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Los Angeles Times  
January 15, 2017

# The human cocoon: Naotaka Hiro's primal art, made from within

By LEAH OLLMAN



Installation view of the Naotaka Hiro show "Peaking" at the Box in L.A. (Fredrik Nilsen / The Box)

In the main gallery of the Box in L.A. hangs Naotaka Hiro's "Peak," a 14-foot-tall canvas column stained with pink splotches and cinched with rope at the top and bottom. "Peaking," a nine-minute video that chronicles the making of the piece, plays in a smaller side room.

Each work reveals something of what the other conceals. Each eludes full comprehension. Together, they comprise a stunning essay on action and constraint, fragment and whole, and the limits of knowing anything in its entirety, particularly the human body.

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"Peaking" thrusts us inside "Peak" with Hiro, who has wrapped himself inside the canvas with a small lantern, a canister of dye and drawing tools. The camera, in his mouth, captures the exertions of his breath and the motions of his hands as he marks the interior of his private cave, his shroud and second skin. His movements echo those of the body engaged in any number of primal functions. The footage is urgent, intimate, mesmerizing.



A still image from the video "Peaking." (The Box)

"Peak," a painting as much as the relic of a performance, is curled closed, denying us access to the dyed and drawn interior. The piece hangs mutely, charged with secrets, a pod pulsing with hidden life.

Seven large wall-hanging works in the show were made in similar fashion, their edges threaded with rope that Hiro uses to fasten the canvases around himself. Some have giant holes for his legs to fit through. Each canvas is site as much as surface. Immersed in these sheaths, Hiro uses fabric dye and oil pastel to draw insistent whirls and dashes, inscribe rib-like patterns, invoke dark chasms and indulge in radiant splurges of tangerine, teal, gold, scarlet. The raw abandon of the Viennese Actionists courses through them, but so does a love for rich, gem-like splendor that recalls another artist from Vienna, Gustav Klimt.

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Naotaka Hiro's "Untitled (Two Legs Vertical)" 2016, canvas, fabric dye, oil pastel, rope, grommets, 9 feet by 7 feet. (Fredrik Nilsen / The Box)

Hiro also works in bronze, his sculptures extending the legacy of Bruce Nauman's body casts, and dovetailing thoughtfully with his own performed drawings and paintings. With concise elegance, he actualizes the notion of the body as an instrument for creating representations of itself in "Tool." Cast strips of the L.A.-based artist's body double as the hinged X of a gripping device, like pliers. Skin becomes line becomes form that evokes skin. Every piece in this show thoroughly captivates mind and eye alike.

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