



FANTASY ISLAND
The magical Teshima Art Museum, where architect Ryue Nishizawa and artist Rei Naito have created an immersive experience that is both spiritual and moving

Creeping pins and needles pull me out of my meditative state and I realize I have been sitting in the same position for over half an hour. The cold, gently undulating concrete floor that I am kneeling on sits beneath a vast and shallow dome that is the shell of *Matrix*, an extraordinary immersive art installation on the remote and beautiful island of Teshima, one of 3,000 islands scattered across the Seto Inland Sea. It is perhaps the purest and most inspiring wonder on my trail of many wonders through Japan.

“Here you can hear the birds and insects singing, feel the wind, listen to green leaves breathing and experience the light change every day, all year round,” says the Teshima Art Museum handbook of two openings to the sky which bring in and amplify the sounds of nature.

The installation makes use of water droplets that form, dissolve and reform around you. Bubbling out of little pearls, they’re as mesmerizing as mercury as they break into rivulets, wriggling down to make puddles that mutate into larger pools that disappear into pinhole plugholes. It’s an immersive experience – visitors are required to be shoeless, some are on their knees, others stand with their necks craned to the framed sky or remain, like our photographer, struck dumb and moved to tears.

If I ever believed in the power of art to shift perspectives, stir the soul and calm the mind, this place is proof. The Teshima Art Museum is joyful and hopeful – not just as an artistic expression of the creative energy of the universe, but as a reflection of the benefactor Soichiro Fukutake’s vision of life-affirming ‘spirituality without religion’. Fukutake, the powerhouse behind the Benesse education and publishing conglomerate, conceived the installation (alongside native artist Rei Naito and architect Ryue Nishizawa) as a space where architecture, art and the environment come together in harmony. It is also a uniquely Japanese experience: *wa* (harmony) being at the very root of Japanese culture, while Zen philosophy refines life and art to its simple essentials. You can draw a direct line from *Matrix* back to the minimalism of line and ink drawings that are at the heart of Japanese culture, or the stone and raked gravel gardens that find their best expression in the 500-year-old Ryoanji Temple of Kyoto.

Fukutake’s ongoing philanthropic mission since the 1980s has been the regeneration of the once polluted islands through art, to create in the rebirth “a new Arcadia”. So more than a decade after the signing of an accord in 2000 that acknowledged as illegal the governmental dumping of industrial waste on Teshima, (a scandal of the 1970s that badly reduced the fortunes, the environment and population of this island of fishermen and rice farmers), the museum was opened amid eight and a half hectares of fallow land reclaimed as rice paddy terraces. >

HOTSPOT

Art & soul

Occupying the slipstream between art and nature, a handful of ISLANDS floating in Japan’s southern SETO INLAND SEA have been transformed into temples of creativity, where you can immerse yourself in mind-expanding artworks while you sleep, walk, cycle, even bathe. *Catherine Fairweather* experiences a life-affirming trip to a new Arcadia

Organic rice dishes and other local produce from these paddies and beyond can be enjoyed in the café, which is a smaller version of the museum, shaped like a teardrop with an opening to the sky. It serves delicious island salt-crusted potatoes and hotpots, olive- and sake-infused rice dishes, and the island’s strawberries and lemons in various incarnations. And in Teshima, it is the indelible scent of lemon blossom that lingers as you cycle electric bikes around the island trails – to the wind chime installation by French artist Christian Boltanski in a primeval forest, or down to one of the many sandy beaches, where a charming wooden shack turns out to be another installation by Boltanski called *Les Archives du Coeur*, where you can record your heartbeat and “listen to the rhythm of the universe”.

Discovering the artwork on the island by following numbered trails is like joining a giant treasure hunt and is part of the playful allure of the place. In fact, even Hotel Lemon was quite hard to locate. A glass house installation by day, if you book in advance, you can eat, sleep and bathe there too, in a glorious bathtub placed beneath the scented blossom of a citrus tree. A little note urges guests to drop fresh slices of lemon left beside the tub into the steaming water.

Here, a traditional tatami room, which sleeps four on roll-out futons, has pale yellow tinted shoji screens so everything is bathed in lemon light. There is a Mediterranean menu centered around the island citrus fruit and local organic produce, which resulted in, perhaps, one of the best, if most simple, dinners I had in Japan. The owner, a former barman and cook in Tokyo, is part of the slow movement of young idealists moving to the countryside in search of an alternative sustainable lifestyle.

After a day of bumping into artworks, swimming, cycling and eating in sensational cafés and restaurants, a short ferry ride takes you to the better known island of Naoshima. Only five miles squared, the island is home to a depleted native population of yellowtail fishermen and chrysanthemum gatherers, but now attracts some million art pilgrims a year – achieving an almost mythical status globally. The abandoned homes, workshops and shrines of the islanders at Honmura port are now an art house project inhabited by galleries, art shows, cafés, inns and libraries. Minamidera, for example, is a former temple where Fukutake’s inspirational collaborator, the internationally

acclaimed, self-taught architect and former boxer from Osaka, Tadao Ando, has transformed the space with American landscape artist James Turrell. Minamidera offers timed ticket entry into a pitch-black box of a room where the dark plays tricks on your eyes and sense of boundaries. To say more would be to give the game away...

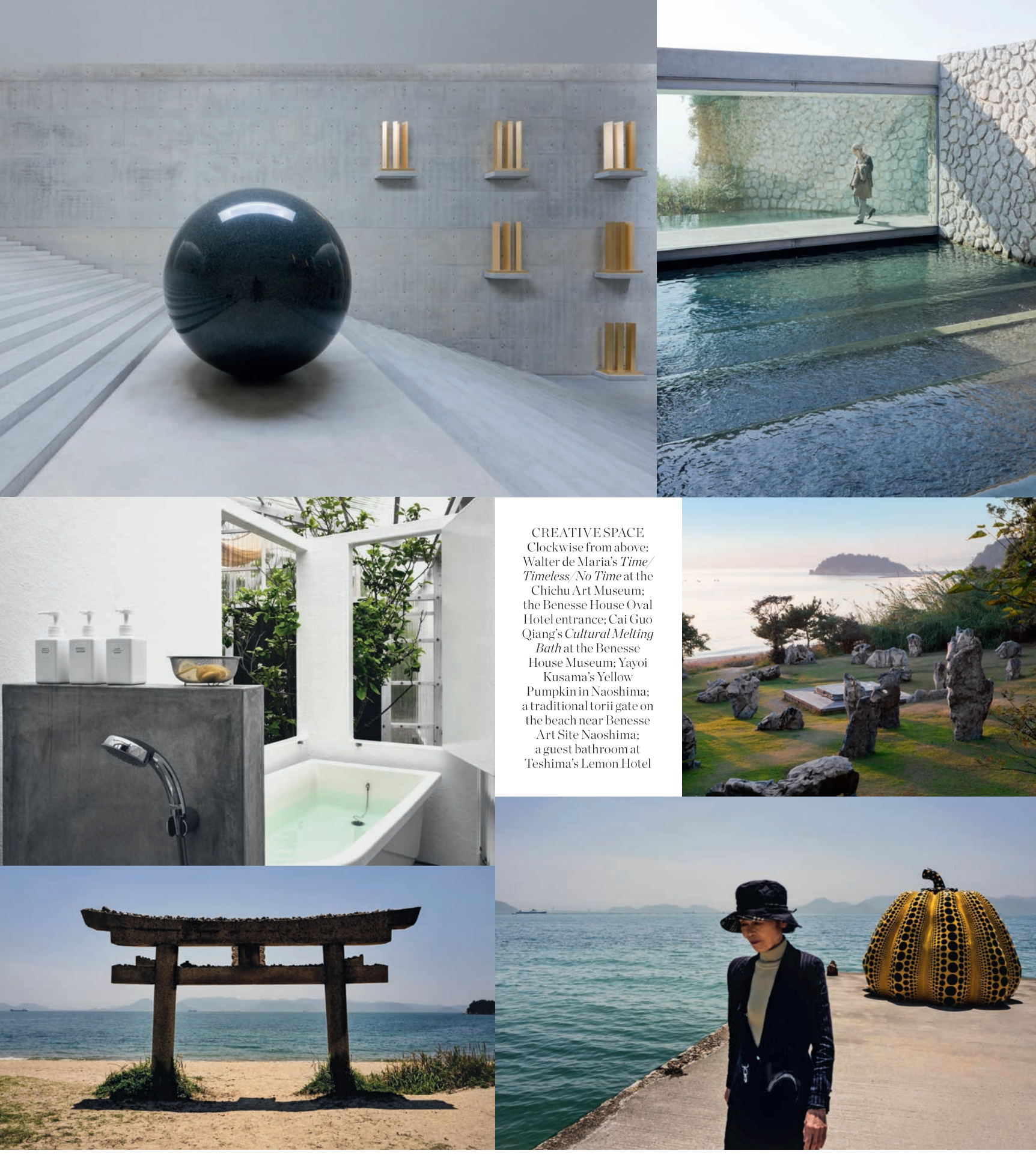
The pièce de résistance, however, is Ando’s underground Chichu Art Museum built on a mound. As well as a number of Turrell’s light installations, there is Walter de Maria’s *Time/Timeless/No Time*, a sky-reflecting sphere in a hall as silent as a tomb. You can also see Monet’s giant water lily canvases, which are housed in a stunning mosaic-tiled space where shoes have to be removed and paintings are observed under natural light that slides in from slashes in the roof and changes according to the time of day and weather. Ando’s

extraordinary ability to make concrete seem fluid is keenly felt as you make your journey to the inner sanctum of the Monet room via long ramps and corridors of poured concrete. It forces the spectator to truly inhabit the space.

Ando’s other big project on the island is the Benesse House Museum, which also offers a hotel of 65 rooms, each one an architectural paeon to simplicity and minimalism. The museum is as austere as a Buddhist monastery, dramatic and intimate at once. The beauty of sleeping within an art museum is that you get to imbibe the power of the artwork (including works by David Hockney, Jackson

Pollock, Jasper Johns and Cy Twombly) when all the crowds have gone home. There are special sunset and night viewings of Turrell’s light works at Chichu. At another hotel annexe, Oval, which is the most exclusive of the hotel’s buildings with six rooms accessed by a small monorail which trundles up a wooded hill from the Benesse House Museum, you get to share intimate bedroom space with a Richard Long or a Keith Haring, while the floor-to-ceiling glass walls, looking out over the hillside and sea, blur the boundaries between inside and out. The lines between art and landscape continue to melt away when you find yourself soaking in a hot tub in a glade surrounded by 36 jagged rock formations. This is artist Cai Guo-Qiang’s *Cultural Melting Bath* and like much of what you experience on the Naoshima and the art islands of the Seto Inland Sea, it leaves you with a warm feeling that comes not just from the steam. You might find yourself, as I did, reluctant to leave a place where you fall a bit more in love with Japan, a little bit more in love with life itself. ■

Photography by Iwan Baan, Marina Sersale



CREATIVE SPACE
Clockwise from above:
Walter de Maria’s *Time/Timeless/No Time* at the Chichu Art Museum;
the Benesse House Oval Hotel entrance; Cai Guo Qiang’s *Cultural Melting Bath* at the Benesse House Museum; Yayoi Kusama’s Yellow Pumpkin in Naoshima;
a traditional torii gate on the beach near Benesse Art Site Naoshima;
a guest bathroom at Teshima’s Lemon Hotel

ART ISLAND ADDRESS BOOK

STAY at Lemon Hotel (lemonhotel.jp) or Naoshima Benesse House (benesse-artsite.jp)
EAT on Teshima at Shima Kitchen (shimakitchen.com), staffed by islanders and offering local produce in a space designed by architect Ryo Abe.
Just next door is traditional Japanese café Shokudo 101, serving whatever food is available on the day. For wonderful bento boxes and homemade ice creams on its seafront terrace, try Umi No (chc-co.com), and for a relaxed lunch with a library, Shimacoya (shimacoya.com) in Honmura.

NEED TO KNOW

From Tokyo, take the Shinkansen bullet train to Okayama, then a small train to Uno and ferry to Naoshima or Teshima. Discover Shikoku (discovershikoku.com) can organize trips, accommodation at the Lemon Hotel, Naoshima Oval and other ryokans, car hire and a guide for four days from \$4,067 per person (double occupancy). You can hire a sea plane from Setouchi Seaplanes (setouchi-seaplanes.com) from \$285 for a 50-minute flight around the Seto Inland Sea.