

Miriam



Umico Niwa's (b. 1991, Japan) practice explores the way Western notions of personhood subsume human life into constructs of sexuality and gender, overlooking the various other modes of unbridled existence, including floral, microbial, fungal, animal, and celestial bodies. Her speculative medical papers propose novel forms of anatomical modification to combat gender dysphoria and playfully explore the possible efficacy of including fecal matter transplants as part of hormone replacement therapy for transgender individuals. Rejecting the neoliberal obsession with quantification and reductive analytics, Niwa asks, "Is it even possible to be queer—let alone human—within a hyper-digital, capitalist system?"

Niwa's drawings and sculptures reflect a commitment to hybridity, fluidity, and play, while also referencing her own personal experience of transitioning. Creatures are formed from foraged plant matter (such as radishes, dandelions, orange rinds, rose petals, eggshells, seeds, and stems) and fused with cast-pewter or electroplated copper. These miniature, nymph-like beings spin across spheres of ancient mythology, fables, pagan ideology, natural folklore, and contemporary fantasy. They are imbued with a latent sexuality—not erotic, but rather celebratory of fecundity and the remarkable perseverance of the most fragile forms of existence. Teeming with life, Niwa's creations posit Poesis to be the primary "maternal wellspring," rather than biological reproduction.

Her work is deeply informed by her own childhood memories, particularly the coping mechanism she developed, which she has coined as "Joyful Escapism." In a recent visual essay for *Final Hot Desert* she states, "In middle school, following the release of *Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers*, I developed a theory that my mother's side of the family was not Swedish but Elven. The size of my tongue resulted in a speech impediment known as a lisp, and I was ridiculed by my classmates for this and for my mixed Japanese and Swedish heritage. But I rationalized that it was rather that I was born to a higher race, with a dialect incomprehensible to mere mortals. It does not require leaps and bounds to reach such a conclusion when being transgender meant that I have never felt embodied to begin with, and my mixed heritage had me treated as inhuman by peers. Race and gender aside, it went beyond secular comprehension because the language needed to fully convey these feelings of animism were missing. It was also a means by which to mentally shift the power dynamics in my favor through what I can best describe as joyful escapism."

Niwa received her MFA in Sculpture + Extended Media from the Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond. She has held solo exhibitions at *Final Hot Desert*, Utah (2022); *Someday*, New York (2022); *Tilings*, Montreal (2022), and *Holding Contemporary*, Portland (2020); and group exhibitions at *Simone Subal*, New York (2022); *Xyz Collective*, Tokyo (2022); *Kristina Kite*, Los Angeles (2021), and *Miriam*, New York (2020). She was a resident at the Bemis Center for Contemporary Art in Spring 2022. Umico Niwa is represented by *Someday*, New York.