

Leiko Ikemura:

**Usagi in
Wonderland**

Large Print Text

18 July – 12 December 2021

SECTION 1

LEIKO IKEMURA: USAGI IN WONDERLAND

Since Leiko Ikemura emerged in the 1970s, she has explored representations of the feminine, focusing on the innocence of childhood and the transition from girlhood to womanhood. Through her girlish figures and hybrid creatures, Ikemura subtly conveys a sense of estrangement and alienation. She asserts that humankind's intimate relationship with the natural environment and the universe can be a source of solace and comfort.

Ikemura is an internationally celebrated, Japanese-Swiss artist, based in Berlin. Originally from Tsu in Mie Prefecture, Japan, Ikemura studied painting in Seville, Spain before relocating to Switzerland and then Germany. She has won prestigious prizes in Germany, Switzerland and Japan.

Ikemura's first exhibition in the UK, *Usagi in Wonderland*, includes painting, drawing, sculpture and photography spanning three decades of her career. The exhibition demonstrates the connectivity of nature – human, animal, plant or mineral – in an eternal circle of life, death and renewal.

On display in the Sainsbury Centre Sculpture Park from November 2021, Ikemura's *Usagi Kannon* represents compassion and hope. The sculpture was produced in response to the Tōhoku earthquake and Fukushima nuclear accident of 2011.

[Anticlockwise from left]

Yellowscape

2020

Tempera and oil on jute

Courtesy Studio Ikemura

The stillness of this enigmatic work evokes a sense of drama and suspense. Embryonic figures gather at the edge of a pool, eerily illuminated by a golden yellow light. Influenced by East Asian 'sansuiga' painting traditions, the contours of Ikemura's landscape are suggested by thin washes of colour, loose brushwork, and areas of blank or unworked canvas. Mirroring the flat white oval shape in the foreground, a cloud floats in the sky, creating an opening in the composition.

Berlin Horizon I

2012

Tempera and oil on jute

Courtesy Studio Ikemura

GIRLS

Ikemura's paintings and drawings from the 1990s explore the uncertainty of childhood – an innocent yet malleable period of human development – through images of what she describes as the 'girl'. Sensitive yet defiant, Ikemura's girls challenge artistic conventions and disrupt social norms.

Inspired by Japanese images of ghosts, Ikemura's girls hover weightlessly above the earth and are set against brightly coloured grounds. Ikemura enjoys the idea that these spirits can move between worlds, as if bridging our dreaming and waking states.

In contrast to her ethereal figures, Ikemura also depicts heavy-limbed, ghostly female forms that possess animal or plant-like characteristics. Lacking a head or facial features, these creatures present an alternative to the idealised version of female beauty that is celebrated in mainstream contemporary culture.

**Standing in
Turquoise-Blue
(Watteau Figure)**

1992-93

Oil on jute

Courtesy Studio Ikemura

French Rococo painter, Jean-Antoine Watteau (1684–1721) is known for his erotic depictions of finely dressed, attractive, young women. In this work, Ikemura rejects Watteau's classical proportions and conventional standards of female beauty. Instead she presents an alternative reading of the female form that seeks to confound the viewer's expectations.

“Did you know that field hares have no fears?
They are known as masters of eroticism, but not as strategists.
They spring joyfully here and there,

Always changing directions.
They spring from border to border
And break the established linear system.”

Standing Figure II

1991

Tempera on canvas

Courtesy Studio Ikemura

Moo

1993

Oil and tempera on canvas

Courtesy Studio Ikemura

Animal characteristics, such as lengthened arms, pricked ears, snouts and monocular vision can be observed in Ikemura’s early paintings of girls. She described her early motif as a ‘cephalopod’ [a cuttlefish or squid-like creature], which gradually morphed into a girl.

Untitled

1993-94

Oil on canvas

Courtesy Studio Ikemura

Untitled

1994

Oil on canvas

Courtesy Studio Ikemura

Untitled

1993

Oil on nettle

Courtesy Studio Ikemura

Untitled

1993-94

Oil on canvas

Courtesy Studio Ikemura

Figure in Blue

1996

Oil on canvas

Private collection, Cologne/Germany

Figure in Ochre

1996

Oil on canvas

Private collection, Cologne/Germany

Figure in Flaming

Red

1996

Oil on canvas

Private collection, Cologne/Germany

Landing

1998-99

Oil on jute
Private collection

In the mid-1990s Ikemura experimented with the horizon line in her 'Black Paintings', enjoying the way a band of luminosity created space from within the canvas. She found that the connection between the human figure and the horizon manifested a 'fourth-dimension'.

DRAWINGS

“Drawing quickly, you learn to grasp the essence of the human figure; it allows you to capture something before the mind intervenes.”

Leiko Ikemura

In Ikemura's drawings of girls, the female form becomes fragmented and the theme of the void emerges. She explores the concept of this emptiness through openings and holes in the human body. In some works, she presents the solitary female form as a headless, hollow trunk, while in others a grieving child presses her looping arms into the sockets of her eyes, self-wounding. Ikemura appreciates how the unconscious mind is revealed through the rapid process of drawing, and values the immediacy and honesty that this medium facilitates.

[Case 1]

Girl in Yellow

1995

Watercolour on paper

Courtesy Studio Ikemura

Girl

1995

Watercolour on paper

Courtesy Studio Ikemura

Girl in Yellow

1995

Watercolour on paper

Courtesy Studio Ikemura

[Case 2]

Untitled

1995

Charcoal and pastel on paper

Courtesy Studio Ikemura

Untitled

1995

Charcoal and pastel on paper

Courtesy Studio Ikemura

Untitled

1995

Charcoal and pastel on paper

Courtesy Studio Ikemura

Untitled

1995

Charcoal and pastel on paper

Courtesy Studio Ikemura

With Blue Miko in

Black

1997

Oil on canvas

Collection of the artist

Alone in the dark, a girl protectively holds a blue cat close to her chest. The choice of the Japanese word 'miko' in the title, meaning 'shrine maiden' or 'spiritual medium', suggests that the animal possesses a supernatural or psychic connection with the female figure. Ikemura had a cat named Miko, and this work may depict the artist with her pet.

SECTION 2

FIGURATIVE VESSELS

Intensifying her artistic practice in the 1990s, Ikemura began to experiment with unfired clay and glazed terracotta. She discovered that her 'new-born' ceramic figures developed out of the simple idea of a vase. Described as 'vessels of being', her sculptures combined animal and architectural characteristics with those of the human body. These vessels contain a mysterious energy and exercise a commanding presence.

"Sculpture is based on the artist's bodily awareness, meaning that rather than using your hands, it's more like altering an object with your whole body. When you use clay, the changes and fluidity of the material can be understood through your body."

Leiko Ikemura

[Theatre from left to right]

Yellow Figure with Three Arms

1996/2019

Patinated bronze

Courtesy Studio Ikemura

In this work, an introverted figure presses its three tentacle-like arms into the cavities of its mouth and eyes. “The sensory organs, the eyes and mouth, are sensitive ‘wounds’ in the form of a hole. They function as permeable ‘places’ that connect the self with the external world.”

Leiko Ikemura

White Figure with Blue Miko

1996

Glazed terracotta

Courtesy Studio Ikemura

A headless body cradles a small animal maternally in its arms. The absence of a head may suggest that intuition and emotion should supplant the rational calculations of the mind.

Yellow Hare

1994

Glazed terracotta

Courtesy Studio Ikemura

Hares and rabbits (*usagi*) often appear in Ikemura’s work and are used to convey a message of hope. In Ikemura’s sculptures, the hare represents spring, fertility and rebirth.

Standing

1995

Glazed terracotta

Courtesy Studio Ikemura

Tower III

1991

Glazed terracotta

Courtesy Studio Ikemura

Column II

1990

Glazed terracotta

Collection of the artist

Rows of moulded female breasts encircle this phallic structure, combining architectural and biological elements. The column is topped with a stamen-like protrusion that resembles a pair of rabbit ears.

Single-Eyed

Baby

1994

Glazed terracotta

Courtesy Studio Ikemura

Doubled

1998

Glazed terracotta

Courtesy Studio Ikemura

In this branching figure of a girl, the splitting and doubling of the human form may refer to the artist's evolving sense of self:

"In my life there has been a series of radical breaks, it was as though I wanted to acquire a new identity each time."

Leiko Ikemura

Sitting

1995

Glazed terracotta

Courtesy Studio Ikemura

Fuji-Animals

2012

Glazed terracotta

Courtesy Leiko Ikemura and Galerie Karsten Greve, St Moritz Paris

Rock transforms into living creatures in this work inspired by Japan's archetypal mountain, Fuji-san. Regarded as a sacred peak and a symbol of immortality, Ikemura depicts the mountain generating new forms of life.

[Installation with projection]

Memento Mori

2013/18

Patinated bronze

Courtesy Studio Ikemura

Ice Water

2019

Film

Courtesy Studio Ikemura

This haunting image of fragility offers the viewer a stark reminder of the impermanence of life. In Ikemura's work, death is not viewed as an ending but rather an intrinsic part of nature's on-going transformation.

SECTION 3

[Middle wall, left to right]

Tree

2013-14

Tempera on jute

Courtesy Studio Ikemura

LANDSCAPES

Produced between 2010 and 2020, Ikemura's landscapes possess a disquieting visionary quality. Rocky outcrops morph into human faces and trees grow out from the skulls of sleeping heads. In these works, human existence is fully integrated with the natural rhythms of the universe, wherein forms of life come into being, culminate, diminish and disperse. Using startling imagery, Ikemura reiterates her view on immortality: death is a new beginning and is present in everything.

Her atmospheric paintings from this period depict desolate mountain scenes, made permeable by craters and lakes, sparsely populated with otherworldly figures that emerge and disintegrate in an ongoing process of transformation. Central to these works are the themes of environmental fragility, transience and slow evolutionary change.

[Right-side wall, from left to right]

PV-Scape II

2011

Pastel on paper

Courtesy Studio Ikemura

PV-Scape III

2011

Pastel on paper

Courtesy Studio Ikemura

PV-Scape I

2011

Pastel on paper

Courtesy Studio Ikemura

[West-facing barrier glass sculpture, from left to right]

Cat

2020

Cast glass

Courtesy Studio Ikemura

When the coronavirus pandemic forced Ikemura to cancel an artist's residency in Murano, Venice – the centre of Italy's glass production – she began to experiment with cast glass at her studio in Germany. Observing how the glass captured and contained light within the body of her sculptures, Ikemura was filled with a sense of hope.

“Usually a sculpture is heavier and weighty in the presence of figuration, but the transparency of glass is fascinating.... you feel the contents of light.”

Leiko Ikemura

**Yellow Figure
With Hummingbird**

2020

Cast glass

Courtesy Studio Ikemura

Sleep II

2020

Cast glass

Courtesy Studio Ikemura

[Right-side wall]

Sinus Spring triptych

2018

Tempera on jute

Courtesy Studio Ikemura

Ikemura presents a dynamic landscape of undulating hollows and hills in this triptych. Fragmented female bodies are suddenly brought into focus at the edges of the canvas. Mysterious figures emerge from the water, the earth and the rocks, as if having been born from the land

itself. Ikemura's palette of vibrant, fresh colours imbues this blossoming scene of genesis with an intense dream-like quality.

[Left-side wall]

Zarathustra III

2014

Tempera and oil on jute

Collection Tress

The title of this painting is inspired by Friedrich Nietzsche's (1844–1900) novel *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1885). The book encourages self-realisation and self-mastery, reminding the reader to embrace life's events and experiences.

Red Tree

2013

Tempera on jute

Courtesy Studio Ikemura

"The calmness at twilight:
Things slowly lose their
Function in its light and
Simply begin to exist"

[Left-side wall]

"Everything my body
Remembers is older than

Any form of memory
And my hands are
Archaeologists”

Trees out of Head

2015/20

Patinated bronze

Courtesy Studio Ikemura

[East-facing barrier photography]

Flower series

2009/21

Black and white photographs on baryta paper

Courtesy Studio Ikemura

Recalling the Dutch still-life genre of ‘vanitas’, the decomposition of the flowers’ organic matter in these black and white photographs symbolises the ephemeral nature of life.

“I have for years now been photographing these ‘broken flowers’; transience comes to the fore in them. For me, there is no such thing as death. There is infinity, a never-ending metamorphosis of form. Which is why these flowers have such beauty and seem so sculptural. The drier they are, the more they change into something different.”

Leiko Ikemura

SCULPTURE PARK

[from November 2021]

Usagi Kannon

2012/2019

Patinated bronze

Courtesy Studio Ikemura

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