

Hiroka Yamashita

Earthing

Oct 11th – Nov 9th, 2024
Caprii, Orangeriestraße 6, Düsseldorf
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For Hiroka Yamashita's solo exhibition at Sies + Höke's project space Caprii, the Okayama-based artist presents a series of new paintings of intimate subjects from nature that fuse the everyday with the transcendent. Here, she speaks with Kristian Vistrup Madsen about her inspirations for the exhibition.

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KVM: For the exhibition at Caprii you've made a series of fairly small paintings of subjects from nature. How have you conceptualised the show?

HY: I just had an exhibition at BLUM Gallery in Los Angeles that closed at the end of August. For that, I made seven large paintings that took scenes from Japanese mythology and my research into the traditional type of Japanese performance called kagura as their starting point. But I've been working on smaller paintings simultaneously, and the spontaneity that they allow for seems to invite a different, more intimate subject matter. I thought this register was more suitable for the exhibition at Caprii. I really enjoy East Asian calligraphy—I think you can express the essence of a thing through the different shades of the ink and the movements of the brush. To me, the smaller paintings present an opportunity to apply these techniques. It's more like drawing, but often there is no concrete plan at the beginning; I just start with a brush stroke and a simple colour scheme. In *Seedhead*, for instance, some parts are drawn on very quickly, aggressively, while others are misty, more pale. Such differences inside a painting can create an interesting experience of proportions changing, and time slowing down.

KVM: How have you chosen your motifs for this exhibition?

HY: The inspiration for this body of work came partly from Hermann Hesse. I found his book *Freude am Garten* in a used bookstore in Japan and then, when I was in Germany for a residency at Lake Constance, I visited his house and garden, which are open to the public. It is a beautiful place. I also do gardening and I grow my own vegetables. When I look at these paintings, I feel like I experience myself again as I am in the garden, looking at insects and plants. For this exhibition I wanted to focus each painting on a single object. It's something I've never done before, a first try. The motif doesn't have to be beautiful, what's important is that it somehow

resonates. And often the painting does not actually begin with choosing a specific plant or animal. In *Ivy* and *Predation*, for example, I started with a favourite colour, or just some abstract brush marks, and from there a shape emerged naturally that reminded me of something from my everyday life.

KVM: *Freude am Garten* could also be a nice title for the show! Even though it's not all joy in your garden... In the painting titled *Stolen Potatoes*, you've used a big format for a dramatic, and yet pretty mundane subject. It feels like there's a story there.

HY: Yes, I woke up one morning to find that an animal had dug up my potato patch—the potatoes were all over, it was a mess. I took a photograph and started to paint. It was only later on that the proportions changed: I added these rice fields at the bottom, the landscape became bigger, something like mountains appeared in the background. It's not completely clear, but I feel that some parts look like the animal that stole the potatoes—a black thing with long paws, and an open mouth. At a certain point, the painting moves away from experience like that and into the realm of memory or imagination. I add shapes or scenery that I am familiar with from childhood, or from looking at other pictures. Another example of that is the painting of the turtle. While I do actually see a lot of turtles around, desperately trying to cross the road where I live without getting hit by a car, the reason why I painted it has more to do with a memory from childhood. I would catch a turtle in a bucket so that I could look at it properly, but then, after a few hours, it would always escape.

KVM: Yes, a nice illustration of how memory and imagination blur in your work, mixing with more immediate everyday experiences. This approach allows both for the personal and the grand narrative simultaneously. How do you incorporate traditional painting traditions and mythologies into your paintings?

HY: I like to do research, but the paintings never become about showing "real history", so much as about how we interpret the stories that are passed down to us. I am very careful about the amount of information I put in a picture – not that my paintings are ever that figurative. But sometimes I will just use certain colours and know that they relate to the five elements in Chinese and Japanese thought, where each colour has a meaning, and that's already enough. I think that we are somehow connected to the place where we are from, to our ancestors and how they used to live. And even if we don't know the specifics of the mythologies that they related to I think something of them passes down to us intuitively anyway, say through colours, or a certain mood.

KVM: I like that idea because it also means that you can choose any topic – even the potatoes in your garden, no matter how small – and it will contain some of this information from the past.

HY: Yes, even though I've painted very simple themes for this exhibition, it is still full of the history of my family and the village where I grew up. I really enjoy living in the countryside, and being connected to the people in my neighbourhood – this, to me, is an important aspect of my work. Living in a small place close to nature is not leisurely, as a lot of people in the city imagine. There is so much to deal with, a lot of hard work under harsh circumstances. More and more artists live in the countryside. And it is also partly what has sparked my interest in Japanese mythology, because it is often about how we relate to the seasons, animals and plants. I hope viewers can find the connection between these two scales in my work: the everyday, the manual labour I do in the garden, and the mythological, what reaches back in time and beyond individual experience.

KVM: The title of one of your paintings is Earthing. What do you mean by that?

HY: It's a verb that means to connect an electrical device with the ground, but I've turned it into a figure who I feel is releasing something from his body, connecting to the peach tree and to the soil, closing his eyes. Letting go of some negativity, maybe.

KVM: It's a nice metaphor for this whole series of paintings: your work in the garden as a way of earthing, connecting, not only taking from the ground but also sharing energy, circulating it.

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Hiroka Yamashita (b. 1991) is a contemporary painter based in Okayama, Japan. Trained in Japanese calligraphy, Yamashita fuses techniques from Western and *nihonga* painterly traditions together with literary references in a style that evades distinct classification. Figuration and abstraction coexist in ethereal and hazy intermundia formed by blurred contours and spontaneously applied colours, ranging from soft pastels to deep somber shades, to embody human sentiments and emotional subtleties in metaphoric expressions of natural and everyday phenomena. Dreamy improbability and animistic sensibilities emanate through compositions meticulously contemplating existence in multidimensional worlds and exploring new articulations of Japanese sensibility on the ephemeral. From otherworldly forces of mythology and their embedded knowledge to the mundane actions of the present, often afflicted with many an instance of historical amnesia, the morphing, gentle surreality of Yamashita's oeuvre tenderly situates itself between the ominous and the soothing.

Yamashita received her BFA from the School of Visual Arts, New York in 2017 and her MFA from the Mason Gross School of the Arts at Rutgers University, New Jersey in 2019. Her most recent solo exhibitions include *こをろこをろ koworo-koworo*, BLUM, Los Angeles (2024); *Field, Force, Surface*, Kiang Malingue, Hong Kong (2022); *Fūdo* at Tanya Leighton, Berlin (2022); *Project N 84* at Tokyo Opera City Art Gallery (2021); *Cosmos Remembered* at The Club, Tokyo (2021); and *Evanescent Horizon* (with Naoya Inose) at FOMO Art, Taipei (2021).