

Ulala Imai: AMAZING

February 6 - March 20, 2021

Nonaka Hill is pleased to present *AMAZING*, a selection of recent paintings by Japanese artist Ulala Imai in her first solo exhibition in the United States.

Bananas don't really go with Darth Vader, except in parenthood.

The exhibition title *AMAZING* derives from Ulala Imai's daughter's school project to name a new country and design its flag. Living life in a state of *AMAZING* is intimately shared by the artist. Imai's other exhibitions have been titled *LOVERS* and *GATHERING*. They all sound good, or something to aspire to.

In Nonaka-Hill's *Yum Yum* gallery, paintings with Imai's oft repeated subject of a limber, loving brown monkey embracing a stiff yellow bear are interspersed with images of cozy foods, giving the impression that we are trespassing into their domestic environment, and indeed we are. "Distance" depicts the shock and dismay of a family "Covid-bubble" possibly contaminated by an intruder, while "Mask" also resonates with these pandemic times, when many of us have stayed home and baked bread. The adjacent "Butter Toast" paintings are another repeated subject of Imai's. The artist, who says she can only paint in oil, finds reciprocity between the act of spreading butter on bread and of brushing oil paint onto canvas. Preferring to paint quickly, Imai's forms have a soft effect, augmented by just enough efficient brushstrokes to snap the image into being. The artist feels that with too much detail the toast "would end up looking like it had been baked for a long time and not very tasty".

Born with severely impaired hearing, Ulala Imai was introduced at a young age to Masterworks of European Art on family trips to visit museums, notably Paris' Louvre and Musée D'Orsay. Contemplating a future vocation which would not rely on hearing, Imai oriented herself towards the visual arts of illustration and painting. She took notice of the dramatic brightness achieved by Manet through his use of black, the quick touch of Velasquez to depict fine textures, and the air of nobility affected in van Eyck's paintings. Her father, a painter, loves Paris and his driveway in Japan is the site for "Sunshine" which depicts Imai's yellow bear in front of her father's teal and yellow picket fence, painted to emulate the distinctive fence around Paris' famed *Au Lapin Agile* cabaret, the cottage-style building where Picasso painted his Rose Period self-portrait, which depicts himself as a melancholic harlequin. This subject of end-of-day weariness appears in "Avocado Rock", in Nonaka-Hill's *Petit Trois* gallery, where Imai's tableau casts a bust of Chewbacca as a salaryman, having an adult drink in the kitchen after putting the kids to bed. An avocado pit replaces ice in his drink while nearby an icy depiction of hand-sanitizer is yet another reminder of this challenging moment in time. Across the room, the same Chewbacca bust is positioned in the artist's vertical bookshelf tableau "La Seine", this time as a jealous would-be suitor of Lucy van Pelt who is on a date with

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Charlie Brown, overseen by a Princess Leia doll, in the classic position of putto. Perhaps this work explains how Lucy and Charlie were “Friends” when depicted on piano keys but are “Lovers” in the two huge paintings where they float rather euphorically.

In the gallery’s central corridor, “Gathering” depicts an incomplete assembly of Imai’s cast of characters. Inspired by her grandmother’s tidy displays of souvenirs from her annual international travels, Imai’s collected objects are not only invested of histories, but also potentials as they are cast into still lifes and portraits, their bodies carefully calibrated to express what their fixed faces might not; narratives of affection or struggle, pleasure, pain, and so on. Combined with studies of food and painted in a corner of her young family’s living room, Imai’s work draws from the amazing that can be found in everyday family life.

Ulala Imai:

Born in 1982 in Kanagawa, Japan, Ulala Imai studied at Tama Art University. She lives and works in Kanagawa, Japan. Imai’s work has been the subject of numerous solo exhibitions in 2020 at Tokyo Opera City and at Union Pacific in London and 2019 at XYZ Collective in Tokyo. Ulala Imai is represented by Nonaka-Hill, Los Angeles.