

# BLUM

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**Thirty Years: Written with a Splash of Blood**  
Curated by Tim Blum and Mika Yoshitake

**BLUM Los Angeles**  
January 13–March 3, 2024  
Opening reception: Saturday, January 13, 5–7pm

Koji Enokura  
Tomoo Gokita  
Kazunori Hamana  
Ryoji Ikeda  
Yukie Ishikawa  
Susumu Koshimizu  
Yukiko Kuroda

Yayoi Kusama  
Lee Ufan  
Sadamasa Motonaga  
Takashi Murakami  
Kazumi Nakamura  
Natsuyuki Nakanishi  
Yoshitomo Nara

Yuko Nasaka  
Yu Nishimura  
Kenjiro Okazaki  
Akane Saijo  
Nobuo Sekine  
Fujiko Shiraga  
Kishio Suga

Jiro Takamatsu  
Yuji Ueda  
Hiroka Yamashita  
Tsuruko Yamazaki  
Yukinori Yanagi  
Katsuro Yoshida  
Toshio Yoshida

Los Angeles, CA, January 9, 2024—BLUM is pleased to present *Thirty Years: Written with a Splash of Blood*, a milestone exhibition celebrating the gallery’s thirtieth anniversary, installed across its three locations—Los Angeles, Tokyo, and New York. Co-curated by Tim Blum and postwar Japanese art historian Mika Yoshitake, this presentation is an inter-generational survey of Japanese art from the 1960s to today.

The title is excerpted from a line in Nobel Prize-nominated author Yukio Mishima’s *Runaway Horses*, a celebrated novel that touches on themes of national identity, self-actualization, and the power of reincarnation. Impossible to encapsulate in its entirety, this exhibition strives to present a snapshot of the tremendous influence Japan has had on the gallery, reflecting on Blum’s first trip to Japan forty years ago and the relationship that has grown since. This vital exchange catalyzed the gallery’s groundbreaking work with Japanese and international artists, including foundational exhibitions of artists Yoshitomo Nara and Takashi Murakami; the acclaimed 2012 survey *Requiem for the Sun: The Art of Mono-ha*; and *Parergon: Japanese Art of the 1980s and 1990s* in 2019. In these thirty years open to the public, the gallery has hosted some sixty-five solo and group exhibitions of Japanese postwar art, alongside live music and performance. The exhibition features work by key artists from Gutai, Hi-Red Center, Mono-ha, New Painting, and Superflat movements through today, traversing the decades from the immediate aftermath of postwar Japan, onward. The first installment of this multi-location project opens in Los Angeles, spanning over 6,500 square feet of exhibition space.

Tim Blum first visited Japan in 1984, returning various times before moving to Tokyo in 1989, during which time he worked at several galleries and a private museum for the five years that followed. This period marks a pivotal moment art historically, following the death of the Showa emperor in 1989, when artists were confronting the postmodern through subversive political, subcultural, and spiritual perspectives alongside the rise of pop culture. Blum’s exposure to some of the most iconic artistic practices that emerged during this time informed the key shows and exhibitions that shaped the gallery’s history. Notably, in 1991, Blum met Takashi Murakami at his first solo exhibition in the Ginza district of Tokyo (“*Takashi, Tamiya*,” Gallery Aires). The two became friends, and each taught the other about artists from their respective countries. Blum was transformed by his discovery of the postwar movements of Gutai and Mono-ha, and by contemporary work by artists such as Murakami and Yoshitomo Nara, as well as Yayoi Kusama and Yukinori Yanagi who regularly showed at Fuji Television

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Gallery in the early '90s. This dynamic era in Japan saw new critical engagement and expansions in art, installation, performance, and multi-genre practices, as well as the nascent scene of noise, sound, and electro-acoustic music experimentation. Blum was able to see early performances by now-legendary music artists Keiji Haino, Boredoms, Merzbow, Otomo Yoshihide, and others.

In 1994, Blum returned to Los Angeles to open the gallery, soon thereafter staging the US solo exhibition debuts of Yoshitomo Nara's *Pacific Babies* (1995) and Takashi Murakami (1997), the latter eventually coining the term "Superflat" in 2001 to describe not only the imperceptibly flat slickness of his paintings, but also a symbolic nod to the flattening of the divide between fine art and pop culture that would come to define a new generation of contemporary Japanese art. In 2010, the gallery invited postwar Japanese art historian, Mika Yoshitake—who helped organize the ©MURAKAMI retrospective at MOCA, Los Angeles (2008) and advised Lee Ufan's solo show at the gallery (2010)—to curate *Requiem for the Sun: The Art of Mono-ha* (2012). This exhibition reconsidered the history of sculpture and the object through the 1960s and 1970s artistic practices of the Mono-ha (School of Things) movement. Considering the gallery's history of presenting the contemporary works of Nara, Murakami, and the Superflat generation, Yoshitake then curated *Parergon: Japanese Art of the 1980s and 1990s* (2019), focusing on the pivotal two decades between Mono-ha and Superflat that introduced the history of postmodern art in Japan and its intersections with underground music and performance.

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The first work the viewer encounters is Yukinori Yanagi's *Study for American Art – Three Flags* (2019), a deconstruction of Jasper Johns's *Three Flags* (1958), made by way of an ecosystem of ants burrowing through painted sand housed inside acrylic boxes. Using the flag as a universal symbol of the US, Yanagi reflects upon the permeability of national identity through his once-removed gesture of double appropriation. That is, Yanagi's appropriation of Johns' appropriation of the American flag not only decenters the Euro-American narrative of pop art, but also destabilizes the outmoded role of political and cultural nationalism on the international stage.

This recalibration sets the stage for the exhibition, which considers multiple formal and symbolic layers of cultural reception. The first room opens with Susumu Koshimizu's massive wooden beams that take up the near-entire surface area of the floor in *From Surface to Surface (Wooden Logs Placed in a Radial Pattern on the Ground)* (1972/2004). The work, which consists of thirty wooden beams of Japanese Douglas fir that are each hand-cut with geometric precision, was first presented at Suma Rikyu Park in Kobe, Japan—the same site where fellow Mono-ha artist Nobuo Sekine debuted his groundbreaking *Phase—Mother Earth* (1968). While some of the patterns repeat, the work considers the gestalt of how the experience of perspective shifts as one walks through the radial lines into its empty center. The constant renewal of the body's perception in space is presented in contrast to earlier paintings by Gutai artist Fujiko Shiraga, made with oil, paper, and glass, and Hi-Red Center artist Natsuyuki Nakanishi, whose works embody the painfully visceral aftereffects of war's destruction—one that envisions the collective imaginary as a sutured topographic map in *Map of Human (Ningen no Chizu)* (1959). Yoshitomo Nara's meditative poster-sized portrait drawings act like contemporary signposts: "NO WAY," "Sekai o kaeru-natte [Don't try to change the world]," or "Ashita-e [For Tomorrow]."

In a second room, singularity and resistance, which have been synonymous with Nara's prolific practice, take on renewed gravitas with *Ennui Head* (2020). The eyes of the sculpture are gouged with the artist's fingers, while its whipped-cream softness offers an emotional ambiguity that is vulnerable and stone-cold. Nara's intuitive sensibility for "ennui" resonates with the present moment. He plays a pivotal role as a bridge between the artists of the 1980s New Painting genre—represented here with Kazumi

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Nakamura's *Broken Hermitage 39 (Mt. Tatakai)* (2018) and Yukie Ishikawa's *Impermanence 3—All that is Not Timely* (2008)—and the younger generation artists such as Hiroka Yamashita and Yu Nishimura featured in this same space. The massive washes of violet gorges in Yamashita's *Shima* (2023) are reminiscent of an ancient cave through which faraway islets are visible, suggestive of Nara's internal landscape in *Ennui Head*. On the other hand, Tomoo Gokita's *Secret Game* (2023) and Yu Nishimura's montaged portrait, *across the place* (2023), are psychological interplays of both critical awareness and resistance to the genealogy of figural painting that has evolved over the past thirty years.

In the third gallery, Takashi Murakami's *DOB in the Strange Forest* (1999) is a vivid display of mushrooms with hundreds of eyes staring back at the viewer. Produced right before his first solo exhibition at Blum & Poe in 1997, the painting features Murakami's alter ego DOB [an acronym taken from the gag "dobjite dobjite oshamanbe" (Why? Why?) from the manga series *Inakappe Taishō* (1967–72) by Noboru Kawasaki], making its appearance in this strange forest. An important stylistic precedent is Gutai artist Sadamasa Motonaga's *In Orange* (1975), whose comedic, anthropomorphic form is imbued with bold animism. The eyes, or negative space dots, of the "Infinity Net" patterns in Yayoi Kusama's *Abode of Love* (2015) and *Pumpkin* (1999) speak to an obsession with perception and permeability, which Kenjiro Okazaki's T-shaped paintings also engage from a different perspective through the literary legacies of painting's formalism. In these acrylic on canvas works, Okazaki offers a reflection on the collapse of history, memory, and form through the present moment.

Perception is a central theme in the Garden Gallery, which includes an immersive installation by Ryoji Ikeda—his *data.tecture [n<sup>o</sup>1]* (2018) projects data along the floor, thus producing a floating field effect, including onto the bodies of viewers. The molecular data, which comprises hundreds of amino acid chains, are accompanied by pulsating, high-pitch sound frequencies, a familiar device that he used as an engineer and producer for the legendary multi-media collective Dumb Type (formed in 1984) in the 1990s. Dumb Type often probed the dichotomies between life and death and the role of technology in our comprehension of this existential border during the height of the AIDS crisis, where performers' bodies took the form of noise distortion and surveillance targets. In Ikeda's installation, data is transcribed into abstract algorithms that result in computer-generated imagery that is compressed, flattened, rasterized, and streamed at breakneck speed. This velocity is deliberately at a rate of hundreds of frames per second, which pushes our ability to process information. Ikeda carefully calculates this perceptual limit in which, according to him, the stream of images "can be slow, but if it's too fast, it seems much slower. Ten thousand times faster, and it gets slow because it's beyond your perception."<sup>1</sup>

The upstairs gallery and den combine key works by seven Mono-ha artists, Koji Enokura, Susumu Koshimizu, Lee Ufan, Nobuo Sekine, Kishio Suga, Jiro Takamatsu, and Katsuro Yoshida, alongside contemporary ceramic works by Kazunori Hamana, Yukiko Kuroda, Yuji Ueda, and Akane Saijo. The viewer is immediately confronted with Yoshida's *Cut-off* (1969/2007), a massive steel pipe stuffed with cotton that was originally photographed in the streets of Tokyo in 1969. Like a strange obstruction in the space, the piece offers a tension that is reflective of Mono-ha's central tenet: probing the structures through which things reveal their existence. Takamatsu's skepticism into visual perception through his shadow paintings were precursors to these bare arrangements of matter, such as Koshimizu's one-and-a-half-ton stone inside an open paper cube; Enokura's draped piece of black-stained cloth from the wall to the floor; Suga's layers of felt or black cloth stretched around stone beams following a corner; or

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<sup>1</sup> Interview with Mika Yoshitake. January 10, 2022.

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Sekine's gravitational pull of a stone wrapped by rope and canvas. The relationship between the materials and their properties is continuous with the architecture of the space. Presented directly on the floor, the mountainous vessels of Kazunori Hamana and Yukiko Kuroda's Japanese lacquer vases, alongside Yuji Ueda's and Akane Saijo's glazed ceramic works, provide a tactile and textural counterpart to Mono-ha's stoic use of mundane paper, canvas, stone, cotton, and pipe and contemplative structures that prioritize mutual co-existence over mastery of perception.

Presented alongside this exhibition is a display of archival photography and ephemera, documenting notable moments in this thirty-year history. This project will be supplemented with two public programs at the closing of the exhibition, including an artist panel and a live performance, with details forthcoming. A publication released later this year will memorialize this milestone and expand upon the histories presented.

The second installment of the exhibition will open at BLUM Tokyo January 20–March 10, 2024. A final chapter will be presented as the inaugural exhibition to open BLUM New York in Tribeca, fall 2024.

## About BLUM

BLUM represents more than sixty artists and estates from sixteen countries worldwide, nurturing a diverse roster of artists at all stages of their practices with a range of global perspectives. Originally opened as Blum & Poe in Santa Monica in 1994, the gallery has been a pioneer in its early commitment to Los Angeles as an international arts capital.

The gallery has been acclaimed for its groundbreaking work in championing international artists of postwar and contemporary movements, such as CoBrA, Dansaekhwa, Mono-ha, and Superflat, and for organizing museum-caliber solo presentations and historical survey exhibitions across its spaces in Los Angeles, Tokyo, and New York. Often partnering with celebrated curators and scholars such as Cecilia Alemani, Alison M. Gingeras, Sofia Gotti, Joan Kee, and Mika Yoshitake, the gallery has produced large-scale exhibitions focusing on the Japanese Mono-ha school (2012); the Korean Dansaekhwa monochrome painters (2014); the European postwar movement CoBrA (2015); Japanese art of the 1980s and 1990s (2019); a rereading of Brazilian Modernism (2019); a revisionist take on the 1959 MoMA exhibition, *New Images of Man* (2020); and a survey of portraiture through a democratic and humanist lens (2023); among others.

BLUM's wide-reaching program includes exhibitions, lectures, performance series, screenings, video series, and an annual art book fair at its base in Los Angeles. BLUM Books, the gallery's publishing division, democratically circulates its program through original scholarship and accessible media ranging from academic monographs, audio series, magazines, to artists' books.

Across the three global locations, BLUM prioritizes environmental and community stewardship in all operations. In 2015, it was certified as an Arts:Earth Partnership (AEP) green art gallery in Los Angeles and consequently became one of the first green certified galleries in the United States. The gallery is also a member of the Gallery Climate Coalition, which works to facilitate a more sustainable commercial art world and reduce the industry's collective carbon footprint. BLUM is committed to fostering inclusive and equitable communities both in its physical and online spaces and believes that everybody should have equal access to creating and engaging with contemporary art.

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