







Portrait of Takako Yamaguchi, pencil on paper by Phong H. Bui.

# TAKAKO YAMAGUCHI with Leah Ollman

Takako Yamaguchi is a painter based in Los Angeles. Her imagery derives from multiple sources across time and geography, including Art Deco ornamentation, kimono designs, Japanese screen painting, and twentieth-century photographs of the female nude. Whether painting stylized seascapes or zoomed-in self-portraits, she favors an exacting, labor-intensive approach that honors the inefficiency of meticulous care.

---

*Innocent Bystander*  
Ortuzar  
April 11–May 31, 2025  
New York

---

*MOCA Focus: Takako Yamaguchi*  
The Museum of Contemporary Art  
June 29–March 1, 2026  
Los Angeles

---

Born in Okayama, Japan in 1952, Yamaguchi studied at Bates College and received her MFA from the University of California, Santa Barbara. Her work has been included in multiple important exhibitions: the 2024 Whitney Biennial, *With Pleasure: Pattern and Decoration in American Art 1972–1985*, and *Ordinary People: Photorealism and the Work of Art since 1968*, among others. *MOCA Focus: Takako Yamaguchi*, the artist's first solo museum show in Los Angeles, will open on June 29, accompanied by her first publication. In late April, she joined Leah Ollman on the New Social Environment (#1217) for a conversation about process, appropriation, and her wry deviation from the trends of any given moment.

**Leah Ollman (RAIL):** I first saw your paintings about twenty years ago, and have been an avid follower ever since. One of the things that's been so interesting in experiencing your work over the years is that it has never unfolded chronologically for me. Every time I see a new series of paintings, it seems I also get introduced to an older series. So there's this fantastic looping and zigzagging and recursion in the experience that echoes the recursive patterns in the paintings themselves. Whether I'm looking at new work or older work, I'm always surprised by it. I'm always taken by the rigor and the astonishing beauty and the integrity within the dissonance, the complexity and also humor.

Your upcoming show at MOCA will feature your most recent paintings, and the show up now at Ortuzar in New York features five paintings on

paper from a series called "Innocent Bystander" that you made in the late 1980s. I think these two shows make good bookends, and I want to start by talking about the work at Ortuzar because this series is a great introduction to your syncretic sensibility—especially the different ways you approach space and represent different kinds of space within the confines of a single painting.

In these paintings, there are fully modeled figures borrowed from a book of nudes by Lucas Cranach the Elder, and each figure is situated off to the bottom or to one side in a shallow, dark area. There's also the receding landscape seen from a slightly elevated position. Additionally, there are these droplets bounding across the surface, not really interacting with anything else in scale or related to anything that we know about. There are all sorts of ornamental patterns, curling scroll-like shapes and scalloped borders. There are also splotches of paint that are spatially indeterminate and very raw. I think these are how you started each painting. Can you talk about the different modes within each painting? How much are you interested in harmonizing? How much do you want to create friction?

**T.Y.** The one painting in the show without nude figures, *Le Temps Mêle #6* (1984), immediately preceded the "Innocent Bystander" series with the Lucas Cranach figures. This painting has blotchy areas that recall my appeal to the dialectic of order and chaos. I start by gridding all these surfaces with five-and-half-inch squares. So I grid the surface of these large papers, and then on top of that, I spill and then push around the liquid paint mixed with metal pigment so that it makes a kind of marbling form. Then I kind of slush them around so it looks like blots of some sort. Sometimes I just pick interesting forms, and figures come from there. Then I lay the bronze leaf down and after that I paint over it. That's how the painting was done.

All this time I have been using decorative motifs that I took from different places, and that kind of

came with me to the next series. Some themes were recurring, others were kind of abandoned in the course of different periods. Between this painting in 1984 and when I came back, I had a brief period of family crisis in Japan. I was in Japan for a year and a half, and I could not paint. When I resettled in Los Angeles, that's when I did the Lucas Cranach series. At the time, I wanted to put some figures in the paintings. The Cranach book is something a friend of mine gave me in Paris. It's full of very strange nude figures by Lucas Cranach the Elder. So I wanted to incorporate some of the figures with my landscape. That's how it started.

**RAIL** I want to talk to you about those figures, because there's Eve, there's Venus, there's some nymphs, but they're all missing the kind of signifiers that identify who they are in the narrative that they originally belonged to. One has a dagger. One originally had a fig leaf—they read less as these individual characters, that is, than as kind of generic Western nudes. And you've talked about your use of these figures as being kind of irresponsible. What do you mean by that?

**T.Y.** Oh, what I meant was the choice of subject matter. I thought it was so nonchalant because I happened to have this book, so I used it. It was more like a permission to kind of poke around. It was interesting just looking at these very strange figures. So the choices were very nonchalant, but I feel like I'm making up for that irresponsibility with an over-committed painting process. I redeem it with labor, so to speak. Those figures came from biblical stories or other traditions. I did not know exactly which story was what. The male artist who was painting the female nude made everything nude—either it was nymphs, or beautiful figures, or the one who is killing with a dagger. It seemed like they were all being implicated in things they had no control over. It was kind of tongue in cheek, but at the same time, I just thought, well, it's as if they were passive. And I just kind of took the daggers, or anything of that sort and put some other items, like a necklace or some drapes.

**RAIL** That passivity you're referring to leads me to your title for the series, "Innocent Bystander." When I think about it, there's so many things that such a title can refer to—someone on the sidelines; someone who's not fully implicated. Obviously that could be the woman figure in each painting who is separated from the rest, and also kind of emblematic of, as you said, sort of the white woman in history who is not given a lot of agency. But it could also describe us as viewers observing these scenes, and it could also mean you, pulling from histories and traditions that you stand apart from and are considering from the outside.

**T.Y.** Yes. And then here it kind of symbolizes the things I was using. In a sense, it has an East-meets-West tension. *Innocent Bystander #7* (1988) is more classic, and then I put the figure in, oblivious to what's outside. That does not mean she is passive or active, in reality, but that's what I was depicting here.

**RAIL** Can you talk about some of the other elements in the paintings? I have heard other people describe those droplets as sperm.

**T.Y.** Yes, those spermatozoa—I call them that too—they came from a previous series as well. But they can also be understood as something connected to a volcano. So it's both the beginning and





the end. It can be a symbol of germination, or it could be an eruption. But it's kind of looping around the otherwise static, very flat surface.

**RAIL** And in *Le Temps Mêle* #6, the white-ish forms on the left also carry through to a lot of your works.

**T.Y.** It's a kind of generic depiction of water—what water looks like in the collective memory. It probably stems from classic waterfall imagery, which later became increasingly stylized. Take the architecture in my paintings, for instance. They might resemble ancient colonnades, but they're meant to be so vague that the images fall into abstraction. The waterfalls follow that same logic—designed in a way that gestures toward Art Deco styles, yet remains indistinct. And still, people recognize it as “water.” This keeps reappearing in my seascapes.

**RAIL** There's such a mix of contexts. And I just wanted to circle back a little bit to that issue of what you called the “irresponsible use of nudes.” Through the decades of work that you've made, you've borrowed bits and pieces and approaches and styles from so many different places and sources, always taking them out of their original context and putting them in this new, magnificent world that you've made. What makes appropriation responsible or irresponsible?

**T.Y.** Well, at the time when we're coming out of school in the late seventies—I came out of school utterly ignorant of contemporary art. We were all told painting was dead anyway. Postmodernism was happening, but I wasn't too knowledgeable about that, or the movements that came before. The key thing we sensed was a permission to just kind of poke around. It's sort of being promiscuous—you don't have to commit to one thing. That said, once you pick something you get attached to whatever you picked at the time.

**RAIL** You've described your manner of picking things from other art as ambivalent, which is interesting, because in common usage, “ambivalent” tends to be used to signify a kind of apathy, but it's really a duality. It's holding both sides at once.

**T.Y.** Yeah, those columns and things kind of symbolized the classics. I wasn't too clear at the time, though looking back I recognize the tropes of postmodernism. They all had these Greek ruins and that sort of thing juxtaposed with something else. At the time, I felt like just bringing in columns that I saw in an old Italian Renaissance painting and placing them next to a Japanese isometric perspective, with heavily decorative elements—it seems like appropriation, I thought.

**RAIL** I love the unusual detail in *Innocent Bystander* #4 (1988), where that translucent garment becomes stripes and then stripes become the thicker bands of this fantastic ornamental border. This surprised me when I saw it, because so often the different approaches to space and form and representation are adjacent in your work. But this was a rare instance where they formed a continuum; the abstraction and the naturalism were linked.

**T.Y.** Yeah. The graphics, almost like a Chrysler Building kind of ornamentation, I thought would be really interesting—here I used them as waves. So it's almost as if it's a veil, but it's more like the spirit has a source of water coming from her hands, and then it becomes like a trademark, a kind of wave pattern.

**RAIL** It's a really beautiful passage. Let's skip ahead in time and talk about the works that are in this current series. You mentioned that the works that are going to be in the MOCA show are the most recent paintings in the series shown at the Whitney Biennial last year.

**T.Y.** Yes, I started this most recent seascape series in 2021, and it ends with this MOCA show. All in all, I did twenty-five paintings. What makes this series different from the previous ones of my seascapes on canvas? 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.

I had my first show at Ortuzar in 2023. It was ten paintings, all elongated vertical paintings of 60 by 40 inches, and for them all the horizon line is exactly in the middle. In western culture, if something is a so-called landscape, then it's usually a horizontal composition. So I thought it was interesting to do vertical seascapes. And then I did a couple of elongated horizontal works; I just flipped the side, and made it horizontal. Those are smaller—52 by 40 inches, 40 by 52 inches—different shapes which are all in the installation. They all share a collective horizon line that extends across the room. That's how it started.

I had been doing several different series and big paper pieces in the nineties, and then I went back to canvas. I was getting simpler. Then came the order and chaos, you know, the splashy paint—that whole method of painting. When I went to the canvas paintings, I was interested in the interwar period of paintings of the same abstraction. The earlier series and the current works carry the same idea: there is a Wallace Stevens quote from one of his notebooks, “All of our ideas come from the natural world: trees equal umbrellas.” So I was trying to do that in reverse: umbrellas equal trees. I was looking at all sorts of different symbols and graphic designs in commercial places, or other artists' renderings of waves, all sorts of things. I used those graphics—everyone can understand what a wave looks like. And then from there, it's representing the ocean. And then, what is a cloud? So in that same notion, I think of the whole series as abstraction in reverse. That's the logic of the series of seascape paintings.





Takako Yamaguchi, *Innocent Bystander #7*, 1988. Oil and bronze leaf on paper, 72 x 96 inches. Courtesy the artist, Ortuzar, New York and as-is, Los Angeles. © Takako Yamaguchi. Photo: Dario Lasagni.

**RAIL** I know that phrase “abstraction in reverse” came up for you a long time ago.

**T.Y.** Yeah, that’s right.

**RAIL** I’m very interested in what else it means to you. Especially in regard to these paintings, which are so continuous with what you’ve done, but they also do mark a shift. As you said, they’re spatially a lot more unified and a little more distilled.

**T.Y.** Right, and then some of those patterns go way back to my flirtation with the Pattern and Decoration movement. It’s like, already, I see some kind of woven patterns, like braided snakes. And then it’s like a Japanese kimono pattern of waves, graphic wave-looking things that accumulated in my vocabulary. And then, even though I might have used a logo of some commercial company or something, over the years it became part of my vocabulary. So, for instance, these waves on the bottom of *Buckle* (2024) I’ve been doing in slightly different forms—even in the paper pieces. I just kind of pick and choose, and then compose different things over the years. These island forms have been recurring even from the paperworks, but it got less chaotic and more stylized over the years, I think. So chaos is left outside of the canvas, maybe.

**RAIL** The primary gesture that occupies the center of this series of paintings reminds me a lot of something else that I see in your vocabulary, which is a representation of fasteners or

closures or connectors—buttons, belts, weaves, stitching, zippers, buckles, braids—all of these are technologies of assembly. So I start thinking, you know, there’s the association of the stitch and the painted mark. There’s also the labor involved in creating or assembling the composition built from all these disparate parts. And then there’s also the connection to the importance of tying and wrapping in Japanese dress and culture. Am I far afield? Or do some of these things play into this vocabulary?

**T.Y.** It’s not intentional, but, over the years, so many things come up within the viewers interpretation. It is true, however, I was really interested in engaging in female domesticity, which, as we were told, is everything related to fabric or braiding or basket weaving. Thus, it’s “females’ work.” So stitching, the beautiful lace making, I’m not so sure how conscious I am with that, but it’s in the vocabulary that I collected over the years.

**RAIL** Speaking of labor and women, you made this incredible series of paintings of your own clothed body in very tightly cropped compositions. I’d love to hear about how you framed the body, generally focusing in on areas that you know we’re not really encouraged to stare at. [Laughter] There’s the chest and the pelvic area across this whole series. Could you talk about why you chose such a tight cropping of that area?

**T.Y.** When I was interested in doing some photorealism, the question was, “What will the subject

be?” I mean, the photorealism started having a different kind of meaning between the time that I was revisiting and when it sort of originated. I was thinking of doing photorealism as a rejection of neo-liberal capitalism: where everything has to be efficient. There was a perverse pleasure in just wasting so much time, and using redundancy, and then fussing over it. But the question of subject matter was very difficult—what should I paint as my photorealism project?

*Untitled (Skirt and Belt)* (2012–17) was my second series of that. I was always interested in fabrics and fashion and clothes. And this has the sense of commerce as well, when you’re looking at online shopping, and then you zoom in on the things and try to see the fabric, even though you can’t really see. But when you’re buying, often the model is wearing the clothes, and you zoom in, and then there is kind of that very close crop.

I wanted to do it with my garment, and then myself. There is a reason that I choose these clothes, either from the thrift shop or my friends gave it to me, and then there is also always some sort of story too. Not that it is just a fabulous, wonderful material itself. It’s more like I pick the pieces that make a good painting, instead of just a nice dress. Also the close cropping—I was more interested in painting the fabric, in a very strange way, even though I was wearing it. Even though I was doing photorealism or representational paintings, it’s a kind of characteristically modernist dialogue between a work of art and its material conditions.





When I'm painting one thread of the fabric, it just kind of goes with the fabric of the canvas, with a ratio of one to one—some of them. That close up is rather fascinating. It was a pretty simple notion of the breast, or showing some of the skin because it gives more of a painterly quality to it. It's not too flat. It's not only the fabric either. There's the notion of my own body or other people's interpretation of it later, which was very wonderful and welcome, and which I did not think of at the time of painting. So when I got reviews or some other people wrote about this series, it was very thoughtful, talking about myself getting old and then looking back—all sorts of different, wonderful poetic things came with it. I had a colder view of it, you know, just fabric and skin and composition. So that recognition of the human element was a really welcome surprise to me.

**RAIL** Well, this dovetails a little with that. I like what you said about how the close cropping brings attention to the individual threads, the individual stitch, and also your meticulous labor in making the surface so exquisite and convincing. They're also larger than life. They're so much larger than life. When I looked back at my notes from seeing this work in 2021, I had written that they were goddess-scaled. There's the reverential detail of the clothes, the labor involved, and they're very humble, but also very grand and elevating the ordinary. Can you talk about this series as a

depiction of a woman's body in relation to the other series you've had which depict women's bodies in a substantially different way, like the Cranach nudes? You also have a series based on photographs of early modernist photographers, and a series called "Smoking Women" that deals a little bit more with, I don't know, kind of femme fatale stereotypes.

**T.Y.** [Laughs] Or passive.

**RAIL** Yeah.

**T.Y.** It's interesting, when I was deciding the size, when I was working on this, I thought I didn't want to do huge scale, or much bigger than this, to avoid the look of Pop art. Nothing wrong with Pop art, but I didn't want that Pop art look of the huge scale, nor did I want to make it very small, to make it just the work itself. Crochet itself is really beautiful, and there are some artists who do very small, meticulous, beautiful crochet works, with a depiction of material as well. But I didn't want to make it really small either. And then at the time, I was—the previous seascapes, when I was using the canvas—I was trying to think, what is a normal medium-size? And at that time, it was just 3 by 4 feet, and that was it. This seemed slightly bigger. I mean, it is bigger. But I like that scale, not too huge like Pop art, but not too, too small. And then 4 by

3 feet was just the right medium-sized painting. That's the way I was thinking then.

**RAIL** Well it's a medium-sized canvas, but because you've zoomed in so close on parts of the body, the body becomes monumental.

**T.Y.** Yes, but I guess I wasn't thinking so much of that whole goddess thing. I think more or less, I just needed this size to have the impact of the conspicuous excess of the labor, and then it had to be a certain size to be convincing, maybe. So I wasn't thinking too much then of the female figure or portrait, or the ideas that came afterwards through other people's noticing, which I welcome.

**RAIL** Well, that's an interesting place to leap back to another series that is also very process driven. And if I understand correctly, you followed a really interesting process in making this series of paintings. You had a model constructed by somebody else according to your specifications, then those models were photographed, and you painted from those photographs. Is that correct?

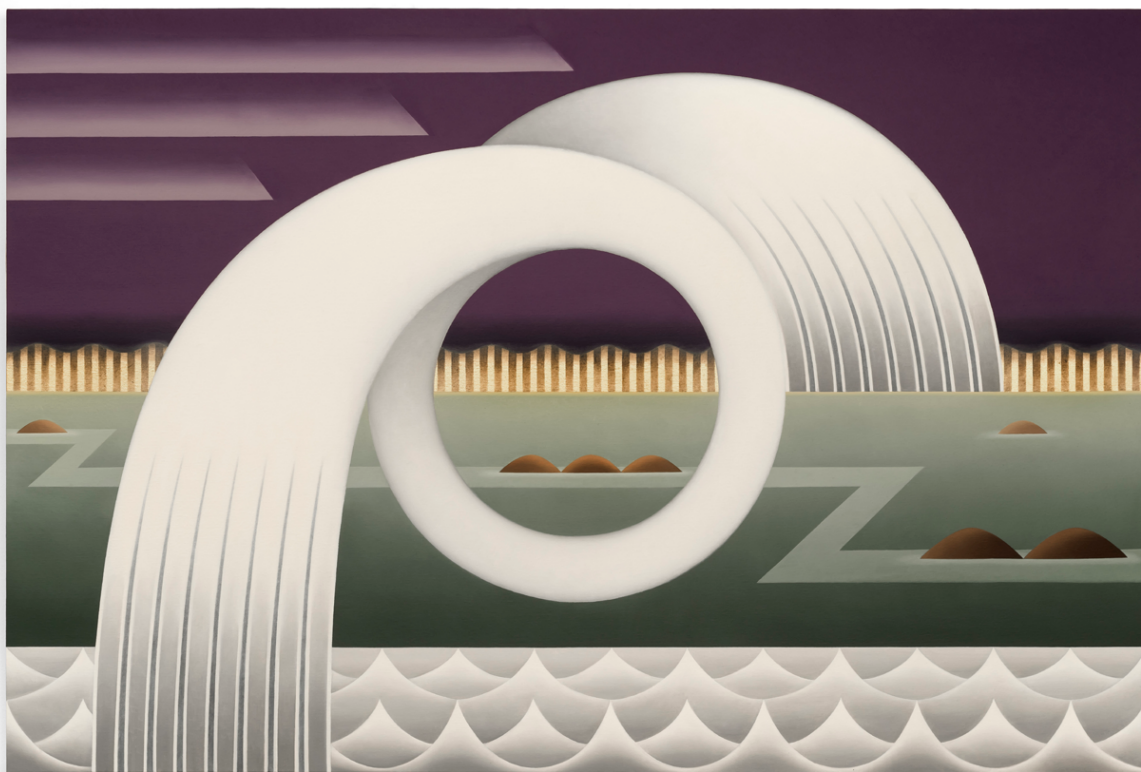
**T.Y.** Yes, correct. This is another slow process, working against the demands for efficiency, I suppose. I was very interested in a kind of *trompe l'oeil*, or photorealism. It's the unsavory thing that we were told by our teachers not to do, and then it seems so gimmicky, because it's so easy to look at for us. I just liked this geometric abstraction, but I wanted to do it in terms of being representational. The representation of abstraction. And to that end, I asked another, young, talented painter who was quite good at wood shop to help, who made a perfectly beautiful model, and then I sprayed white paint on it, and I hired my fine art photographer who photographed this as he would a painting, with nice lighting, so forth. And then from that, he made a print for me. Then I painted from his photograph. It's another kind of perverse waste of time. [Laughs.]

**RAIL** Not from my perspective, not a waste of time at all! They're really spectacular objects, images. They are so austere, but they're also so ostentatious in terms of their technical prowess. They also feel very witty to me. They make reference to so many different things: monochrome painting, white on white—

**T.Y.** Oh, yes, the painting *Untitled #20* (2019–20) is my first attempt at painting on linen canvas. There is a little spacer in the back, so it projects slightly off the wall to give it a little bit more physical presence. I love Robert Ryman's beautiful white paintings. And then it's like the edge of the raw linen is showing. Every time I see work on raw linen, the edge is so beautiful. So many different paints were showing from the edge. I wanted to make some white paintings with raw linen showing at the edge. That's where I wanted to do white-on-white painting, and that's how that started.

**RAIL** You've made reference to this a little bit along the way, about pushing back against the given and the mainstream and expectation. You've identified yourself often as a little bit of an outsider, rejecting what's in fashion, and what I really want to know is, over the decades, as the art world gets more and more pluralistic, and it's no longer incendiary to associate with the decorative, what is against the grain now in your opinion? What's taboo?





**T.Y.** I don't particularly think it's that way, because now there is a certain attachment to what I picked up over the years. I very much still want to keep using these things, and then the wonderful part is, even though I was using different motifs that I've used years and years ago, originally picked because they were falling out of favor of the mainstream and so forth—there is a new revelation in those motifs, and there are always these things that I have never seen. I like surprises. The one thing that I could say, though, that carries forward the things from older work to even a newer work, is a question of punctuality. My engagement is often untimely, which is to say ever so slightly out of step with prevailing taste and action. The risk is that any artistic statement may be just barely legible at the time of annunciation, but the reward when it works is that the statement becomes increasingly meaningful with the passage of time. Sometimes it doesn't work, but either way my work is not in the present. It's either a little in the past, or in the future, but it's never in the present. That's what I feel, if that makes sense?

**RAIL** That definitely makes sense, and it makes it all the more confounding, I think, for critics and historians to try to categorize you. I take great delight in looking at a CV like yours. You've been associated with so many different thematic group shows, and I was wondering how you felt about that. You've been in a show about photorealism, mystical abstraction, Pattern and Decoration, transcendence, symbolism, responses to nature. It's a very ornate Venn diagram with you in the tiny spot in the center. All of these things fit in one way or another, but I'm wondering how they feel to you.

**T.Y.** I welcome all these invitations. Though sometimes it is so humbling, because of the many important people in those movements, whose dedication is very profound. When I do seascapes, it's not because I love nature. I mean, I like to be at the sea, okay. But I really like the seascape as a genre. For instance, I don't go to Iceland or Greenland to paint, but I go to Rockwell Kent instead, and Rockwell Kent goes to Greenland. Likewise, I'm not a spiritualist. I don't have any religion or belief to speak of. Some Transcendentalist paintings are fascinating. That's all I can say without sounding so ungracious for being invited to different areas.

**RAIL** I love what you just said, but I want to get back to this question about humor, because I think there is some there. There is a sense of defiance in the way you identify your work as outside of the present moment, with a little bit of a push back, or a push away from what's prevailing. I'd say the general art expectation would be a real self-seriousness about that. But I see a different kind of gesture of defiance and a little bit of a playful contrarianism in your work.

**T.Y.** Yes, it all is true. I feel the same way. The humor part probably is like, I'm rather nonchalant in picking the things I really like, and then later I get so excited. But the serious part is I work incredibly hard, and then I just face up to my responsibilities and try to make sense of my whimsical choices. Yes, I still have the part of me that likes things a little bit different from what people have already said or done. For instance, without sounding like I'm dismissing high art or anything, it's just sort of like fashion. Right now, there aren't any hemline requirements or anything, but it's like, if someone says, "In this season, this has to be just

about the length of the skirt," you want to be a little bit different, even though right now—in art and fashion both—you can do anything you want for better or for worse.

Leah Ollman is a writer. Her books and exhibition catalogues include *Alison Rossiter: Expired Paper*, *William Kentridge: Weighing... and Wanting*, *The Photographs of John Brill*, *Michal Chelbin: Strangely Familiar*, *Camera as Weapon: Worker Photography Between the Wars*, and most recently *Ensnaring the Moment: On the Intersection of Poetry and Photography* (Saint Lucy Books, 2025).