

Berkeley alum brings color, creativity, hair to C. V. Starr East Asian Library

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March 27, 2018



Artist Masako Takahashi speaks to guests at the opening of her exhibit, *Antidotal*, at the C. V. Starr East Asian Library on Saturday. (Photos by Cade Johnson for the UC Berkeley Library)

What is the antidote for life's sticky, ugly problems?

For Masako Takahashi '74, a splashy, squishy pom-pom.

In the C. V. Starr East Asian Library, a family of such creatures has made its debut in an exhibit by the artist called *Antidotal*, which opened on Saturday and will run until May 2.

Suspended from the ceiling throughout the Library are bright orange, pink, blue, and yellow pompoms made by the artist. And lounging somewhere in the space are two larger renditions — furry masses of hand-dyed wool, so big and so soft you can hug them like an old friend.

With whimsical grace, the pompoms complement a second half of *Antidota*: a collection of embroidery work by Takahashi, sewn with strands of the artist's shining black-and-silver hair.

In each of the pieces, called hair texts, Takahashi's locks are threaded to form an elegant script of an imagined, universal language, which she hopes viewers will interpret for themselves. Each word is as long as the piece of hair allows, and at the end of each word, the hair tips fly upward in a cursivelike flourish.

“One day I noticed that my hair — which is always falling out, like everybody else's — looked like a piece of thread, and so I started using it,” Takahashi said. “I don't cut it or pull it out. I sort of harvest it from the floor.”

At the event, Takahashi wore a scarf of pink pompoms around her neck, with her long dark hair pulled up in a large bun. Essentially, the theme of her hair texts is time, Takahashi said.

“People often say something like, ‘How long did it take you to do that’ — immediately they get the sense of time,” Takahashi said. “It takes time to grow your hair that long, we all know that — we all have hair — and most of us know it takes time to sew. So most people get it right away in some way or other.”

For a 2017 piece called *Journal*, Takahashi stitched daily, leaving a space between days to mark her journey in time. “The pompoms are an antidote to the stuff that's in the journal,” the artist said, laughing.

The two art forms are also united in their bold use of color, inspired by the art that surrounded Takahashi when she lived in Mexico. Some of Takahashi's embroidery is

accented with bright red hair donated by a friend. For a piece called *Tribute*, made in honor of her mother, who died in 2016, Takahashi used only her silver hairs to create what looks like a poem, shining brightly against black kimono silk.





Top to bottom: A guest looks at a piece called *Tribute*; Takahashi's pom-poms hang from the ceiling; and *Friendship Series*, made from the artist's hair, is on display.

Takahashi's mother, Tomoye Takahashi, was also a UC Berkeley alum, and she left many rare books to the East Asian Library when she died. She also left two endowments to the campus's Center for Japanese Studies, said Dana Buntrock, chair of the center, who reached out to Takahashi about bringing her art to the Library. The endowment gift was announced at a reception on Saturday, held before the exhibit.

The opening of *Antidotal* drew more than 100 people. Many of the artist's friends came to the event, adorned with pompoms on their bodies in "support and solidarity," said friend and fellow artist Marcia Donahue.

Another friend in attendance, Ellen Bepp, said she appreciated the artwork because of its power to liven up the entire space, adding fresh air and vivid spirit to the building's modern architecture.

"That's what art does, right?" she said. "It brings you back to humanity."

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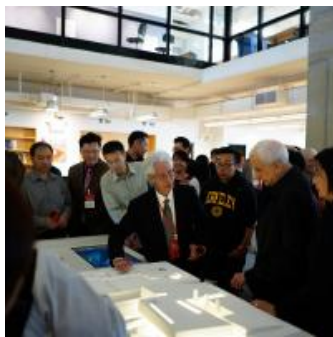


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