind as it slowly sifts and acts as a cultural filter. It can be a little late to the big issues, but I see it coming to this one.

**TM:** So how do you deal with a narrative that is associated with climate issues? I think one of the most difficult things is that the phenomenon of climate change is invisible. It's creeping up on us. It's behind the actual appearance of things. It's always a challenge to visualise these phenomena. How do you express it as an artist?

**DM:** That is the same question we ask here every day. It's a constant puzzle and a constant challenge. But it's the fun part of the studio practice, too. We experiment and test and see how we can invent a new language in visual form. We're always hoping for success but it's really slippery. But I read a lot about nature and the environment. And as I'm sure you know making architecture, I've got to let things sit in an unknown part of my mind and hope that at some point something spits out visually through my head and my hands. I think that's maybe the best way I can answer that question. It's just opening up in a deep way to the influx of information, and then seeing if it can possibly winnow down to a piece of art (or architecture). And at times, it does.

**TM:** Your pieces have a visceral appeal that I think is beyond just the visual: the texture and size, the placement. It's not just a passive painting. There are certain activated elements in the pieces you produce, in an abstract way, but not in a figurative way. It's always abstract, and that's really tough work.

**DM:** Tough, yes. But there's also a freedom to working in a strictly visual way. It balances out the difficulty of trying to say something when you're using an idiom that is fundamentally abstract.



**TM:** Is there a theme to this next show?

**DM:** I've been using and reusing a title for a couple of years now: "Nature Cult". With "cult", people's hair stands on end and it is exactly the volume I want. I want a word after "nature" that perturbs in a way. But in this one, we're adding a third word: "Picnic". So it's "Nature Cult Picnic"; it's our annual picnic, and all are invited.

**TM:** "Nature Cult" sounds very dark and serious. And "Picnic" sounds very fun and informal.

**DM:** It could be dark – unless we all join; unless the cult includes all of us, as in seven billion people who really believe in nature as the spectral genius teacher. Regarding the critical issues of the environment, I know art can be extremely powerful. Art can move slowly, but this changes. I've seen it before. I think the moment will come – and it will come in a rush – because most artists whom I know like to deal with the most important issues of the day, no matter how difficult. The differences between art and architecture are known and profound, but artists and architects are on equal footing about what has to be done. Each discipline, each practitioner has a responsibility to the planet – to nature in general, to the forest specifically, and to animals in particular.