

About Urushi

Urushi is a natural sap harvested from the *urushinoki*, a deciduous broadleaf tree, and has long been used in Japan and across East Asia as a coating and a bonding material. Upon curing, it hardens into a highly durable, water-resistant material with a lustrous sheen. Widely employed in vessels, craft objects, and architectural ornamentation, it has also given rise to highly refined decorative techniques such as *maki-e* ('sprinkled picture') and *raden* (mother-of-pearl inlay). Combining natural origins with high functionality and aesthetic value, urushi stands as a defining material of Japanese culture.

Through polishing, the surface of urushi develops its characteristic sheen, gently absorbing light to produce a sense of depth. This is not simply a superficial gloss; the many layers of urushi, built up through successive applications, draw light inward, giving rise to a deep, subdued brilliance. It shifts with changes in viewing angle and lighting, yet retains a quiet, rich magnetism. This sheen is central to how the materiality and temporality of urushi becomes visible. I understand this sheen as a phenomenon arising from the material itself and endeavor to incorporate it into my work.

On the kanshitsu technique

Kanshitsu is a traditional Japanese technique in which sculptural forms are created using urushi, widely employed during the Nara period (8th century). A wooden or clay core is formed and layered with hemp cloth or Japanese paper using urushi to build up and fix the shape. Once cured, the core is removed, leaving a lightweight yet durable structure. Used primarily for Buddhist sculpture, the technique is distinguished by its capacity for finely detailed, naturalistic expression, though its use gradually declined as wood carving techniques developed.

I use this technique in my work, replacing wood or clay with tubular or spherical objects wrapped in a stretchable fabric, layering them with hemp cloth and urushi to build up the structure. Once the surface is strong enough, the interior is removed, leaving a work that encloses a hollow interior.

This enclosure of absence is the very essence of the kanshitsu technique and defines the urushi in my work.

Works with sprinkled powder

Maki-e is a decorative technique in which gold or silver powder is sprinkled onto designs drawn in urushi and fixed in place. Beyond the processes of applying and drawing with urushi, expression emerges through the act of sprinkling. Rather than defining images directly with a brush, forms emerge through the scattering of powder.

Highly valued overseas for its decorative quality and distinctive technique, works that employ *maki-e* exported from Japan to Europe from the 16th century onward came to be known as Japanning.

Rather than drawing motifs as in conventional *maki-e*, I aim to reveal form itself through the act of sprinkling. In these works, powder is sprinkled onto the urushi surface, allowing form to emerge through the layered accumulation and the density of the particles.

I use *Kanshitsu-ko*, *nashiji-fun*, and gold powder. *Kanshitsu-ko* is made by crushing dried urushi, with variations in particle size resulting in changes in texture when applied to urushi. *Nashiji-fun* is a flattened metallic powder, named for its pear-skin-like texture; in these works, I use a tin-based variety. Gold powder, the most common material in *maki-e*, has a strong brilliance.