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NEWS

## Carrie Yamaoka's Distorted Mirrors: 2025 Maria Lassoing Prize Winner

BY EMMA NESS 11.07.2025



### A Quiet Alchemy of Surfaces

**C**arrie Yamaoka doesn't shout. Her art simmers, pulses, waits. And in that stillness, in those shimmers of resin and film, the world changes shape—slightly, irreversibly. With the 2025 Maria Lassoing Prize now bearing her name, Yamaoka's long devotion to distortion, surface, and the sensual chaos of perception receives the acknowledgment it has long deserved.

This is not a prize for noise. It's a prize for precision. And in Yamaoka's case, for reorientation.

Born in 1957 and based in New York, Yamaoka has spent four decades building a practice that refuses to settle—folding painting into sculpture, merging photography with process, fusing memory with material. Her upcoming solo exhibition at the Hamburger Kunsthalle, slated for 2026, will mark not just her first institutional show in Germany, but a slow-burning collision between the museum's walls and her spectral palette of lacquer, mylar, and translucent voids.

## What the Eye Can't Hold

“ I don't make work with obvious subject matter.

– Yamaoka once said. But the absence of narrative is not a lack. It's an invitation.

Her surfaces—part mirror, part skin, part ghost—resist completion. They shimmer with a barely-there iridescence that calls to mind everything from 1960s Light and Space minimalism to queer theory's embrace of instability.

There are no easy edges in a Yamaoka work. The boundaries between image and material are mercurial. Her mirrored surfaces tilt reality into abstraction, catching your reflection but returning it warped, fragmented, interrogated. Viewers become both subject and distortion—a fitting metaphor for any identity forged through diaspora, queerness, and time.

Her queerness is not a subject. It is an undercurrent. A formal engine. As a founding member of *fierce pussy*, the legendary activist art collective born in the AIDS-era 1990s, Yamaoka has always known that the personal is political—but she expresses this not with slogans, but with spectral residue.

## The Politics of Process

Yamaoka's materials carry their own memory. She manipulates resin, ink, and mylar with the patience of a chemist and the touch of a poet. The surfaces aren't painted *on* so much as coaxed *into* being. Accident and control dance here—thin pours of pigment, intentional abrasions, the slow sediment of time.

Her recent works shimmer like relics pulled from a post-human archive. They do not depict. They react. The mirror becomes a metaphor for the body—fragile, mutable, reflecting what surrounds it but never quite yielding to it.

And yet, despite their formal elegance, these works are unafraid of discomfort. They blur the distinctions between what is seen and what is felt, what is intimate and what is alien.

## A Prize That Reflects a Career Built on Refraction

The Maria Lassnig Prize, awarded biennially to a midcareer artist whose practice mirrors Lassnig's own fierce commitment to autonomy and experimentation, feels like a perfect match. Lassnig once painted her "body awareness"—inner states rendered in expressionistic flesh. Yamaoka, by contrast, externalizes inner ambiguity, creating reflective fields where the viewer's own image completes the work.

The jury—comprising Hans Ulrich Obrist, Alexander Klar, Rosa Barba, and others—understood this. What they honored in Yamaoka wasn't merely aesthetic rigor but conceptual endurance. An artist who has long refused to compartmentalize—between mediums, between politics and poetics, between clarity and haze—now finds herself the focus of an institution historically wary of liminality.

## Toward the Edge of the Visible

Yamaoka's work doesn't need spectacle. It works at the level of temperature, of fog, of breath on glass. In an **art world** addicted to immediacy and impact, her compositions move like tidewater—slipping around the ankles of viewers, soaking deeper the longer one stays.

The award is not an end but a continuation: another chance to look, to be looked at, and to ask—what do we see when the surface starts to shimmer?

As Maria Lassnig once painted her own insides out, Carrie Yamaoka invites us to enter the mirror—and stay long enough to see it melt.