

Boundaries of the Real: Yuka Mori's Organic Paintings

Art 1 Jul



Ghost like hover (162mm×112mm), Japanese paper, Mineral pigment, Wood panel, 2024

Interview by Katherine Elliott

Yuka Mori is an artist based in Kyoto who works, for the most part, with mineral pigments and Japanese paper as well as domestic objects and textiles. Her subject matter consists of fluid depictions of flowers and plants, of solitary figures and multiplicitous human subjects.

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Attending Kyoto's University of the Arts before studying abroad at Beaux-Arts as an exchange student. These academic playgrounds acted as hubs of artistic inspiration, laying down the foundation for much of her future work.

In what may be considered a tale as old as time, artists across generations have grappled with depicting nature and finding their own place within it. In works like *Layer* (2025), *Floating* (2025) and *After Dreams* (2024), bodies take the forms of leaves or budding flowers, meld with lamp-like reeds or mirror the posture of saplings. Yuka commented that at times she felt as though the body was "like a prison, and I felt suffocated by the fact that I could not escape from my own body." Yet the merging of body and nature in her works, of interior and exterior worlds, finds strength in this ambiguity. Rather than an individual being confined to the body, Yuka depicts her humanesque subjects as being part of a greater ecosystem, connected to the sentient elements of the natural world. The ill defined is not a source of confusion, but a means of agency and self-expression.



Metamorphosis (410mm×242mm×20mm), Japanese paper, Mineral pigment, Wood panel, 2024

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Uninhibited by the constraints of a single medium, Yuka works with textiles, Japanese paper and hanging scrolls to name just a few. Furthermore, her collaborations with craftspeople, such as Tachiiri Kōwado, a Kyoto-based mounting artisan, reflect the breadth of knowledge and wide ranging influences that inform her artistic practice. Indeed the significance of such collaborations encourages viewers to question their preconceived notions of what “art” is. Yuka chooses not to limit herself to specific “schools” or genres, citing Buddhist art, traditional Japanese architecture and American video artist Bill Viola as influences. In this way, caught between tradition and modernity, Yuka’s oeuvre is a lesson in anthropomorphism. Boundaries and inspirations are blurred, representing Yuka Mori’s vision of the “real”.

Phantasy was lucky enough to hear Yuka’s thoughts on everything from her creative process to the epiphanic power of art.

My name is Yuka Mori. I’m currently based in Kyoto, where I create paintings using traditional Japanese materials. *Nihonga* (Japanese painting) is created by using pigments made from natural minerals as well as animal glue made from hide. They are painted either on *washi* (Japanese paper) or silk, but I primarily work on *washi*.

I never had a strong, conscious desire to become an artist. I simply enjoyed drawing, and since my parents also liked art, it felt natural for me to attend an art university. What made me strongly want to continue creating was, first and foremost, my love for making things. And when I studied abroad in France, I felt that all the students at the art university there had a strong determination to continue their artistic practice. I also found it enjoyable to connect with different people and spark conversations through my own work.

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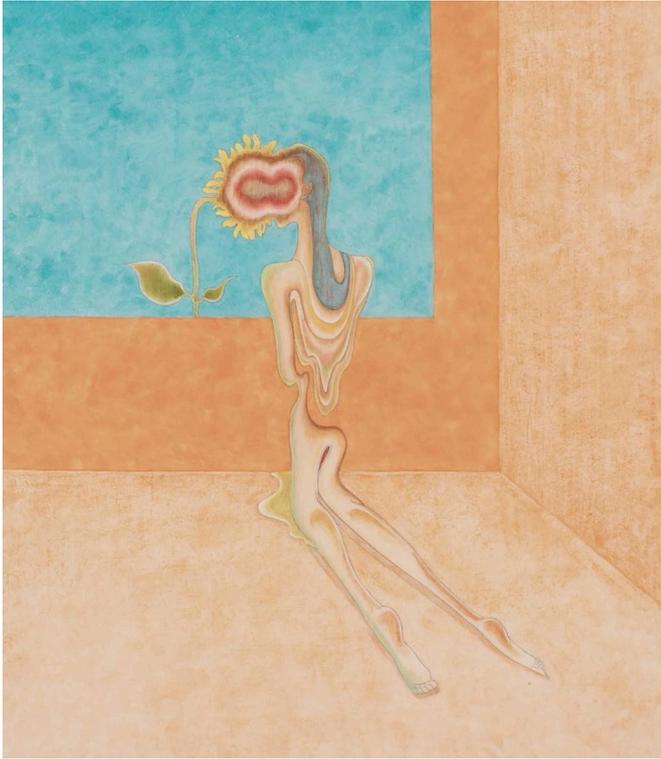
Moon (530×410mm), Japanese paper, Mineral pigment, Wood panel, 2024

I would say the person who has influenced me the most is probably Noboru Yasuda, through his books. Reading his work helped me clarify the themes I want to explore, particularly the relationship between the body and its environment.

As for artists, I would say Bill Viola. My parents took me to one of his exhibitions when I was in junior high school. I still vividly remember the videos of people merging with elements like water and fire projected on large screens, and the slow-moving images of figures reflected in rippling water. I didn't know why, but I was deeply drawn to them even then. Looking back now, I realise that my long-standing fascination makes sense—my interests lie in the relationship between the body and the environment, and in their fluid nature. I feel that his video works have had a real influence on my own.

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Summer Moment (318mm×410mm), Japanese paper, Mineral pigment, 2023

My work has always been about imagining the relationship between the body and the environment, more recently, especially with plants.

I've always been interested in the body, partly because I originally loved dance. At one point, however, I began to feel like my body was a kind of prison, and I felt suffocated by the fact that I couldn't escape from it. But then, the idea occurred to me that maybe the boundaries of the body are actually ambiguous. Maybe the body is connected to other things, or something more expansive. That thought brought me a great sense of relief.

Since then, I've been painting images of bodies dissolving into the world like mist, or bodies connecting with one another: figures that could be seen as two people, or just one. In the past three years or so, I've also developed an interest in plant structures. I've started drawing works that connect humans and plants, or dissolve the boundaries between plants themselves.

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underdrawing of the same size as the final piece. I then trace this underdrawing onto *washi* paper mounted on a wooden panel, going over the lines with fine ink. After that, I begin colouring it with pigments. Even if I have a colour palette in mind at the start, the colours often change as I work.

— Yuka Mori

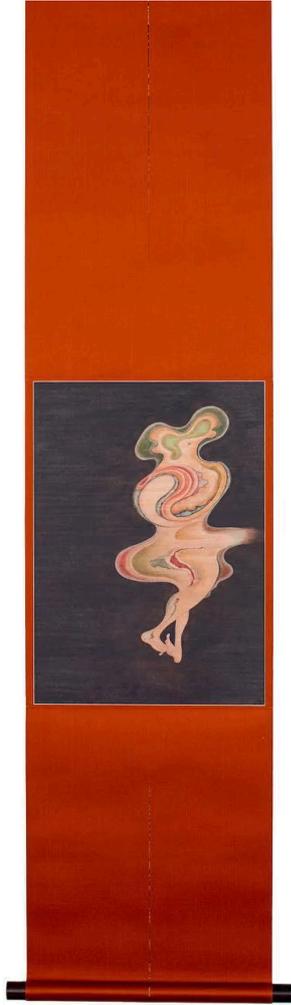
At first, I started using these materials simply out of curiosity; I just wanted to try them. Japanese painting pigments are made from a wide range of materials: there are mineral pigments made from ground stone, *gofun* made from seashells, metallic pigments like *kindei* and gold leaf, and ink made from soot.

Each material reflects light differently, and I feel that the coexistence of these varied textures within a single painting creates a sense of reality that mirrors the world I live in. Once I experienced that feeling, I came to love these pigments and have continued to use them ever since. I also find the colours of mineral pigments incredibly beautiful.

There are many types of *washi* paper, too, but I prefer its texture when pigments are applied, especially compared to silk.

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Ghost Like Whisper (318mm×410mm), Japanese paper, Mineral pigment, Hanging scroll, 2023

Yuka: In traditional *Nihonga*, there has long been a style of painting birds and flowers, known as *kachōga*, as well as landscape paintings created to surround a space, such as those found on sliding doors [*fusuma-e*]. By turning the scenery outside the home into art and bringing it indoors, I feel that the boundary between inside [*uchi*] and outside [*soto*] becomes blurred.

In traditional Japanese houses, the boundary between indoors and outdoors was often just a paper sliding door [*fusuma*], and spaces like the *engawa* [a kind of veranda or hallway] were themselves ambiguous, neither clearly inside nor outside.

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insulation, creating spaces where the separation between inside and outside is clearly defined. I feel that these ambiguous spaces, now largely forgotten, once evoked a kind of bodily awareness or physicality that we've lost in the present day.

While my paintings are not realistic, and I'm not consciously trying to adhere to traditional styles, by painting plants and imagining my works displayed inside homes, such as in hanging scroll format, I'm trying to reintroduce a sense of that ambiguity and embodied sensibility that has long existed in Japanese culture.



Midnight Stroll (1167mm×803mm), Japanese paper, Mineral pigment, Wood panel, 2024

It depends on the clothes, but if the theme or the shape of the clothes is fixed, I try to find a painting that allows me to use my find my own expression that still fits within these constraints.

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what would happen if I added my drawing to it, and it was completed. It was decided that the shape of the drawing would be the dress as it was, so by setting the constraint of drawing an organic body in a nearly circular shape, I was able to create a form that was different from my usual drawings, which was interesting. This is one of the joys of collaborating with clothing.



YOHEI OHNO x Yuka Mori

Mounting a painting as a *kakejiku* (hanging scroll) is, of course, one way to display a work, but for me, it holds deeper meaning than that.

A *kakejiku* is traditionally framed with fabric known as *kireji*, which surrounds the painting. By selecting types of *kireji* that resonate with the theme or seasonal atmosphere of the work, the overall impression of the piece can be heightened, and a sense of narrative can emerge.

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they look at my paintings and suggest interesting *kiirei* options, so it feels less like a standard craft service and more like a collaborative process between the painting and the scroll. While *hyōgushi* are craftsmen, I also think of them as stylists, dressing the artwork, so to speak, with the appropriate clothing.



Chit Chat, Japanese paper, Mineral pigment, Hanging scroll, 2023

If we interpret the nature depicted in my paintings as referring to plants, then for me, they represent an ideal: beings with a different kind of physicality from humans, and something I admire.

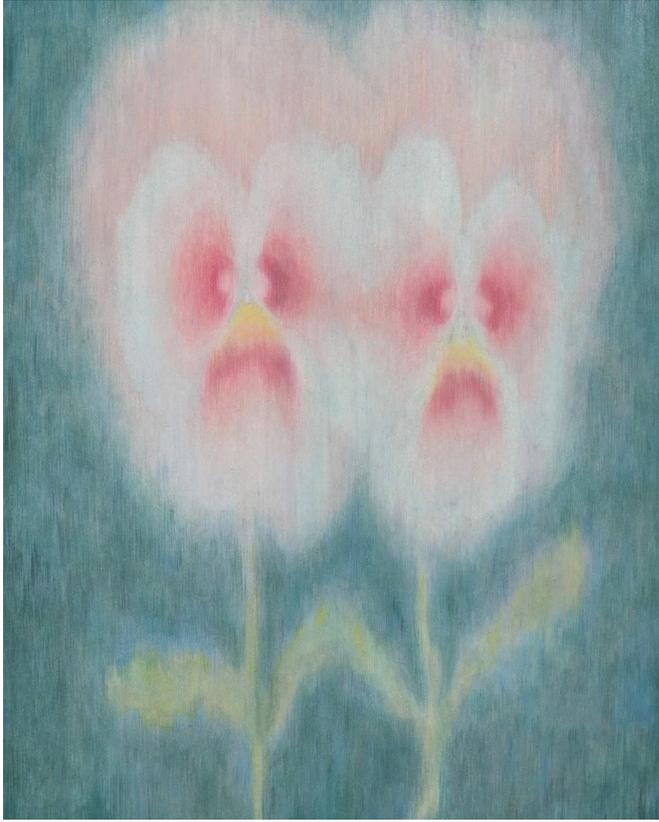
According to the biologist Shigeo Miki, plants have a structure that is “like the human intestinal tract turned inside out and pulled outward.” When I heard that, it made me think of plants as entities that are constantly connected to their environment, without clear boundaries.

That idea aligned perfectly with the kind of world I want to express in my work, which is why I’ve increasingly started to include plants in my paintings.

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Perhaps, in my mind, I see them as something that exists between humans and plants. The name "pansy" is said to come from the French word *pensée*, meaning "to think," and there's a story that their faces are seen as those of people deep in thought.



Distant View of Twilight (53cm×41cm), Japanese paper, Mineral pigment, Wood panel, 2024

Of course, since I use *Nihonga* techniques to depict plants, I think it's only natural that my work is compared to the *Rinpa* school. I often use parts of the *tarashikomi* technique [applying a second layer of paint before the first layer is dry], which was employed by *Rinpa* artists. My work isn't realistic either; instead, I tend to deform shapes or extract certain elements of plants in my depiction. In that sense, too, I feel there are definite points of connection with *Rinpa*.

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YUKA MORI. He's already passed away, but his work conveys a profound sense of spirituality. His paintings are not explanatory, but when you stand before them, they prompt you to reflect on fundamental questions: what it means to be human, what it means to live.



Ripple (116cm×80cm) Japanese paper, Mineral pigment, Wood, 2024

When it comes to my favourite, I've always loved the picture book *My Dress (Watashi no One-piece)* since I was a child.

In the story, the rabbit protagonist makes a dress out of white cloth. When she wears it and goes to a flower field, the dress takes on a floral pattern. When it rains, the dress changes to match the raindrops... In each scene, the dress blends into the surrounding landscape.

I've always admired that world where the rabbit effortlessly merges with her surroundings through the dress.