

Performance artist Naoko Maeshiba turns inward



Naoko Maeshiba at her studio. (Reginald Thomas II/For City Paper)

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When I visit Naoko Maeshiba in her Mount Washington studio, she tells me little about her upcoming performance at the Baltimore Theatre Project, and yet she shares almost everything.

She's preparing a solo performance titled "Subject/Object," opening this Thursday. Billed on the venue's website as "a highly experiential dance theatre performance," and not much more, the piece is something of a mystery—and Maeshiba wants to keep it that way.

"I think, as audience members, if they can come in not expecting anything, that usually works the best for my performances," she says, laughing.

She fills me in on a few details. But mostly, I'm learning about her process, and not so much the final product—though, for Maeshiba (who was recently awarded the Baker Artist Awards' \$5,000 Board of Governors Award), performing the piece in front of an audience is only the beginning. She's already spent five or six months working on this piece, by her estimate, and sometimes she'll take up to a year to incubate a performance before presenting it to an audience. But the life of the performance begins onstage and continues when the lights go out.

Moving to the center of the studio, Maeshiba begins to rehearse. Bathed in natural light pouring in through the large windows, her body slowly stirs. Her wrists followed by her limbs followed by her torso fold, refold, and quake in rolling movements, like her entire body is made of thousands of loose hinges. Each gesture seems to be a reaction to the one before, and each audible breath she takes in and releases in turn invokes a new shape in her form. The breaths turn into hums, squeals, chirps, growls—growing, at one point, into wordless articulations—pouring and resonating in the space until they return to her body, provoking another sound.

I'm not the first person to see this performance—Maeshiba held two part-performance, part-workshop shows at BTP earlier this spring—but no one has seen or will see a performance exactly like this one. Though she establishes a loose structure, Maeshiba's work is largely improvised.

The sounds, the textures, the shapes she creates with her body, it's all playful, but more primal than childlike. There's weight to it. This has to do, in part, with the images that surround her. Laid out on the floor are printed copies of Goya's "Los Caprichos," landscapes, the Earth in shadow, the crumpled hand of a human stricken with Minamata disease—mercury poisoning that plagued thousands of people in Maeshiba's native Japan—the bombing of Hiroshima, a fetus, among other things. The images are there to awaken her personal memory, she says, and the collective memory she shares with Japan, which in turn invoke and manipulate her movements and vocalizations. With each sound, she associates a memory or a point in history.

"I wanted to see if I can tap into the nature of voice as time machine," she says. "It's not overt, like there's no narrative saying 'oh we are in 2011,' or whatever, but in my own consciousness I believe everything is imprinted; it's stored inside of my body. That's coming from the voice."

Vocalization is new to her practice. During an artist residency in Slovenia in March, she worked with experimental vocalist Irena Tomažin to explore the nature of her voice and how to carry it in her performances. Though this is a solo performance (the last time I saw her perform was last year with her gorgeous show "Dream Island," also at BTP, which featured a small cast), Maeshiba expresses the importance that with this piece, she surrenders some of her agency to the nature of improvisation and that she works with the input of other artists. Khristian Weeks, a regular collaborator, has also worked with Maeshiba on the sonic element of the performance and will contribute the sound design to the show—including an instrument of his own design that will manipulate Maeshiba's voice. She's interested not only in how her voice exits her body and goes out to the audience, but also how it comes back to her, the source.

"I was always curious about my voice," she says, "Why this pitch, why this tone, why does this texture come out of this particular body?"

She adds that when she lived in Japan, her naturally low voice stood out among the naturally high voices of most Japanese women. In America, it's her dark sense of humor and struggle to understand American jokes that can separate her from other people—so with "Subject/Object," she will also introduce comedy to her work, using new skills she's developed with the help of San Francisco-based performer Sara Felder.

"I wanted to explore humor and laughter," she says, "I think that could be potentially really good for me, because I do have that explosive aspect of myself."

With "Subject/Object," Maeshiba is investigating herself—how her mind works, how the contents of her mind, and, deeper than that, her inner self, come out into the world beyond her body and become manipulated.

After rehearsing, she grabs a large scroll of paper tucked into a nook in the wall and unrolls it on the floor to reveal a kind of map. Boxes labeled with different categories—Work, Practice, Not Knowing, Food, Body, Strange Beauty—embody different elements of her life and art, which she sees as deeply interconnected. Bulleted points fill each box, and red lines connect the points across the map, meeting in a tangled frenzy. Under Practice, for example, is Noh training, referring to Maeshiba's training in the traditional Japanese musical theater arts, from which she takes her minimalist dance movements ("when you take one step," she says of Noh theater, "you feel like the whole universe opens up"). Food, she says, has a growing but indirect presence in her work—her body is her medium, so she takes care with everything that goes into it. She takes time to read labels to prevent external forces from putting unknown or unwanted substances in her body. Everything is deliberate and connected.

This circles back to the problem she's been considering throughout this entire process: how her body is treated, acted upon, objectified. The limits of language and social constraints, among other things, mold and manipulate Maeshiba in her attempt to uncover herself.

"These imprints are ingrained in our beings and direct us to say certain things, to react to certain situations, respond, choose certain words to describe things—which to me really masks our real beings," she says. "How can I live as a subject and not as an object? And how does this subject get objectified?"

By soaking herself, via the images laid out on the floor, in memories of her country's trauma, in the imperfections of the world—things that she knows deeply affect her identity—Maeshiba attempts to awaken her subject. By unearthing parts of herself she's previously neglected, like her voice and her sense of humor, she explores how to bring that subject out to her audience, and to herself.

"I think the more imprints, the more ingrained, the more we have this, the more the subject gets buried," she says. "It leads to nonexisting, really."

"Subject/Object" opens at the Baltimore Theatre Project on May 26 and runs through May 29, with a final dress rehearsal, free and open to the public, on May 25. For more information, visit theatreproject.org or naokibi.com.