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Takako Yamaguchi

*Blending Elements From Eastern and Western Art History*

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by Jody Zellen



While Takako Yamaguchi has been making and exhibiting paintings regularly for over forty years, up until recently she was below the radar. Her inclusion in the 2024 Whitney Biennale elevated her exposure and finally in 2025, recognition in Los Angeles has arrived. Though not really emerging (at 72), she is the subject of a MOCA Focus exhibition (a series designed to showcase emerging local artists). The Focus exhibition is not a retrospective, but rather the presentation of a recent body of work.

Those familiar with Yamaguchi's prior series will see these quasi-seascapes as part of a continuum, noticing relationships, familiar elements and methodologies of paint application. Yamaguchi is a slow, exacting painter who focuses on large shapes, wide expanses of color and the transitions between them in her imaginative representations of the natural world. Those coming to Yamaguchi's work without context and knowledge of her painting history can absorb these magnificent pieces on a purely visual level.

As a painter, Yamaguchi's works defy categorization as she explores a different subject or concept in each project. In some series, she references traditional Japanese landscape paintings or kimono design. She has integrated Art Deco motifs and created paintings that draw parallels with feminist spiritual abstraction. She has also explored the body with a series of photorealist nudes, as well as a suite of tightly cropped images that focused on women's clothing modeled by the artist. An anomaly is perhaps her monochromes — white on white (or gray) paintings of geometric shapes in a *trompe l'oeil* style.

The ten images on view at MOCA categorized by Yamaguchi as "*abstractions in reverse*" are large-scale oil and metal leaf paintings filled with undulating and overlapping geometric shapes. While they appear to be seascapes, the imagined places they depict are a synthesis of symbols and motifs derived from paintings of the natural world throughout art history. Formally, the works on view share a kinship with artists like Agnes Pelton and Hilma af Klint, whose painted landscapes captured a sense of

spirituality and transcendence. Yamaguchi's works have a similar sense of light, and layering of shapes to suggest the landscape, however they are not overtly spiritual.

A horizon line unifies the ten paintings in the exhibition. As Yamaguchi remarks, *"I set out to do this series with the painting's horizon line exactly in the center, and then above is sky, and below is a sea."* Each painting is filled with saturated colors and shapes that reference waves, clouds, islands and mountains. In *Trap* (2024) three rows of stylized gray and white waves sit at the bottom of the canvas. Above them is an expanse of deep blue filled with curved brown mounds that sign for islands dotting the sea. A long, wide golden shape snakes across the sky exiting the painting about a third of the way down. In the middle, just above the yellow horizon line is a row of vertical lines placed to reference a setting sun. A large striated white shape is perfectly balanced in the center of the painting, at once a wave and a large bird flying up, over and across the composition. At once familiar and entirely other-worldly, the image is simultaneously grounded and ethereal.

*Plenum* (2024) is the most sensual of the ten paintings on view. The multiple meanings of the title are echoed within the work as it is both a seascape and a body. As in *Trap*, the bottom of the work features a row of rippling waves. Above them is a golden-yellow bulbous form outlined in gray with a shaft that rises vertically and splits in half as it nears the top of the painting. It not only sprouts tendrils here, but also changes direction and mutates into undulating forms that flow down on the left and right sides of the shaft against a deep maroon-red background ending at the horizon line.

For *Residue* (2023), Yamaguchi also divides the painting into sections. The horizon (a white then black line) cuts across the center. Green vertical stripes meet the horizon line against a yellow green-black gradient suggesting a distant expanse. Six rows of flattened, golden braid-like shapes float across the top of the painting: posing as clouds that dominate the upper foreground. The sea zig-zags as hard-edged blue-gray bands from green waves lining the bottom of the canvas.

Each painting can be described as a relationship of forms — colorful, geometric shapes — that float in an imagined landscape. Yamaguchi is interested in what the paintings infer, how viewers interpret the abstracted seascapes, and how they not only seem to become recognizable and familiar but also remain obtuse. In these complex and breathtaking paintings, she blends elements from Eastern and Western art history, architecture and culture to make unique scenes that hover between abstraction and representation

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