

MOKI CHERRY: HERE AND NOW

Wednesday 31 May – Sunday 27 August 2023

Press View: Tuesday 30 May 2023, 11am – 1pm

Exhibition Preview: Tuesday 30 May 2023, 6 – 11pm

From May 2023, ICA London presents the first solo exhibition in a UK institution of Swedish artist, designer and educator, Moki Cherry (1943 – 2009). The exhibition explores Cherry's expansive and collaborative practice across textile, sculpture, painting, drawing, writing, collage, and video.



Moki Cherry, *Malkauns Raga*, 1973, textile appliqué tapestry, 250 × 200cm.
Photograph: Tom Van Eynde, Corbett vs. Dempsey

Here and Now displays over 30 artworks and archival material of Moki Cherry including works that have never been shown in the UK. The exhibition celebrates her exploration of where art and life meet, her collaborative and interdisciplinary practice, and her inventive resolve in the face of gendered challenges working both as an artist and mother – issues which remain pertinent to artists and audiences today. Drawn entirely from the Estate of Moki Cherry, this exhibition presents a rare chance for the public to view these privately held works, which remain preciously cared for by her family.

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The title of the exhibition is inspired by an untitled drawing, an abstracted figure with arms outstretched embracing the words 'Here & Now' against a cloudlike landscape alongside a star and birds. It reflects the artist's longstanding study and practice of Buddhism and its teachings which focus on being in the present, rather than dwelling on the past or speculating on the future. Characteristic of Moki's playful use of language, it recalls her jazz musician husband Don Cherry's 1976 album *Hear & Now*, for which Moki designed the cover using appliqué and collage.

Formally trained as a fashion designer, Moki left school in 1959 to apprentice at an haute couture atelier, moving on to work as a design assistant at a women's coat manufacturer two years later. In 1962 she moved to Stockholm, first taking up evening classes in pattern cutting and drapery, and then enrolling at Beckmans College of Design to study fashion design, illustration and pattern cutting that year. Already embedded in the Stockholm cultural scene, Moki met Don for the first time in 1963, beginning their 20-year relationship and artistic collaboration. Utilising her expert skill in fashion textiles, Moki developed a unique tapestry-making practice for which she is most well-known. In 1967 she and Don formalised their art and music project as 'Movement Incorporated', later renamed 'Organic Music' or 'Organic Music Theatre'. At their first concert, Moki created tapestries, costumes, posters and a live painting, which begun her evolving practice for the stage, performing across the world for the next three years.

In 1970, the Cherrys and their two young children settled near Dartmouth College, USA, while Don took up a position as music professor and artist-in-residence. Here they organised a performance with over 100 students for which Moki designed the costumes and sets, with their home becoming a rehearsal space. Deeply inspired by their collaboration with the students, they began to develop a pedagogical commitment, moving to an old schoolhouse in Tågarp, Sweden later that year. While primarily a family home, the Cherrys also used the schoolhouse as a creative educational space for established artists as well as local children. Used as a teaching tool at workshops across Swedish schools, Moki's tapestry, *Malkauns Raga* (1973), spells out an Indian classical music scale in Latin alphabet alongside mudras, Indian symbolic hand gestures.

This engagement with audiences as active participants forms a crucial part of the Cherrys' radical work in *Utopias and Visions 1871 – 1981*, an exhibition at Moderna Museet Stockholm curated by Pontus Hultén in 1971, in which the family lived and ran daily workshops and happenings in a geodesic dome in the museum for three-months. Moki created costumes, tapestries, sculptures and paintings including a large mandala which she painted on the floor over days. Visitors participated in live music, dressing up, self-portrait photography and other improvised activities that Moki facilitated, and participants communicated with people internationally via a telex that was connected to New York, Tokyo and Bombay. Alongside her creative practice Moki continued to perform the role of mother and wife, cooking

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for her family in an improvised kitchen in the museum when the exhibition closed at 6pm every evening.

Moki reflected on her domestic and creative work:

‘I was my husband’s muse, companion, and collaborator. At the same time, I did all the practical maintenance. I was never trained to be a female, so I survived by taking a creative attitude to daily life and chores.’

Foregrounding Moki’s assertion of herself as an artist in her own right, *Here and Now* will feature a 16mm film shot by Moki of her first solo exhibition at Galleri 1, Stockholm in 1973, which featured tapestries, paintings and live music performances. The film gives an intimate insight into the details of her work which she wanted to capture for posterity, her taking stock of this significant moment in her career.

From the late 1970s, Moki began to focus more on her personal practice and received further contemporary recognition after a solo exhibition of her tapestries in Los Angeles in 1979. From the 1980s Moki also developed work in sculpture, ceramics and collage, sometimes continuing the use of motifs from her earlier work such as the ouroboros, the snake eating its tail, symbolising the eternal cycle of life and death. Working as a set designer for the Apollo Theatre, Harlem in the 1990s, Moki started using power tools and incorporating electric lights in wood sculptures in her work. One of these works, a sculpture depicting a camouflaged heart, will be on public display for the first time, having been in the home of Moki’s daughter until now.

Throughout her life, Moki sought to use her creativity to communicate with and inspire others. The exhibition’s accompanying event programme will provide a platform for contemporary practitioners to respond to the significant themes in Moki’s work, from music, experimentation, collaboration, audience engagement to teaching and working as a mother.

Naima Karlsson, artist, musician and archivist for the Estate of Moki Cherry says:

‘Moki Cherry’s work engages with a history of making and functionality, where her art was a tool for expression, survival, playfulness and learning. At the forefront of Moki’s activity was the philosophy of living in the “now”, expressed in her bold colours and use of language, humour and improvisation. Her practice traversed the worlds of art, music and theatre with diverse influences such as fashion, philosophy, music, modernist design and traditional folk arts.’

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I've had a lifelong relationship with my grandmother's work, often helping Moki in the studio and to install exhibitions while growing up, so it's been a natural progression to continue to care for her art and work on exhibitions such as this show at the ICA. It's a joy to see an exhibition of Moki's work happening in London for the first time, where a lot of our family live, and to work on the project as co-curator.'

— ENDS —

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