

# Ulala Imai

## *MEMORY*

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Press Release

Xavier Hufkens is delighted to present Japanese artist Ulala Imai's first exhibition with the gallery, titled *MEMORY*. Ulala Imai, a third-generation artist in her family, is known for her paintings in which everyday objects are transformed into enigmatic scenes charged with a sense of intimacy. Her use of popular culture iconography, which she depicts across a variety of genres such as—still life, portraiture, landscape, historic and narrative painting—distinguishes her unique body of work.

*MEMORY* includes a new series of paintings, populated by a revolving cast of characters, many of whom she has been painting for years. "I do not possess the ability to imagine a fictitious world. The first stage of creation begins with a proper motif," says Imai. In search of the motifs, Imai turns to her everyday life, which allows "the motifs themselves to be understood as an autobiography." Always having worked from home, and in close proximity to her father, husband and children, her domestic milieu serves as the primary source of inspiration. Still-life abounds with a focus on day-to-day objects in a household: the melting butter on a piece of toast in the kitchen; fruits and flowers picked from the garden; stuffed toys and figurines left behind by her children. For Imai, these objects found in the everyday are akin to proxies or avatars that become visual manifestations of human emotions and complexities through which she communicates with the world.

Imai's work is a result of her endless fascination with the process of combining different motifs into expressive yet careful compositions, invoking the viewer's imagination. Combining a monkey with a daikon radish may be meaningless on its own, but it can give birth to an infinite possibility of narratives. In this new series, the viewers are introduced to unique arrangements of several stalwarts, including fuzzy and plastic figurines of Chewbacca (Star Wars); Cookie Monster (Sesame Street); an Undercover x MediCom hamburger lamp 1, a 'family' of three teddies and two identical-looking Steiff monkeys. The paintings also include several familiar attributes that have long appeared in her work, including a green Loki mask (Marvel Comics) and miniature kimonos. Light, on the other hand, is a key preoccupation in all its forms. In this exhibition, we encounter dawn (*LOST*), daytime (*PLAY*, *PARTNER*) and nightfall (*HOLY NIGHT*, *BREEZE*), but also an unusual combination of candlelight and electric light (*MARRIAGE*). The seasons also turn, from the lush greenery of spring and summer (*PLAY*, *RANGER*) to fall (*PARTNER*) and winter (*HOLY NIGHT*).

The narrative paintings depicting Imai's intimate relation to non-human objects can also be considered in the context of Shintoism and animism. Shintoism, the traditional belief system in Japan, revolves around supernatural entities called *kami* who are believed to inhabit everything, from objects to natural phenomena and even geographic formations. All animate and inanimate things are thus possessed of a 'spiritual essence' or 'soul.' Japan boasts a rich visual tradition relating to these beliefs. With the ease which people project human-like traits onto non-human things based on these beliefs, Imai's paintings tap into such themes. The objects and toys in Imai's oeuvre can thus be read as symbolic of people, the masks they wear, and the roles they play.

Ulala Imai's mastery of oil paint—her exclusive medium—also comes to the fore in a new series of still life depicting an array of food, flowers, and fruits. The plates filled with typical European dishes confirms Imai's affinity with Western culture, and France in particular, where her mother lives. From a young age, she visited French museums and immersed herself in the work of artists such as Manet, the quintessential *peintre de la vie moderne*. His painting *L'Asperge* (Musée d'Orsay) has always inspired Imai, being a work that offers an extreme sense of reality in a seemingly effortless manner. She brings a similar degree of pragmatism and spontaneity to her own still life, by striving to capture the inherent freshness of the food itself. As a *peintre de la vie quotidien*, she invites us to reflect upon everyday life in a curious and sensory way. Imai says: Sometimes I find the madness, the humour, and the otherness lurking in the everyday, and there are moments when it looks so beautiful that it makes my heart tremble. I hope to provide a glimpse of my 'memory' through my oil paintings, which express my impressions of daily life."

Ulala Imai (b. 1982) lives and works in Kanagawa, Japan. She trained at the Faculty of Art and Design at Tama Art University and graduated from the Doctoral Program in 2009. Recent exhibitions include *A Lover's Discourse*, Aspen Art Museum, Aspen, CO, USA (2023); *PUBLIC PRIVATE*, Pond Society, Shanghai, China (2023); *The Postmodern Child*, Museum of Contemporary Art Busan, Korea (2023); *THE SCENE*, Karma, New York, NY, USA (2022); *Reminiscence*, Union Pacific, London (2022); *Melody*, Parco Museum, Tokyo (2021), *AMAZING*, Nonaka-Hill, Los Angeles, CA, USA (2021) and Project N. 78, Tokyo Opera City Gallery, Tokyo, Japan (2020). Ulala Imai's artworks are included in the permanent collections of San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco, CA; Dallas Museum of Art, Dallas, TX; The High Museum, Atlanta, GA, USA; He Art Museum, Guangdong Province, China and Space K/ Kolon Museum, Seoul, Korea.

For further inquiries please contact the gallery at [info@xavierhufkens.com](mailto:info@xavierhufkens.com) or at +32(0)2 639 67 30. For press enquiries contact [press@xavierhufkens.com](mailto:press@xavierhufkens.com)

#ulalimai  
#xavierhufkens

Twitter: @XavierHufkens  
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Facebook: Xavier Hufkens