

CULTURED

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What Does It Feel Like to Be Called an Emerging Artist at 72? Ask Takako Yamaguchi

The painter of geometric seascapes is getting her first solo museum show in Los Angeles, the city she's called home since 1987, with MOCA's "Focus" series this summer.



Takako Yamaguchi. Photography by Jack Pierson. All images courtesy of Yamaguchi and Ortuzar.

Takako Yamaguchi has lived a 12-minute drive from [Santa Monica](#) State Beach—and just 10 minutes farther from the wilder Will Rogers State Beach—since 1993, but she rarely ventures west to look out at the Pacific Ocean. That hasn't stopped marine life from figuring heavily in her almost five-decade-long practice, especially since 2021, when the Okayama-born artist embarked on a new series of seascapes. They were featured in two recent milestones—a 2023 [Ortuzar](#) show and the 2024 [Whitney Biennial](#)—that set the stage for a reexamination of the artist's prolific and genre-allergic practice, along with a suite of record-breaking [auction](#) sales of work from other periods.

"She really needs a museum retrospective to kind of put all these pieces together," Mike Egan, founder of the gallery Ramiken (which dedicated a show to her hyperrealistic shirt [paintings](#) in 2021), told [Artnews](#) last year. The art world will have to wait for a comprehensive survey of Yamaguchi's work, but the painter is getting her first solo museum show in [Los Angeles](#), which she's called home since 1987, this [summer](#). Starting June 29, Yamaguchi will share 10 new seascapes in MOCA's Grand Avenue space. Ahead of their unveiling, she sat down with *CULTURED* for a debrief about ambivalence, abundance, and the next paintings.



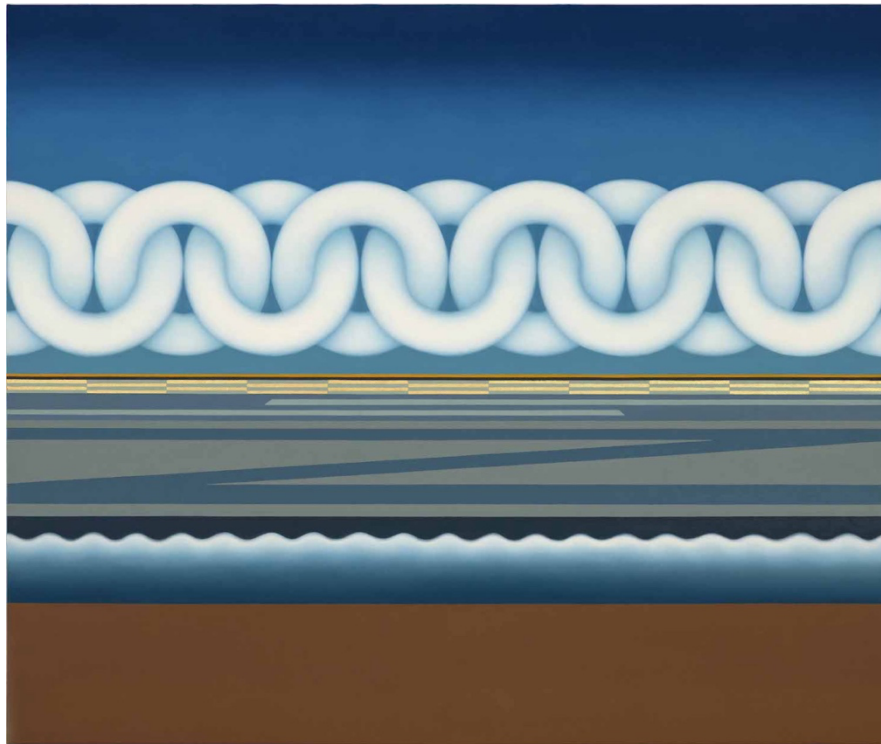
Takako Yamaguchi, *Procession*, 2024.

CULTURED: Tell me about your seascapes. You have access to the sea living in Santa Monica, but you don't go there often. Where do they come from?

Takako Yamaguchi: I don't go there, but I know it's there. Without sounding disrespectful to naturalists, I don't have the bone in me to go admire nature or that sort of thing. I really like seascapes as a genre—particularly the ones from the interwar period of semi-abstraction. I like Marsden Hartley, for instance. I've looked at the Canadian Group of Seven. I like Joseph Stella and Milton Avery, even though he comes much later. But I like the way that he resists pure abstraction.

CULTURED: So your seascapes are not inspired by the sea but by other people's seascapes that you filter through your own lens.

Yamaguchi: Rockwell Kent went to Greenland to really study what icebergs look like; instead [of doing that], I go to Rockwell Kent. It's each artist's imagination of what they look at that's fascinating to me. The poet Wallace Stevens has a phrase: "All of our ideas come from the natural world: trees equal umbrellas." I do the reverse: umbrellas equal trees. I call it semi-abstraction in reverse. I'll take from commercial culture some logos or patterns of waves—they're very common—and use those in lieu of actual waves.



Takako Yamaguchi, *Stitch*, 2023.

CULTURED: Your seascapes also bring to mind postcards for me. They're so dense in symbolism, yet they get the message across. What's your relationship to travel—between genres, between abstraction and figuration, between cultures and geographies?

Yamaguchi: I just don't feel like I belong to one thing. I'm always half in, half out. Maybe it's because I call myself an American artist, but I'm still a Japanese citizen, even though I've lived most of my life in the States. I still feel like the outsider. My situation [as an immigrant] isn't unique, but it might be the position of being an artist that explains why I'm drawn to things that fall outside of the mainstream. When I graduated from UC Santa Barbara and was figuring out what I was going to paint, I felt the permission to poke around and pick and choose [subjects]. It was like this serendipity—you happened to look at this book and say, "Oh this looks great. How can I use that in my paintings?" But then I'll make a big fuss of over-working it, as if I'm making up for my "irresponsible" choice of subject matter. It's like when you kind of like someone and don't make too much of a commitment, then you start having some attachment when you really, really work on it.

CULTURED: How have you maintained that spontaneity over the course of your career?

Yamaguchi: The degree of changing subject matter changes as you get older. I'm thinking, *How many more years can I be really good and excited about painting?* One thing that is fortunate is that I was so ignorant when I was younger. I did not know so many different works. There is an abundance of really interesting works not being looked at—those are always incredibly fresh to me. Or the kinds of things that I was familiar with and hated at the time now look so refreshing. Like the 1930s.

CULTURED: What do you think draws you to the interwar period so much?

Yamaguchi: It's that sort of ambivalence. Particularly with semi-abstraction, there was this timidity of not going all the way towards pure abstraction, which became the highest form of art later on. That ambivalence could have been wisdom.



Takako Yamaguchi, *Guide*, 2023.

CULTURED: Neither is enough—it's an interesting mode to make art in. The MOCA show is part of their "Focus" series, a platform for emerging artists. You are 72. How does it feel to be having this big show right now? And what do you want next?

Yamaguchi: Any moment is, for me, an emerging time. It came a little later than for other people. I wish this was happening, maybe when I was 50? Just to be able to look forward to a little longer ahead. But I can't wait for the next paintings. I have this series of small-scale, white-on-white paintings. It's my attempt at geometric abstraction and brings me back to this period of flirtation with photorealism I had about 15 years ago, before I went back to the seascapes. It was a time where I was going against so-called efficiency. Everything was about wasting time, like a slow-food kind of thing. So I'm working on those, and then after that thinking of the [next] landscapes, even though I'm pretty much set with just going back to my seascape/landscape journal. Over the years I've accumulated so many different motifs; I feel like I have ones I want to reuse in a different combination. It's endless, the things that interest me—I almost don't have enough time.