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Mika's world: No cubicle could hold this show-biz savvy artist

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COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND ELIZABETH DEE

Edge of Breakup, 2008, is meant to echo an apartment-trashing scene in the 1970 Mick Jagger film *Performance*.

On a Friday night at the Bass Museum of Art on Miami Beach, life is in full groove mode for the opening of Mika Tajima's *The Double*, which consists of artwork that adorns a series of panels snaking through the lobby. Tajima's gallerists, Elizabeth Dee of New York and Miami's Kevin Bruk, are on hand, along with a crowd that includes artist Naomi Fisher.

Tajima was born in Los Angeles and studied at Columbia University School of the Arts. Her professional career has included such New York shows as the 2008 Whitney Biennial and *Learn to Communicate Like a F - - - - - Normal Person* at Art Production Fund. Like many artists, she understands showbiz. She had flown down from New York with her own mixes of hipster art-opening music. In the adjacent museum café, an eclectic mashup is booming over the crowd.

Music, especially its knack for cutting through the socio-cultural fallout of the universe, is a big deal in Tajima's world. She has a noise band, New Humans, a term older Japanese apply to the younger generation of bewildering upstarts. The

group has worked with grand old master Vito Acconci, who growled out one of his poems amid the screeching amplifier feedback. It's all sort of Yoko Ono with an edge of youth and vastly less money.

This Bass show is inspired, in part, by two cult films with everyone's favorite rock metaphor,

early Mick Jagger, long before his creepy-old-horndog period, and The Rolling Stones. A poster from 1970's *Performance*, a gender-bending, identity-switching romp with Jagger and James Fox, is incorporated into one of Tajima's pieces. The poster features an image of Jagger as he slicks back his hair, assuming the staid-English look of Fox, who, in turn, goes feral rocker with long hair and a leer. The poster's bold-type caption -- "See them all in a film about fantasy. And reality. Vice. And versa" -- proclaims the movie's aspirations to twisted darkness.

In a small open room off the lobby, *Edge of Breakup*, 2008 is meant to echo a scene in the film that entails an apartment's being trashed with red paint by abstract-expressionist vandals. In the room, a swinging chromed-aluminum lamp rocks back and forth in a perilous way, casting sinister shadows on the walls.

Tajima is also a big fan of Jean-Luc Godard's interminable but oddly riveting 1968 youth-quake movie *Sympathy for the Devil*. Much of that film is set in a drab London recording studio with The Rolling Stones, who endlessly repeat variations of *Sympathy for the Devil* until they get it right and make a few bucks. Tajima's interest in the movie has inspired her abstract ambitions.

"If you remember, the walls of the studio are monochromatic, like cubicle spaces, which is something else that interests me," she says.

The Double originated at The Kitchen in New York, and Tajima is bringing The Kitchen's performative dialectic to bear in the show, as well as painting, sculpture and a philosophical grounding in the work of the design firm Herman Miller. In 1968, the company launched Robert Propst's Action Office cubicle system and changed working life forever. At the time, the cubicles were thought to be Brave New World Lite, bringing hope, cheer and more productive social interaction to work. Later, of course, the cubicle would come to be seen as the death knell for white-collar serfs, a feeding pen for anomie best portrayed in another cult movie, *Office Space*.

The centerpiece of *The Double* is a row of five-foot-tall, cubicle-style panels, highlighted by a curved fun-house mirror in the middle.

"The viewer can engage with the mirror, which adds a performative element," Tajima says. Most of the panels incorporate silk screen, cotton, gold leaf, acrylic paint, wood, paper and pins, with the attendant imagery including 1968 press releases from Herman Miller, extolling the Action Office: "As we have become more affluent, more walls have appeared."

Walking to one side of the row of panels, Tajima points to a series of images with geometric, cubicle-shaped forms in gray and purple.

"To me, this piece is a kind of sculpture, like a Donald Judd," she says, throwing the icon of brutal minimalism into the mashup of her art. "But the painting and performative element is a realm that Judd would never go into."

“It's interesting to see how cubicles embodied the utopia promised by modernism, with the fabric on the boards meant to be a kind of flat modernist painting. But they became so alienating, and workers eventually used them as bulletin boards and hung up personal images.”

Among the most affecting images incorporated into the panels are silk-screened photos of the massive slabs of concrete barricades, like over-inflated cubicle walls, surrounding the Green Zone, the heavily fortified Baghdad compound. In an effort to soften the monolithic walls, the Iraqi government had commissioned local artists to paint on them. The art is mostly bad, bucolic work, officially sanctioned nonsense, but to Tajima, the work proves her theory that life is one big cubicle.

“Look how they've tried to humanize these walls that define their lives,” she says. “Even here, in the middle of chaos, there's art.”