

INFORMED SOURCE

Trusting Play: Yuka Oyama's “SurvivaBall Home Suits”

by Jessica Hemmings

“Certain conditions are needed for play,” offers Berlin-based artist **Yuka Oyama**. “You need trust to play.”

As a relational jewelry artist, Oyama makes objects that test just how much trust we might share with others if our identities are concealed. Working in a scale far larger than we typically

expect of jewelry, her focus is not on the traditional connections jewelry often signals, but instead how performance and play may recover some of the acute disconnections of contemporary life: the degeneration of human-to-human emotional communication and an increasingly eroded sense of belonging.

Born in Japan, Oyama grew up in Malaysia, Indonesia, Japan, The United States and Germany. A childhood spread across so many cultures and languages encouraged her early interest in making, something she describes as a constant even when much else around her was in flux. At the **Rhode Island School of Design**, she studied jewelry, followed by sculpture and art jewelry at the **Munich Art Academy** in Germany and, most recently, earned a PhD at the **Oslo National Academy of Arts** in Norway.

Today she works across a range of formats from sculpture and jewelry, to video, photography, choreographic experimentations, public interventions and performances. Because the objects she creates are worn by the general public, rather than trained performers, much of her attention focuses on how she might give each wearer the “freedom to



Yuka Oyama *SurvivaBall Home Suits* 2021, video still. Photo: Zoe Tempest.



Yuka Oyama *SurvivaBall Home Suits* (installation view) 2021. Photo: Zoe Tempest.

perform” beyond assumed conventions. Objects that cover or obscure the face are used to “erase shyness,” while the larger-than-human, but less-than-architectural scale often means “you cannot sit still, you want to move” while wearing her creations.

The “Power of Small Objects” is Oyama’s three volume investigation into the different ways objects anchor contemporary lives. Volume one included costumes made in response to interviews with migrants who had moved (voluntarily and involuntarily) across many countries; volume two involved a collaboration with vocational commuters (between both cities and countries). Made with support of the Berlin Cultural Fund, volume three, “SurvivaBall Home Suits” represents the conclusion of Oyama’s investigation into the role objects play in the lives of children growing up in two households—often due to their parents’ separation.

During the height of the German pandemic lockdown in 2020, Oyama conducted online interviews with children living between two homes. Still photographs of the objects participants cited as important to personal identity and sense of home, such as headphones or candles, were recorded and a series of inflatable suits designed in response. Each inflatable suit created a distance of 1.5 meters (nearly 5 feet) required by the German government’s pandemic guidelines for social distancing. Working with plastic allowed surfaces to be thoroughly disinfected, while the format of inflatable costumes allowed each wearer, symbolically at least, to “keep the same air between their two houses.”

If we are lucky, home is a site we associate with safety and security. The space marked out by each “SurvivaBall Home Suit” is intended as a safe space both emotionally and hygienically for the wearer. Drawing inspiration from a board



Yuka Oyama *SurvivaBall Home Suits—White* 2020, plastic, PE sponge, textile, 75" x 71.25" x 50.75". Photo: Zoe Tempest.



Yuka Oyama *SurvivaBall Home Suits—Red* 2020, plastic, PE sponge, textile, 70.75" x 70.75" x 50.75". Photo: Zoe Tempest.

game she received as a gift when her son was born, Oyama created her own version of a seated board game and full-scale floor game to be played in costume based on questions about living between two households. She admits that many of her ideas could have more easily been made out of metal (her original training) than inflatable plastics, but safety was her first priority, followed by volume. Light materials also allowed younger children to wear their suits without bearing a tiring weight.

When the risks of production delays and possibility of postal contamination became real in 2020, Oyama managed to strike a new relationship with a fabricator in Germany who shared her values of creating work that was both made well and met her aesthetic objectives. She hopes future work may use biodegradable plastics and acknowledges that some of her lockdown solutions such as the yoga mats used to create hats are not as environmentally kind as she would want. The inflatable solutions have offered a further, unanticipated benefit by solving the limited storage space in Oyama's studio.

Oyama's interest in the experience of children living between two homes is in part autobiographical. "*SurvivaBall Home Suits*" is also about "finally finding the courage to work with feelings of guilt about such a common social phenomenon. To me, making, especially in this work is my effort to understand complex matters. I seek to translate, represent and communicate children's experiences into an analog structure that I understand through making." The terms of the contract Oyama made with each participating child (and their parents for those under sixteen) agreed that identities would remain anonymous to allow the interviews and subsequent filmed conversation to "be anyone's story."

"*SurvivaBall Home Suits*" required a complex coordination of expanding steps—something of an irony for an artist first educated to consider the minutiae of jewelry design. These days she often begins an idea with painting, then small models followed by larger three-dimensional models, a test stage, table model and finally a full-scale model mapped out with tape on the floor. "Couldn't it be simpler?!" she laughs. "Actually no, I need breadth in the art process." The game board "creates the choreography and offers a system for people who cannot instantly perform." But, "if what you are wearing does not give confidence, then you cannot be yourself."

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Yuka Oyama *SurvivaBall Home Suits—Yellow* 2020, plastic, PE sponge, textile, 39.25" x 39.25" x 47.5". Photo: Zoe Tempest.



Yuka Oyama *SurvivaBall Home Suits* (installation, without people) 2021, Photo: Zoe Tempest.