

Creating a Body of Work: On Nami Yokoyama – a text by Martin Germann

Nami Yokoyama works in series, and by now her best-known works belong to one in which handwritten words are translated into neon tubes and then painted, among them a variety of pieces in this exhibition. While “Shape of Your Words” is its overarching title, most of these words are common and global: “love,” with which the series began (though it isn’t part of this show), but also other terms such as “history” and “pray,” or phrases such as “I am.” A glimmering neon tube, into which the handwriting has been transformed, sits frontally on the painting’s flat and clean surface, while the technical infrastructure that brings the tube to light remains visible in the background. Yokoyama began this series with words drawn by her own hand, but later opened it to other people’s writing, which gives the series its frame while making every piece singular, since no two people’s handwriting is alike. The paintings themselves are as exact and controlled as possible, while the handwriting they preserve is the opposite: loose, intuitive, caught in a single unrepeatable moment of gestural intensity.

Every artist’s path starts somewhere in life, and Yokoyama’s earliest memory of art belongs to another artist’s work: Masao Mizuno, from Gujo Hachiman, whom her father introduced her to, and whose painting is tied closely to the traditions of her hometown in Gifu Prefecture. Only a few years later, on her first trip to Italy with her parents, she stood in front of a Botticelli, an encounter she still describes as formative. This distance between the long-standing grandeur of Western art history and what she has described as her comparatively peripheral upbringing in Japan set her searching for something as simple as her own identity, or, put less categorically, for what is genuinely hers, against the countless categories that structure life in Japan, because what has no name, especially within this logic, does not exist. But isn’t making the invisible visible one of art’s oldest tasks?

“I was born into the roles of Japanese, woman, and Nami Yokoyama. I wanted to depict something freed from that fixed framework,” she has said in an interview — a statement that orients her drawings, self-portraits, and her debt to artists such as Wilhelm Sasnal and Cy Twombly, as well as her own strategies, among them a painterly series bringing discarded objects into paint. From early on, her practice has occupied a grey zone between herself and the world, between the terms that define both. “Shape of Your Words” 5 gives that inquiry a body, in the name of the word: these works sit between inside and outside, or, borrowing a distinction central to Japanese culture, between *tatema* and *honne*, the built façade one shows and the private voice kept underneath it. Almost as if cutting through butter with a hot knife, Yokoyama’s neon paintings interfere with these registers to create a strange hybrid: not the face a person composes for others, but the trace left behind when they simply write a word down.

“Love” was among the first words in the series, but it was during the increasing isolation of the pandemic that she began to feel the need to bring other voices in, which created a shift toward something more collective. Yokoyama wrote a word herself and let others answer in their own hand, calling the new series “Shape of Your Response.” While she wrote “where,” others, commissioned for the piece, answered “here,” adding a spatial register to the quiet psychological undertone already running through her work. It matters to her, too, that none of the words are Japanese — they are generic vessels, already at a linguistic distance from her own language, which fuses image and sign in a different manner from the way the Western alphabet operates.

While Yokoyama’s practice at first sight seems to blend in with certain language-oriented legacies of Conceptual Art, her work cannot be adapted to them too easily. Formally, it shares ground with an artist like Joseph Kosuth, who used neon to probe how meaning arises in the first place, or On Kawara, who measured categories of duration, time, and distance through a variety of painterly strategies. But Yokoyama expands those categories inward. Where Kosuth’s neon explores the ontological state of a term standing alone, detached from the hand that wrote it, and each of Kawara’s date paintings has a different colour to articulate difference, Yokoyama insists on other factors, such as the tremor of

the wrist, the pressure of the pen, the instant in which someone asked to write “love,” or “here,” does so in a random moment. The tube amplifies the handwriting, giving a private, almost involuntary gesture a public and even architectural scale, while the technical infrastructure represents at the same time, in the artist’s own words, the “body,” which carries and produces feelings and thoughts.

But language, on its surface, remains only a vessel, which becomes evident with a simple experiment: by saying one’s own name a hundred times in a row, it starts to empty of meaning, becoming nothing but sound, shape, or something close to muscle memory. And a thought, a word, a name, a category like “Japanese” or “woman,” has to become matter before it can be shared, because it begins in the body: a hand’s pressure, a held breath, a response to whatever image and feeling came before. Two further series in this exhibition make these mechanisms even more tangible, turning the strategies of repetition inward, toward the artist’s own body and toward the bodies of objects.

The first, *forever*, was made on site during her stay for this exhibition: one drawing a day, each showing her lying in the grass. Yokoyama has said that lying in the grass, looking at the sky without thinking, is when she feels most simply in the world. Like the neon works, these follow difference through repetition — each day she looks at the previous drawing and tries to repeat it, and each attempt comes out slightly different. That drift is the work: carrying an ordinary self forward into tomorrow, by hand rather than by machine. Works such as Ian Burn’s *Xerox Book* (1968) make a useful comparison here: each copy became the source for the next, allowing small differences to accumulate through repetition, but Yokoyama runs something similar through her own hand and body.

This culminates in the third series in the exhibition, which consists of figures cast in bronze, above all a material with its own historical weight: the metal of war memorials, imperial statuary, the public monument built to outlast its subject. But while all the figures in Yokoyama’s series come from the same mould, each carries a fragment of the sentence “I / am / thinking / of / you / .” in hand-painted words, so that a shared origin produces singular results — much as, in Yokoyama’s own phrase, people share a language and never become the same through it. Spread across several bodies, the sentence never closes, since every figure holds only a piece of it. What the figures share — mould, language, sequence — offers no guarantee of sameness.

Since it opened to the West in the mid-19th century, Japan has served as a screen for every kind of projection, from the supposed homogeneity of its population to a particular aesthetic and onward to an inventory that is simply too long for this text. At the same time, it is hardly ever questioned how these images are perceived in Japan. In 1957, political theorist Masao Maruyama described a “centrifugal” structure of Japanese self-understanding, in which the self is defined less by what it is than by a constant measuring against what lies outside it. There is perhaps an echo of this in Yokoyama’s decision to work with words borrowed from outside her mother tongue. Her work isn’t an illustration of Maruyama’s thesis, though; rather, it makes visible the plain human act of looking outward, even as it interrupts what that gaze expects to find.

Perhaps this is where two rather different histories meet: the repetitive structures of Minimal and Conceptual Art and the postcolonial, identity-driven discussions of more recent years, which increasingly dominate contemporary discourse. It is worth returning, from here, to her early encounter with the estranging grandeur of Western painting, because what Yokoyama quietly seems to undermine is the idea of the artist as sole author of meaning, while at the same time painting with total precision — claiming for herself only the role of a hand that executes. Perhaps this ongoing withdrawal from the ego, while articulating its grey zones, carries a feminist gesture precisely in this restraint: mastery without the need for grandiosity.