



JAPAN'S ART ISLAND

NAOSHIMA, ON THE SETO INLAND SEA IN SOUTHERN JAPAN, HAS TRANSFORMED INTO A WORLD-CLASS ART DESTINATION. FROM TADAO ANDO'S MINIMALIST ARCHITECTURE TO YAYOI KUSAMA'S POLKA-DOTTED PUMPKINS, GISELLE WHITEAKER EXPLORES THE WORKS THAT HAVE TURNED THE QUIET ISLAND INTO A LIVING GALLERY.

A flood of passengers alight from the train in the tiny town of Uno on the edge of the Seto Inland Sea. The crowd swarms through the ticket barrier and out the station doors at a fast clip, headed for the crossing that separates the station from the port. Local guides appear, mustering the influx with reassurance that there is still time.

At the ticket office, the herd divides into those who have pre-purchased tickets and those who have not, rejoining beyond the ticket machines just as boarding commences. In less than 10 minutes, hundreds of passengers, my mother and I among them, have flowed in orderly chaos from train to ferry, making their way to the tiny Japanese island of Naoshima.

One of some 3,000 islands dotted across the inland sea that separates three of Japan's main islands – Honshu, Shikoku and Kyushu – Naoshima covers a mere eight square kilometres and has a population of just over 3,000. Diminutive though it is, it attracts upwards of half a million visitors a year. Such is the drawing power of contemporary art.

Since the 1989 launch of what has become Benesse Art Site Naoshima – a multi-island art initiative initiated by billionaire Soichiro Fukutake – Naoshima has shifted from an industrial wasteland to an internationally recognised art destination. The north of the island is still the site of a smelter run by Mitsubishi Materials, which provides stable employment beyond tourism,

while the south is home to multiple art museums, installations and a glut of open-air sculptures dotted across the lush island landscape.

After around 20 minutes cruising, when the ferry docks at Miyanoura Port, the swarm reassembles to disembark. Dozens of guides prevent excited visitors from crossing in front of the unloading vehicles, directing them towards the bicycle hire outlets across the road and the lines of buses ready to motor the most eager to their starting points. Ushered along with the crowd, we soon find ourselves on a local bus, making hasty decisions as to our route. When most passengers alight at the first stop, Honmura, we decide to continue on to Tsutsuji-so, where we transfer to a free shuttle to the Benesse House Museum.

After missing out on tickets for the Chichu Art Museum, an interesting bunker-like structure designed by Japanese architect Tadao Ando that houses artworks by Claude Monet, Walter De Maria and James Turrell, I'd snaffled tickets online to the Benesse site, also designed by Tadao Ando. We are dropped at the base of a mercifully short, but steep access road with views across the bay, a golden sand beach curving around a rocky headland. From here, the museum built into the hillside is barely visible.

At the top of the hill, visitors are greeted by a circular entryway into the four-level structure. Guests staying at the Benesse House Hotel on the top floor are whisked to the check-in desk, while the remainder have tickets scanned for entry to the remaining three levels. We work from the top down, starting on the second floor, which is home to the café, shop and a trio of artworks, including one by Yoshihiro Suda that is hard to spot – called Weeds, it is a deliberate seam in the concrete wall growing a trail of tiny plants.

The ground floor and basement contain permanent features including One Hundred Live and Die, a neon installation by Bruce Nauman that sits within a circular, two-storey atrium, as well as several large, site-specific works by artists including British sculptor Richard Long, Yukinori Yanagi and Hiroshi Sugimoto. Other artwork in rotation includes paintings by David Hockney, Andy Warhol and Gerhard Richter, amongst others. Particularly striking is an untitled work that Jannis Kounellis created during a two-week stay on Naoshima. This wall of work saw the artist mix raw materials with forgotten objects to show how human objects lose value. I am also rather taken by Three Chattering Men by American sculptor and graphic artist Jonathan Borofsky. This piece involves three cut-out male figures with mechanised mouths droning the word chatter and occasionally breaking into a harmonious tune.



Yayoi Kusama, Narcissus Garden



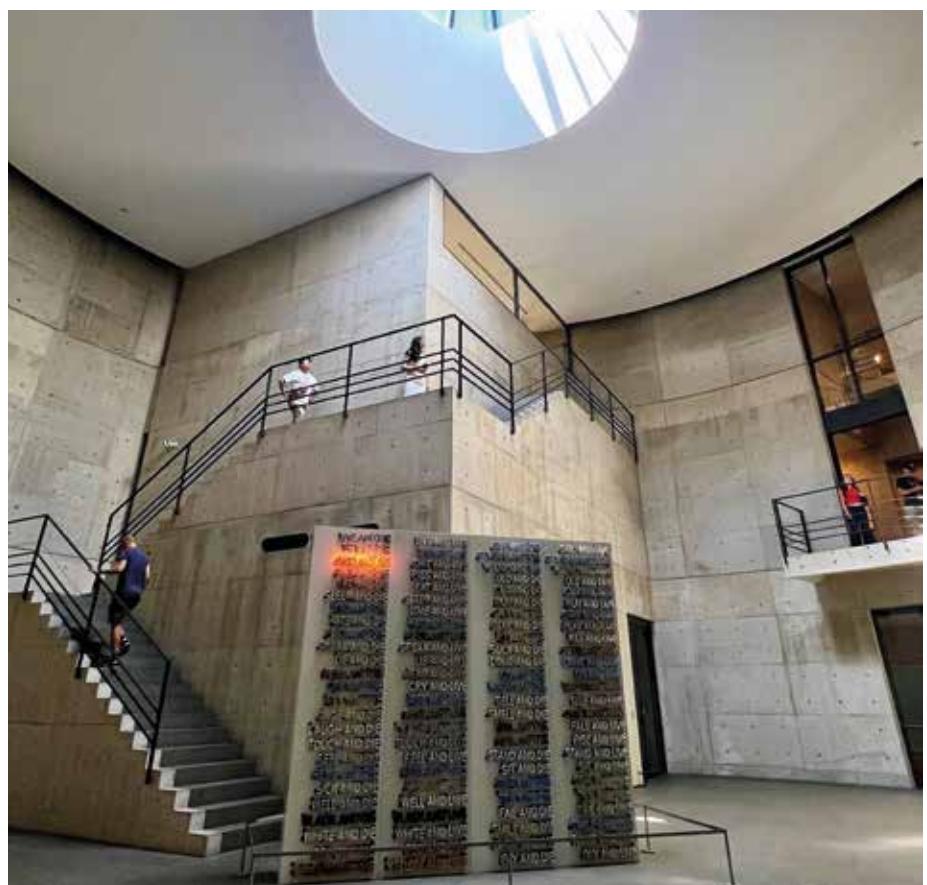
Richard Long, Full Moon Stone Circle



Shinro Otake, Shipyard Works Bow and Hole



Jonathan Borofsky, Three Chattering Men



Bruce Nauman, One Hundred Live and Die

The Benesse tickets include access to Tadao Ando's Valley Gallery, a geometric building wedged into the folds of a valley a 10-minute walk along the road. This is home to two artworks – Tsuyoshi Ozawa's *Slag Buddha 88*, a collection of 88 Buddha statues created using industrial waste, and Yayoi Kusama's *Narcissus Garden*, a collection of mirrored stainless-steel orbs that float in the pond next to Ozawa's work, which lurk in the shade of the trees on higher ground, and trail through Ando's gallery building.

Across the road is the Lee Ufan Museum, showcasing the works of Lee Ufan, a leading figure in minimalist art and philosophy, but the sun is shining, calling us to admire the outdoor works dotted along the coast. We follow a short path between the road and the water to find *Cultural Melting Bath: Project for Naoshima* by Cai Guo-Qiang, a bath surrounded by standing stones with a magnificent coastal view. Only Benesse House Hotel guests have access to the bathing experience here, but visitors can wander around the bath and stones.

Further around the bay, a cluster of brightly coloured works backed by the Hiroshi Sugimoto Gallery lead to one of the icons of the island – one of Yayoi Kusama's oversized yellow polka-dotted pumpkins, which squats at the end of a short pier. There is a queue of visitors waiting to take selfies, and we watch as some proud pooch parents position their two pups by the pumpkin for a photo.

Back at Tsutsuji-so we board a bus bound for Honmura, a living village that contains a large number of historic buildings. Stomachs rumbling, we duck into the first eating establishment we find. The café has a sign that points upstairs. Removing our shoes and donning the thoughtfully provided slippers, we climb the steep staircase that leads to a room containing a tiny kitchen and four tables. Here, two local women dish up a choice of three dishes – a toast set of raisin toast and salad, a pilaf set or a fried rice set. The food is simple but tasty, and the women are friendly, happy that the art has breathed new life into the island.

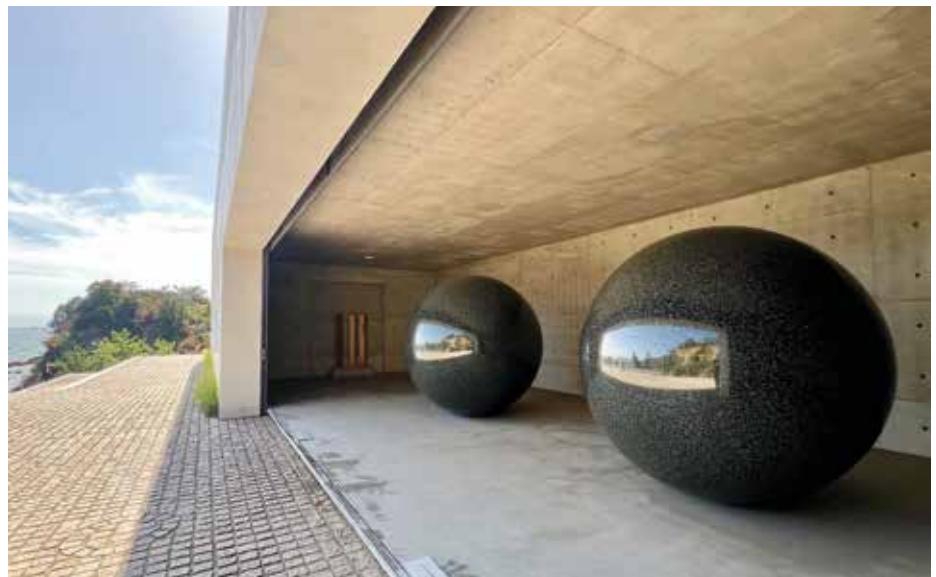
Honmura is a firm fixture on the Naoshima circuit. Along with being one of the few villages on the island, it is home to the Art House Project, a collection of abandoned buildings that have been converted into art installations. The art houses are dotted across the neighbourhood, small blue plaques the only distinguishing feature from outside. The interiors, however, are an artist's canvas, each quite different. Expressions include Kadoya, a 200-year-old residence that now contains an LED display set in a pool of water. Each light counts from one to nine at a different pace, set by the villagers. Go'o Shrine, an old Shinto shrine atop a hill, has been given a modern



Cai Guo-Qiang, *Cultural Melting Bath: Project for Naoshima*



Yayoi Kusama, *Pumpkin*



Walter De Maria, *Seen/Unseen Known/Unknown*



Kadoya house, Tatsuo Miyajima, *Sea of Time*



house in Honmura

makeover with a glass staircase leading from the worship hall to an underground chamber. My favourite is the former home and office of a local dentist, the façade now patched together with rusted tin sheets, wooden panels, old signboards, glass and other repurposed materials. Three black fibreglass boat hulls protrude from one side of the building, while, inside, the most striking feature is an unexpected version of the Statue of Liberty standing on the second floor.

Realising it's impossible to visit all of the art on the island in a day, we reluctantly make our way back to the port. We have just enough time to walk to the other Kusama pumpkin by the ferry dock, glowing red under the golden light of the setting sun, before we board the return vessel.

Had we thought to book earlier, we could've stayed on Naoshima, whether at the high-end Benesse House Hotel, the domed tents of Sana Mane, in a Mongolian yurt at SeaSide Park Stay Tsutsujiso, or any one of a score of mid-to-budget-range guesthouses. With every bed on the island booked, we have no choice but to leave, our hearts filled with the joy of art.



Go'o Shrine, Hiroshi Sugimoto, *Appropriate Proportion*



Haisha house, Shinro Otake, *Dreaming Tongue*