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The Painter Who's Been Hiding in Plain Sight for Nearly 50 Years

Ahead of an exhibition in New York, Takako Yamaguchi discusses her process and what it was like to be discovered so long after she began.



The artist Takako Yamaguchi at her home studio in Santa Monica, Calif. Arielle Bobb-Willis

By Anna Furman
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The artist Takako Yamaguchi, 74, has at various points been drawn to the decorative, the minimalist and even the photorealistic. Some of her paintings depict geometric shapes; others, detailed views of clothing (a pleated skirt, a crocheted top) worn on her own body. Around 2021, the artist started creating surreal, stylized seascapes, employing what she calls "abstraction in reverse": starting with an undefined shape and, through painting, transforming it into

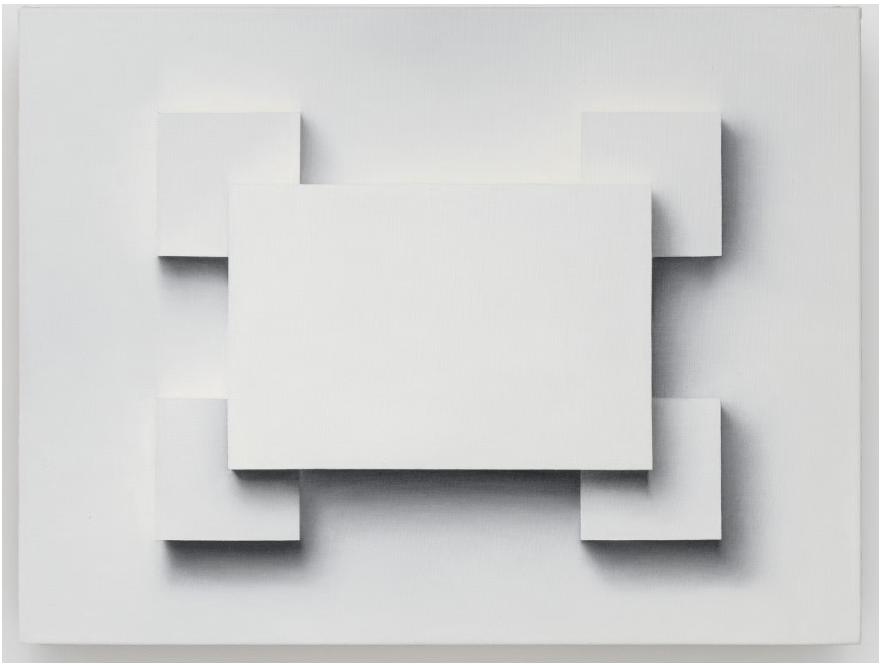
something recognizable from nature. As varied as her approach are the potential interpretations of the symbols and figures she paints. In the artist's eyes, a scalloped line might represent the outline of clouds, waves or mountains. Although she's been making work for over 50 years, however, it's only in the last few that her work has reached a wider audience.



Yamaguchi's husband, the gallerist Tom Jimmerson, often surprises her by pinning cutout images that he thinks will interest her to their shared bulletin board. Arielle Bobb-Willis

Yamaguchi, who was born and raised in Okayama, Japan, lives in Santa Monica, Calif., having moved to the U.S. in the early 1970s to attend Bates College in Maine before heading to the West Coast to earn an M.F.A. from U.C. Santa Barbara. In the decades that followed, she appeared sporadically in small shows until, in 2022, she secured representation by New York's Ortuzar gallery. Two years later, she was selected for the Whitney Biennial, at which she showed some of her seascapes. Rendered in oil and bronze leaf, these works take cues from Japanese graphic design and advertising, as evidenced by the bold white zigzags, spirals, curlicues and braids that are superimposed like logos over her jewel-toned seas and skies. Around the same time, a painting she'd made 30 years earlier — "Catherine and Midnight" (1994), which depicts a reclining woman smoking a cigarette and incorporates Japanese printmaking techniques — sold for over $1.1 million at

Sotheby's London. Last year, the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles hosted Yamaguchi's first solo museum show. The artist's response to this late surge of success has been to continue working as always, from the studio in the same rent-controlled apartment she's lived in since 1993.

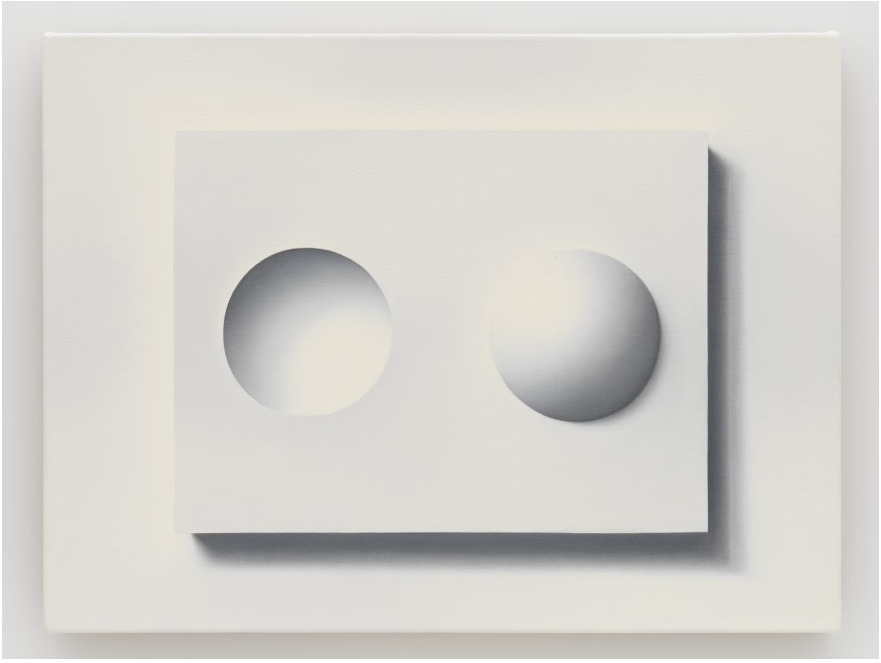


Yamaguchi's "Untitled (48)" (2026), one of her new all-white geometric paintings. © Takako Yamaguchi. Courtesy of the artist, Ortuzar, New York, and as-is.la, Los Angeles. Photo: Gene Ogami

In an exhibition opening today at Ortuzar, Yamaguchi will display 13 new all-white paintings. To make them, she collaborated with other artists to build three-dimensional wood models of geometric forms, which were then spray-painted and photographed. Next, Yamaguchi painted what she saw in the images, using a grid to ensure the proportions were precisely scaled on the canvas. "I'm a really slow and meticulous painter," Yamaguchi told me when I visited her in Santa Monica last month. In person, Yamaguchi is warm and ebullient, a sharp contrast to the austerity of these latest works. "My slow process is a kind of rebellion from this neoliberal economy that's ever demanding of higher efficiency, even in fine art."

What benefits are there to being an artist in Los Angeles instead of New York?

New York is such a hub. [In the 1980s] everyone thought you had to be there, but if I'd moved there early in my career, like some of my friends from Downtown L.A. did, it would've been hard for me to concentrate. It was a blessing for me to be left alone to just work. I had a sense of freedom, not being bothered with too much information from the art world and galleries. I set my own pace and did my own thing. I also didn't have the community that some people found in New York, but with that comes competition — about who is or isn't showing at a gallery. God, that's tough. I couldn't deal with that.



Yamaguchi's "Untitled (62)" (2026). © Takako Yamaguchi. Courtesy of the artist, Ortuzar, New York, and as-is.la, Los Angeles. Photo: Dario Lasagni

Your series have spanned different genres of painting and incorporated disparate techniques. What do you think unifies your work?

All my paintings have precision and take time. I don't do spontaneous work. When I was a young artist, minimalism was the big enemy to go against, because it was mainstream. I'd thought this new series would be my way of mocking minimalism, but because of how much time I spent on the works, I found myself thinking seriously about [the style].

When I came out of graduate school, there was a common understanding that painting was dead. I was feeling contrarian, so of course that made me want to be a painter. And then the Pattern and Decoration movement was considered mindless busywork for women, so of course I wanted to do that.



Yamaguchi's "Untitled (Crochet Top)" (2012-17). © Takako Yamaguchi. Courtesy of the artist, Ortuzar, New York, and as-is.la, Los Angeles. Photo: Gene Ogami



The artist's "Untitled (Skirt and Belt)" (2012-17). © Takako Yamaguchi. Courtesy of the artist, Ortuzar, New York, and as-is.la, Los Angeles. Photo: Gene Ogami

Does your contrarian streak show up in other parts of your life?

I've never really thought that I had to comply with how I'm "supposed" to look or behave. [In Japan,] girls weren't supposed to stand out. In high school, we had to wear our hair neat, so I went out and got a perm and wore ribbons instead. We had to have skin-colored tights — so I wore black stockings.

Nowadays, [when I visit Japan] people excuse me for not following the rules because I'm seen as practically a foreigner, and probably as an old woman artist. You know, artists can do anything.

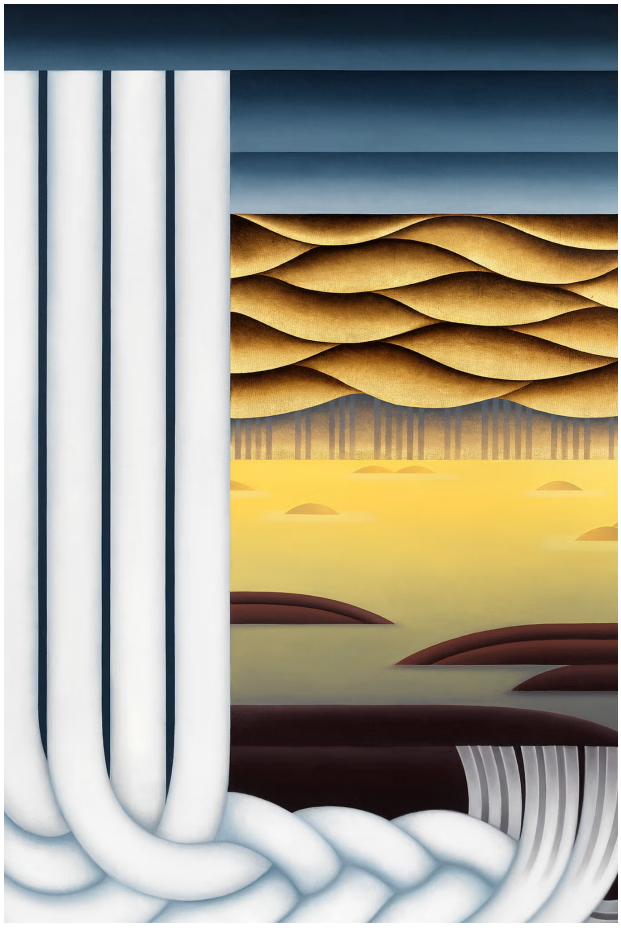
It's become a cliché that many women artists are suddenly "discovered" in their 70s or later. You'd been showing for decades, just not in blue-chip galleries. What do you think about this narrative about late-career recognition?

That's the market, I think: "The rediscovery industrial complex," it was once called in The New York Times.

At one point it was all white men getting famous. It wasn't equal. Things might [swing back] in the next few years — who knows, maybe "white male" will become fashionable again. But I feel quite lucky. I was used to being off anyone's radar, so it's a nice feeling now. Even if I hadn't lucked out, though, I'd still be painting.

How many hours of creative work do you think you do in a day?

No less than 10 hours a day, no fewer than six days a week — and happily. I don't have time for anything else. I don't feel deprived, either. Because of my age, I can't afford procrastination. Now I really consider: For how many more good years could I paint rigorously?



One of Yamaguchi's seascapes, "Transit" (2022). © Takako Yamaguchi. Courtesy of the artist, Ortuzar, New York, and as-is.la, Los Angeles. Photo: Dario Lasagni

What's the first work you ever sold? For how much?

When I was at U.C. Santa Barbara as an M.F.A. student, I befriended a professor and his wife. He was a Japanese culture scholar, particularly of the Meiji and Teisho eras. He had a beautiful collection of prints. She was an incredibly good cook, inventive and adventurous. They bought some of my student work, from my senior thesis show. I think they gave me $500. I felt almost like, "Are you sure?"

What was it like to see your work suddenly sell for so much money at Sotheby's London in 2024?

It was a strange, creepy feeling. I wasn't sure that it was good for me. I thought, "What does this mean? For the next one, if the price goes down, is it my fault?"

Everyone just starts talking about money and not about the work. It wasn't a blessing. I don't even know where that piece went because it's been flipped so many times by now. I have no control over it, so I'd rather not know about the auction side.



"Untitled #7 (White and Green)" (2009/2021), one of Yamaguchi's photorealist paintings. © Takako Yamaguchi. Courtesy of the artist, Ortuzar, New York, and as-is.la, Los Angeles. Photo: Gene Ogami

Your new series of white-on-white works is restrained and cerebral. It marks a departure from your earlier work, not just aesthetically but in terms of its emotional tone. What are you hoping to accomplish?

I don't want to show emotions**,** but they sneak in, strangely — not despite but maybe *because of* my trying to avoid them.

What's the last thing that made you cry?

I cry all the time, even while watching stupid commercials or nice stories on the news, and particularly during Japanese TV shows that are trying to be sweet. There was only one time when art made me cry, though. Gerard Richter — I was at his big retrospective at [San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, which ran in 2002 and 2003] and I was probably looking at the Baader-Meinhof Group paintings [Richter's "18 October 1977" series, made in the late 1980s and depicting the young members of the German far-left militant organization]. My tears took me by surprise.

When did you first feel comfortable saying you were a professional artist?

On my tax returns, I've always written "painter" or "painter/artist." I've never had a side job. I've never had anything else to call myself.

This interview has been edited and condensed.