

Kako Ueda's paper cut "Tree of Life" is both giddy and ghoulish. The paper is as fine and delicate as lace; refined tracings of spindly, reaching vines crowned by a grinning skull. The effect is arresting, to say the least.

Ueda's cites a host of inspirations for her work in paper, including stencils for kimono prints and Japanese origami. Her medium is fragile and somehow dignified, while at the same time ordinary and disposable. "Paper has been my main medium for many years," Kako explains. "Even back in undergraduate school, I liked painting on paper instead of on canvas. I guess being a Japanese native, I developed an appreciation for paper quite early. All Japanese young children learn how to do origami (the crane is the most popular one) and I was no exception. I started making wall relief pieces by using origami techniques in graduate school. The hand cut paper series started in 2003."

"I felt the certain limitations to folding paper (for example, you cannot really make round or curvy lines) and was looking for an alternative way of using paper. So one day I started cutting and felt really excited about the results. Also cut paper exists in many cultures as a traditional craft medium. I like the idea of using something so common and creating something new out of it. Also, what comes out of cutting paper looks like a line drawing but has physicality. I like this kind of hybrid being."

To create a paper cut piece, Kako first draws on the paper with pencil, then carefully cuts out the figure with a number 11 Xacto knife. She began using pH-neutral black paper first, then expanded into occasionally painting the paper with acrylics before cutting, or painting patterns on the pieces after cutting. The final pieces are as time-consuming as they appear, each figure relying on patient precision. "I've been working on this installation and it will take one or two more years to be completed," Kako says. "I want to cover the walls of a small room with individually hand cut paper pieces. One insect will take at least thirty minutes to draw and cut."

Kako comes from a "bohemian family." Her father, a stage actor, and her mother, "an art lover and avid reader," own a bar in Tokyo. At age fifteen, Kako departed Japan with the blessing of this bohemian parents and left for Brookline, Massachusetts. There she stayed with an American host family while attending high school and then a joint BFA program at Tufts University and The School of Museum of Fine Arts.

"My aging parents are still in Tokyo, they've never visited the U.S. I go back there with my American husband once a year now." During one such trip, Ueda was charged with caring for her ailing mother. "I had been interested in all kinds of organic life forms, which go through distinct stages of life: birth, growth, reproduction, decay and sickness, and finally death. My mother nearly died from brain aneurysm and I was in Japan for 3 months taking care of her right before the cut paper series had started in 2003. So many of the pieces I made in 2003 have the brain image embedded among insects and vegetation."

As an undergraduate, Kako studied photography while painting in her spare time. "Again there I chose a medium that involves paper. I have quite a few photographic works but I've never exhibited any of them." Now Kako spends her days as a researcher and editorial assistant at the intriguingly named Archive for Research in Archetypal Symbolism [<http://aras.org/>], an image archive in midtown Manhattan and, from the look of their website, a sort of Jungian Museum of Jurassic Technology. "I am lucky to be surrounded by all the coffee table books on symbols and mythology," Kako explains, and they serve as inspirations for her varied designs.

Kako's finest cuts are reminiscent of Dürer's woodcuts, not only his grim "Riders of the Apocalypse" but also his gentler animal and plant studies. Works like "Allure" and "Vanitas" are beautifully balanced compositions, highly symbolic representations of the natural order. "One of the recurring themes in my pieces is the ancient Greek idea of the macrocosm and microcosm. Basically, it is an idea to see the same patterns in all levels of reality: in the body, in nature, etc. The body as environment, the environment as body. Ancient Chinese medicine and alchemy have the same philosophies also. I do use traditional Japanese patterns as well as many other patterns from different cultures (the European Renaissance, Celtic, Egyptian). Also I use the imagery of

body organs: the brain, intestines, etc. I get inspiration from art history (like *vanitas* pieces), allegorical themes, current news about the body and body images, medical drawings from all ages and cultures, world mythology (for example, the ‘tree of life’).”

*Vanitas* paintings, formal and highly symbolic seventeenth century Dutch still life arrangements, warned viewers of the inevitable transience of life’s pleasures and pains. There is certainly something of decay around Ueda’s elongated, wasting forms, all the more poignantly rendered in a medium easily bent, burned, or torn. Yet instead of the funeral stillness of a *vanitas*, Kako’s plant and insect forms are riotously living, even in the midst of death.