

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

kaba ni yu wo heru

Solo exhibition by Ai Yamaguchi

14 April – 28 May 2023

Vernissage in the presence of Ai Yamaguchi (artist): Friday, 14 April 2023, 5pm – 8pm



Mizuma Gallery is pleased to announce *kaba ni yu wo heru*, a solo exhibition by Ai Yamaguchi.

Japanese artist Ai Yamaguchi is known for her fictitious world based on the lives of young female courtesans working in a teahouse on a mountain ridge during Japan’s Edo Period. Her first solo exhibition in Singapore, *kaba ni yu wo heru*, features recent works based on Japanese *tanka* poetry. There exist countless Japanese poems that express human emotions in an intimate, almost palpable manner, defined by the rhythm of 31 characters (syllables), and with a lyrical quality that still appeals to us today. To her, reading through these 31 syllables really feels as if watching 31 leaves flutter down one after another. These words, as they fly by one by one, are keen enough to salvage us, but they are also sharp enough to slash us. This applies to any situation in any age, and nowadays, according to the number of means of communication, a single word may either bring peace or start a war. The experience of randomly catching a word in passing that instantly makes us feel happy or sad, is one that every human has probably encountered at least once. In such situations, the letters that we read or hear, seem to linger around us while flexibly changing their appearance.

It is the way that such “letters” form words, which are then communicated in the form and rhythm of poems, that intrigued Ai Yamaguchi. Tracing back the history of letters and their original meanings inspires her to create paintings that illustrate how humans are unconsciously guided by the power of letters. The artworks shown in this exhibition are based on the idea of how poems function as continuous chains of words, and how words are aggregations of letters that only make sense together.

kaba ni yu wo heru, a solo exhibition by Ai Yamaguchi, runs from 14 April to 28 May 2023 at Mizuma Gallery, 22 Lock Road #01-34 Gillman Barracks, Singapore 108939. The gallery will open from 11am-7pm on Tuesdays to Saturdays, and 11am-6pm on Sundays. The gallery will be closed on Mondays and Public Holidays.

In conjunction with the launch of the exhibition, an opening reception in the presence of Ai Yamaguchi (artist) will be held on Friday, 14 April 2023, from 5pm to 8pm. This event is free admission, and is open to public. To register your attendance and to meet the artist in person, please RSVP at info@mizuma.sg by Thursday, 13 April 2023.

A digital publication featuring images of the artworks and a note written by the artist about her artworks will be available on www.mizuma.sg.

Text: © Ai Yamaguchi and Mizuma Gallery.

About the Artist



Ai Yamaguchi (b. 1977 in Tokyo, Japan) established the group “ninyu works” in 1995 after entering Joshibi University of Art and Design, Department of Design and Crafts in 1995. Her works feature a unique support material below the picture surface, and are expressed with supple and delicately-drawn lines, often depicting women who live as ladies of the night in a teahouse on a mountain ridge, known as the *touge no ochaya*. Taking as her model the culture and customs of the Edo period, she accedes to the legacy of various forms of Japanese beauty from *rinpa* art to classical *waka* poetry. In doing so, she continually searches after a unique kind of ideal beauty: a renewed iteration of the classical Japanese form of paintings of beautiful women or *bijinga*. Her works have gained widespread acclaim both within Japan and internationally. Significant exhibitions in recent years include “*Kamisaka Sekka: Dawn of Modern Japanese Design*” (Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia, 2012), “*The Grand Kojiki Exhibition - Feelings and words handed down from past generations to the future*” (Nara Prefectural Museum of Art, Japan, 2014), Meiji Jingu Forest Festival Art “*Shikansuiyo - Beautiful Forest and Nature*” (Meiji Jingu Museum, Tokyo, Japan, 2020) and solo show “*yamaai no uta*” (Mizuma Art Gallery, Tokyo, Japan, 2022). Ai Yamaguchi lives and works in Tokyo, Japan.



Ai Yamaguchi, *kaba ni yu wo heru*, 2023, persimmon tannin and acrylic on wood (old cedar door), 180 × 825 cm
photography by Miyajima Kei © ai yamaguchi · ninyu works, courtesy of the artist and Mizuma Gallery

About the folding screen work “kaba ni yu wo heru”

“This is based on the “Iroha”, the first three letters of the versified Japanese alphabet. The Iroha is a poem in which each of the 47 syllables in the Japanese alphabet appears one time only, and that has been recited throughout Japanese history without ever clarifying the mystery of its originator, purpose and time of creation. Vaguely defined until around the Edo period, its seven-five-syllable meter was later applied in Buddhist poems expressing the joy of entering Nirvana, before the Iroha was formally established as a recitable poem for calligraphy use.

While being of practical use, the Iroha’s content is still a riddle that has been interpreted in different ways, and it is today recited in various rather playful renditions.

Aware of this fact, I attempted to write my own Iroha, whereas the challenge and the trickiness of having to convey one’s message in the seven-five-syllable meter, and without using the same syllable twice, struck me as one entertaining point. So I decided to write a poem that suggests the most unintelligible of sceneries.

*Na-ku-shi-ta ko-i ka (A lost love)
A-me fu-ra-se-re-ba (If I could make it rain)
Ke-mu-ri no yo-u ni (Like smoke)
Ho-so-i su-mi-tsu-yu (The thin dew of ink)
Ya-ma ne-ro to e wo (A vision of the mountains asleep)
O-mo-wa-sa-nu hi he (Over days unimagined)
Ki-e-te chi-ru (And fading away)*

The meter here is not the basic seven-five-syllable meter of tanka poetry, but I deliberately chose a composition of seven-syllable lines. There exists an expression, “toganakute shisu,” that resulted from cutting up the Iroha into blocks of seven syllables each, and then lining up the last syllables of these blocks. It has been interpreted as referring to “a man dying after being falsely accused,” which further stresses the Iroha’s inscrutability. So I tried the same with my poem, and got the phrase “kabaniyuwoheru.” This does of course make no sense at all, but while looking for (Chinese) kanji characters that I could apply, for “kaba” I found the character 栴, which is also read “momiji” (“autumn leaves”) in Japanese. The character is a Japanese variant of the Chinese 栴 and both combine the characters for tree (木) and “flower” (華/花). From this I gathered that the idea behind the word “momiji” was to express how, in autumn, the leaves of trees change their colors to look like flowers.

In other words, through my unintentionally composed poem, I learned about how the word “momiji” came into being.

[In the painting, I chose to depict cherry blossoms in honor of the original Iroha as a poem dedicated to the lifetime of a blossoming flower.]”

– Ai Yamaguchi, 2023



Ai Yamaguchi, *ha no ura*, 2023, porcelain, 71 × 70 × 1 cm

photography by Miyajima Kei © ai yamaguchi · ninyu works, courtesy of the artist and Mizuma Gallery

About the ceramic tile work “ha no ura”

“This work depicts a transformation that occurs in a girl, from the inside out, after hearing a certain poem. I made it based on the idea of something that was originally one picture, which then broke into pieces that eventually got buried and lost, and that were then discovered and unearthed after a long time, and the work was restored based on memories of the original picture. After discovering a shard that had been buried in a nearby park, and seeing ancient ceramic vessels at museums, which were reconstructed by anticipating their designs from single unearthed fragments, I became interested in the way fragments of things stir our imagination. This inspired me to create works like this one.”

– Ai Yamaguchi, 2023



Ai Yamaguchi, *hana no atama*, 2023, porcelain, 20.5 × 16 × 2.5 cm
photography by Miyajima Kei © ai yamaguchi · ninyu works, courtesy of the artist and Mizuma Gallery

About Mizuma Gallery

Executive Director Sueo Mizuma established Mizuma Art Gallery in Tokyo in 1994. Since its opening in Gillman Barracks, Singapore in 2012, the gallery aims for the promotion of East Asian artists in the region as well as the introduction of Southeast Asian artists to the international art scene. From 2014 to 2019, the artist residency space Rumah Kijang Mizuma operated in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, providing a new platform for dialogue by supporting exchanges between East Asia and Southeast Asia. In 2018, Mizuma & Kips opened in New York, as a shared collaboration between Mizuma Gallery from Tokyo and Singapore, and Kips Gallery from New York.

About Gillman Barracks

Set in a former military barracks dating back to 1936 and surrounded by lush tropical greenery, the Gillman Barracks visual arts cluster was launched in September 2012. Gillman Barracks' vision is to be Asia's destination for the presentation and discussion of international and Southeast Asian art. Today, Gillman Barracks is a place for art lovers, art collectors, and those curious about art. The cluster is a focal point of Singapore's arts landscape, and anchors the development of visual art in the region and beyond.

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Gallery hours:
Tue-Sat: 11am-7pm
Sun: 11am-6pm
Closed on Mondays &
Public Holidays

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