

Life by a thousand cuts

A meditative practice needing careful planning and strict concentration, Nahoko Kojima creates huge sculptures from a single piece of paper

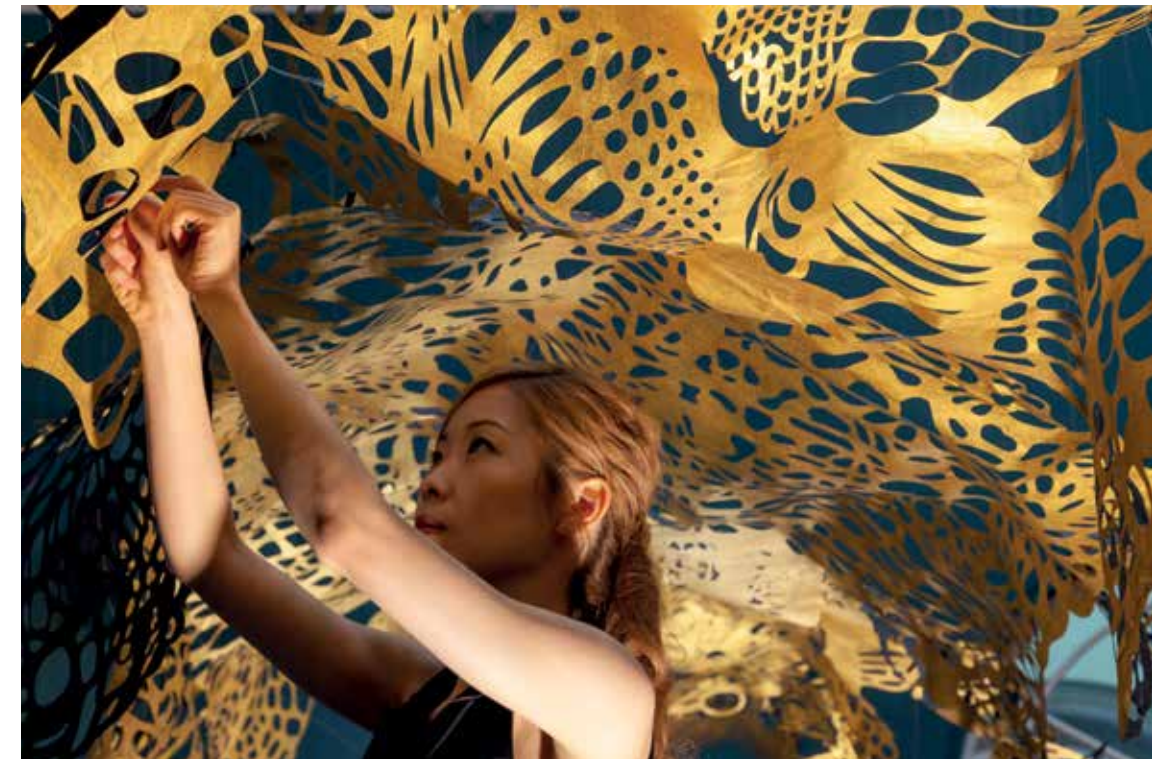
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At first glance, *Sumi* seems to float like a Sicilian widow's veil – black and gold lacework quivering in an imperceptible breeze. It hangs on delicate nylon threads from the glass ceiling of the Dulwich Picture Gallery's entrance hall, casting elaborate shadows on the venerable walls. Stand here a moment and a recognisable shape quickly emerges: a scaly tail, claws suspended as if in water, a bone-crushing maw hungry for invisible prey. *Sumi* is the latest work from boundary-pushing paper artist Nahoko Kojima – an impressive, eight-metre-long life-sized crocodile crafted from a single sheet of *washi* paper.

I meet Nahoko outside the gallery for a half hour snatched between two paper-cutting workshops she's running alongside this new commission. "I want to show how amazing paper-cutting is to so many

people," she says. "It's so much fun." No doubt this sense of playfulness has played a role in her continued dedication to the art form: she's been cutting paper for the best part of 33 years, having discovered the practice at the tender age of five. "I was so happy to find paper-cutting when I was very young. I was so surprised. In painting, you can use so many colours, but with paper-cutting you can use only one colour, so you really have to think. That's really fascinating for me."

Sumi, she tells me, hatched from a long year of drawing, planning, cutting and painting (she used layers of black and gold ink to emulate the hard skin of the animal) starting with a series of observational sketches at a crocodile zoo in Oxfordshire. "I tried to find the muscles, how they move, how they live. →



Nahoko is consistently reinventing the traditional Japanese art of kirie into a contemporary form

“Because it’s a single sheet, if one part moves, the whole sculpture moves. I love it”

Crocodiles have quite interesting lives. Of course, they’re dangerous animals, but for them, humans are dangerous. It’s a bit ironic.” Conceptual drawings came next, then a small-scale prototype to work out the mechanics of crafting the animal’s whole body – the bulge of a stomach, an articulated jaw – from one piece of paper.

This, she says, is her biggest challenge: a strict adherence to the single-sheet rule of *kirie* (the traditional Japanese art of paper-cutting), which she’s carried over into her three-dimensional work, from wearable fashion pieces to her signature animal sculptures. “I wanted people to feel the paper texture, to give them an emotion about the paper. In the beginning, I worked with plain paper pinned to a wall, but even those pieces had a third dimension. You can use lighting to create shadows. After that, I started creating paper-cut sculptures.” *Washi* paper, she explains, has been around for a thousand years. Made

from the pulp of the inner bark of the mulberry tree, it’s thinner yet stronger than modern western paper. “The way you hang it creates beautiful forms. You can see the fibres going through the paper. Because it’s a single sheet, if one part moves, the whole sculpture moves. I love it.”

My mind wanders to one of Nahoko Kojima’s previous pieces, a monumental 32-metre long whale large enough to swallow the artist whole. The sheet of paper she used for this mighty cetacean was 100 metres long. I imagine it spread out, covering the floor of an immense warehouse, with Nahoko working her way over it fastidiously, barefoot, scalpel in hand. The reality is more prosaic. “I’m based in Bermondsey. My studio is always very clean. It’s secret, no one notices it. I have a huge table, probably six metres long, so I can create huge pieces too. I move the paper on top of it, and roll it. I cut the paper, roll, cut, roll...” →



Sumi, paper sculpture, Dulwich Picture Gallery, London (2019)



*Shiro, paper cut sculpture,
BACC, Bangkok (2018)*

“It’s the small things... Nature does amazing things, it’s the most inspiring”

It sounds, I put forward, like a meditative practice. “You have to be patient and concentrate. Also my dog helps physically. Because I create so many animals, it helps to have one, to understand how they move.” The dog in question, a bright-eyed pug called Duke, appears regularly on Nahoko’s Instagram. “He’s really calm, so I’ll be calm too. I walk him in the morning, when the flowers all open up, and in the evening, when they close up again. It’s the small things, they always make you think... For me they’re beautiful. Nature does amazing things, it’s the most inspiring.”

Nahoko has called London home for the past 10 years, having first come here to study western art and design. Living here has been a source of inspiration, too. “It’s a totally different culture. Even nature is different. The trees are different. The colours are different. For example, it’s more cloudy here, so the leaves are a different colour, a different kind of green. I’m always

amazed at the temperature, the weather, the different quality of light.”

These organic cues, it seems, have woven their way into Nahoko’s work, in the intricate web of swirls, slashes and curlicues she adorns her beasts with. Is there some significance to these patterns? “There are a lot of hidden characters in a piece. So for example, with this crocodile it’s about what they eat.” She laughs. “I don’t know, you’ll find some secrets in the piece, there are so many secrets in it.” Nahoko stays equally schtum about her upcoming projects (“small, or maybe big... but animals still”), but she’s enthused about the 218K-follower-strong community she’s been building on Facebook. “People are interested in paper-cutting. A lot of countries don’t have this tradition, so I like to share what I’ve learned. Even if they’re not familiar with it, people can try it. They can share their work with us, spread it out to the world... I think it’s really good.” ♦

Follow Nahoko @nahokokojima on Instagram or give her a like on Facebook at facebook.com/papercutart.craft. Sumi is on display at Dulwich Picture Gallery until 8 September, visit dulwichpicturegallery.org.uk for more information