

# Song-Ming Ang on Yamashita and Kobayashi



## There is a magical pull in the consciously modest art of Mai Yamashita and Naoto Kobayashi.

**MAI YAMASHITA and  
NAOTO KOBAYASHI**

*When I Wish Upon a Star*  
2004–06

Video installation, 2 min.

Courtesy Takuro Sameya Contemporary  
Art, Tokyo.

I believe it's because their works are never prescriptive or didactic, but are purposeful in their lightness.

My first encounter with their work was in late 2010, when I received a booklet about the current residents of the Künstlerhaus Bethanien, where I was going to be an artist-in-residence the following year. I thumbed through the pages, and one image captured my attention. It was a video still of a couple jogging on a grass lawn, following a track that bore the shape of an infinity sign. Evidently, they had been jogging until they wore out the grass, leaving the trail in their wake.

The work, *Infinity* (2006), felt refreshing in its simplicity and subtle humor. But it wasn't just a joke. Behind the seemingly pointless gesture of running in circles was a palpable sense of labor and a carefully delineated premise. I wondered, who are these people?

As artists, Yamashita and Kobayashi deal with mundane subjects in an often whimsical way. They've fed a canvas to a pride of lions, they've licked a giant candy ball until it became lollipop-sized, and they've rolled five dice for two months until all of their faces showed the same number. I like how silly they are. Their work may be

calculated, but it has an unpretentious quality that I admire.

The work in which they rolled the dice is called *Miracle* (2004). It's not a miracle, but a feat of human endeavor. In the video, you do not just see the results of the astonishingly aligned dice but also hear the couple's surprised exclamations. The spontaneous yelps are curiously stirring, just as the results are life affirming. It makes me think that I can achieve anything as long as I try very hard.

I also very much like their work *1,000 Waves* (2007). Here, the couple shot a video of the sea and superimposed a number from 1 up to 1,000 onto every wave they counted. The process is of course arbitrary to a certain extent—it's difficult to determine when exactly one wave ends and another begins, but that's why I like it. Our world often feels chaotic, but in Yamashita and Kobayashi's universe I see discipline and devotion trump everything else.

The artists make works from simple, diligent repetition, but their talent really lies in dreaming up the impossible. In *When I Wish Upon a Star* (2004–06), they shot a video of a shooting star and slowed the footage down from a split second to two minutes, long enough for Yamashita to recite all her wishes over the video.

"I wish to be a great artist. I wish not to worry about money. I wish never to become sick again. I wish to have no regrets after death. I wish to be prettier after I'm born again. I wish to repay my debt to the Japan Scholarship Foundation. I wish I could be closer to my parents. I wish I could have witty conversations. I wish to produce masterpieces."

The list is much longer, but every line reflects so accurately our basic desires and insecurities. *When I Wish Upon a Star* is universal in its concerns, and moving in its nakedness. I don't know the couple personally, but when I finally arrived at the Künstlerhaus Bethanien, I was informed by a fellow resident that the previous inhabitants of my studio were Yamashita and Kobayashi. Given that there were 25 studios, I must say that was quite a miracle.