

Travel

The Lee Ufan Museum, designed by Tadao Ando. **Opposite page** Naoshima is littered with public art pieces – one of two Yayoi Kusama giant pumpkins that inhabit the island.



A Cultural Convergence

text: Eleanor Scott photography: Jenni Draper

Japan's "art islands" are a true testament to the beauty and power of intersection – particularly the space between art, architecture and nature.



It's not hard to find reasons to visit Japan. The food, the people, the architecture and the atmosphere are all compelling. But Naoshima, a small island in the Seto Inland Sea of southern Japan, is the one reason I'm seduced. The place houses an intriguing convergence of art installations, architecture, museums and nature that has been seamlessly blended into what can only be described as a kind of art Mecca.

This peculiar development is the result of several donations by billionaire art-lover Soichiro Fukutak's Benesse Corporation, whose almost three decades of support has transformed not only Naoshima but several other surrounding islands into truly remarkable destinations – principally Teshima and Inujima.

However, it was in 1992 that the most important partnership for Naoshima was formed. Japanese architect Tadao Ando was commissioned to design the Benesse House Museum, and has masterminded many of the “art island’s” complex concrete structures, including its crowning achievement, the Chichu Art Museum.

Upon arrival the first thing you notice is the lack of an exterior façade; but since “chichu” literally means “in the earth” in Japanese that should come as no surprise. An aerial view of the museum reveals the geometric shapes of the rooms, connected by unseen underground passages, but as you descend it's the sloping corridors that demand your immediate attention; and it's a testament to the beauty of Ando's clean but considered brutalism that, as you move from one artwork to the next, you find yourself equally transfixed by the empty spaces as by the works that came before.

There were two main concerns for the building's design, the first being its environmental impact. As a result the Chichu Art Museum is built almost entirely underground in an effort to maintain harmony with the natural environment, and to aid in heat retention. Throughout the seasons, the air conditioning system in the display galleries dehumidifies the outside air independently, in place of a traditional system that dehumidifies the outside and inside air together.

Ando also used only a material combination of concrete, wood, glass and steel – the lighting is all natural and no paint adorns the walls.

The museum balances the opposing qualities of being both non-monumental and highly architectural in a way that isn't a typical type of sustainability, but has similar effects.

The second concern was the prerequisite of wholly site-specific artworks, an undeniable necessity to complement the recurring nature motifs.

The room that *precedes* the room housing Monet's *Water Lillies* perfectly guides your line of sight, while the skylight in the space actually housing the works softly illuminates each canvas, while acknowledging the artists' love of light fluctuations. →

top Benesse House designed by Tadao Ando is set on (and in) a green hilltop, running down to a sandy beach. **middle** Art and the courtyard inside the Benesse Art Site Museum. **bottom** Looking across Richard Long's *Full Moon Stone Circle* sculpture from inside the Museum to the islands beyond.



Sou Fujimoto's Naoshima Pavilion sculpture in the main port at Miyanoura. The ferry terminal behind was designed by Pritzker Prize winning architecture firm SANAA.



top left The dramatic concrete entrance to the Lee Ufan Museum. **right** Main street in the village of Honmura. **bottom right** This 200-year-old house in Kadoya, was the first building in the Art House Project. The townspeople of Naoshima participated in the creation of the work *Sea of Time* by Tatsuo Miyajima. **top** Local fisherman. **middle** Yayoi Kusama's giant pumpkin. **bottom** Bike riding around the island is the only way to go with great views back to mainland Japan.



James Turrell and Walter De Maria also confront, enhance and manipulate nature in their art. Turrell's *Open Field and Open Sky* both use light and shade to frame empty space in two vastly different architectural installations, while De Maria's *Time/Timeless/NoTime* has the atmosphere of an old cathedral. The hushed, cavernous room contains a black granite sphere surrounded by 27 gold-leaf timber sculptures, imposing stairs and careful cuts in the walls that can bathe the room in sunlight or shadow, depending on the time of day. The physical experience of each work is emphasised so greatly by the physical presence imposed by Ando's design that it's impossible to draw a line between the art and the architecture – a constant theme on Naoshima.

The Lee Ufan Museum, located in a gentle valley surrounded by hills and the ocean, offers a tranquil space where nature, architecture and art come to resonate with each other. Close by, The Benesse House blurs interior and exterior boundaries with installations that reach beyond traditional enclosures to the peninsula below. What's truly exciting is that, although these galleries are considered the biggest attractions on Naoshima, there's still plenty more to be seen.

Comprised of seven locations, The Art House Project takes empty houses scattered about the residential areas of Naoshima's Honmura district and turns them into artworks that weave together the history and memories of the small fishing village. Its capacity to facilitate memorable interactions between visitors and local residents is truly remarkable as you traverse a unique intersection of daily life and art.

As if that's not enough there's also the Ando Museum, designed by the king of concrete himself and detailing his projects on the island along with a selection of other works in Japan; or Miyanoura Gallery 6, a compelling exhibition facility with the façade of an old pachinko parlour.

It would be easy to go on, but all one really needs to know is this: Naoshima is a place to visit before you die. Whether or not you consider yourself an aficionado, the experience will instil in you a sense of wonder, contemplation and calm, unique to being there, in those spaces. It's completely holistic and affectingly transcendent. A cultural convergence. 🍃