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"Hiroka Yamashita"

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REVIEWS LOS ANGELES

Hiroka Yamashita

Blum

By Andrea Gyorody

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Hiroka Yamashita, *UZUME*, 2024, oil on linen, 89 5/8 × 57 1/4".

The world conjured in the paintings of Hiroka Yamashita is a strange and bewitching one. In the seven large-scale works included in her show at Blum, the border between figure and landscape was blurred, as foreground and background, real space and dream space, interpolate. Her paintings test the limits of apprehension and also foil attempts at definitive description. *UZUME*, 2024, for example, was dominated by a contorted bodily form, its bent torso and buttocks floating in the center of the canvas, tenuously connected to a head that turns away from the viewer while its two arms with deep-crimson hands, one sinewy, the other glove-like, pierce the picture plane. This figure—a term used advisedly to name a flat pinkish shape with the vague markers of a human body—transects the vertically oriented work, separating the oozing, melting fragments of torso, head, and limbs at the top of the canvas from a field of jade dotted with rudimentary trees at the bottom. From within the watery layers of green appear a sketchy eye, nose, and mouth together reminiscent of a face seen in puffs of clouds or eddies of water—a mirage or a miracle, depending on your persuasion.

But the ghostly visages that haunt nearly all of Yamashita's paintings aren't nebulously supernatural; they're rooted in the vast pantheon of Japanese mythology. Her titles hint at this context: *UZUME* is an abbreviation of the name of Ame-no-Uzume, a goddess associated with the arts, joy, and meditation, who once danced to restore light to the earth. In Shinto religious tradition, she is one of many venerated deities or spirits called kami: The term encompasses an impossibly fluid category that includes gods and goddesses, ancestors, forces of nature, elements of landscape, honorable beings, and more. Kami are inescapable in Japanese culture, starring frequently in manga and anime, and perhaps most memorably in Hayao Miyazaki's 2001 film *Spirited Away*, about a little girl who finds herself accidentally trapped in the spirit world.

Central to Shinto's pantheistic and animist worldview, kami inhabit everything around us but usually remain hidden. This magical omnipresence is exactly what Yamashita so deftly captures in her work, in which kami seem to enchant not just facets of the natural world but the medium of painting itself. In *Byakkai*, 2024, two faces and a cartoonish hand took shape in the murk of a gauzy earth- and water-toned abstraction, intruding into the space of Color Field painting. Across the gallery, *Hagoromo*, 2023, the least representational painting of the group, included a tentative set of brushstrokes that just barely articulated a vignette of tiny figures. They float in a sea of pale blue above what might be a seated figure in emerald robes, conjured from a series of feathery brush marks that seem to be spreading across the canvas in real time. In *Oracle*, 2024, the ribbons of paint fluttering through the unmoored space of *Byakkai* coalesced into an ominous snakelike form encircling an orb that resembles the earth, with downward-dripping paint where the continents should be.

The otherworldly quality of movement in Yamashita's paintings manifests a reality that swirls in and out of recognition, seemingly in an endless state of becoming. The knockout diptych *Tobiraki*, 2024, featured a progression of cloaked forms merging together as they move from left to right, eventually coalescing into a mushrooming billow that thrusts upward, calling back to the atomic blasts littered across so many examples of postwar Japanese art. Rendered in part with techniques from the ancient Japanese tradition of *nihonga*—painting typically done with mineral pigments on silk or paper—Yamashita's atmospheric effects here reached their apex in *Sarutahiko*, 2023, a work that oscillates more insistently between abstraction and representation. The painting references the mythological story of Ame-no-Uzume dancing before a cave to entice the sun goddess to reemerge; the dance is still performed today in ritual Shinto practice. In homage to the tale, Yamashita blankets the canvas in a deep rust red, an intense ground out of which disembodied arms and hands materialize, glowing white-hot and churning around a central seated figure. Adding to the drama of the scene is a shower of paint dripping downward from the top-left half of the work, pulling us out of the narrative and into the materiality of thinned oil on linen. This, too, might constitute an homage, not just to the history of Japanese painting but to the force of gravity and its profound influence on the natural world. Yamashita gives form to gravity just as she does to kami, illuminating the power and presence of what we cannot see.

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