

LEIKO IKEMURA: Migrations Sculpture and Paintings

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Haggerty Museum of Art, Marquette University



Leiko Ikemura, *Liegende, gesicht auf Miko Stutzend*, 1998

Leiko Ikemura began to make art as a child in Japan. At the age of 21 she moved to Seville to continue her study of art. There she became immersed in the dark and mercurial richness of Andalusia with its mix of Arabic, Roman, and African cultures. Following a period of six years in Spain, Ikemura migrated again - this time to Switzerland 1979 - 1983, and then to Germany, where she lives and makes art in Cologne and Berlin. Since 1990 she has taught at the Hochschule der Künste in Berlin.

Much of Ikemura's work concerns migration. But the migration has more to do with her own unfolding identity and the evolution of her work than with geography or nationality. The paintings and sculpture as well as drawings, installations, and photography of her twenty year career document the internal migration of an evolving persona.

Art in Ikemura's life has little to do with ambition or commodification but is "like a stream, very much attached to my person." The art mediates memories of very personal experiences. In this process, conventional thought concerning the rigid division of time into past, present, and future dissolves as older memories merge into the lived moments of the present. Experimenting with memories so as to incorporate them into the art helps to break the rigidities of an existence posited only on the present moments.

Migration continues in Ikemura's method of working as she alternates among the various media of painting, sculpture, installation, and photography. When asked how her work in painting relates to the sculptures, she replied that work in a single medium frequently influences what is being done in another. For example, she finds that a shift to sculpture often frees the mind to solve problems in painting, or vice versa. Crossing over from one medium to another also contributes to a consistent artistic vision throughout the work.

A key element in Ikemura's approach to composition involves repetition of a core form. The core element is based on a very simple formal discovery endowed with a certain oneness. There are examples of this process in Ikemura's sculptures and paintings throughout her career, and particularly in the sculptures and paintings of the nineties. For instance a group of her recent clay figures exhibit different artistic possibilities for a single form. The basic form remains similar with changes in dimensions. Some are headless, some are not; colors of the glazes vary from earthen to bright yellows. Most of the figures hold a surrogate doll-like or animal figure. Sometimes a tiny bird or animal is perched on the rim of a headless figure. Purposeful repetition with changes of scale, color, or iconographic intent is guided by the artist's intuition and a desire to maintain the oneness of the initial form while experiencing in it a slightly different nuance each time it is revisited.

As with many artists before her, Ikemura places the body at the center of her sculptures and paintings. Her creatures are mixed - part human, part animal, and sometimes incorporating elements of plants. Perhaps they are metaphors of the self, but with ontological intent. Ikemura's symbolic figures, she admits, are allegories and stories filled with message. They are her means of exploring the secrets of Being both in its personal and universal aspects. Ikemura's figures nevertheless are as uncertain in their meanings as the mysterious Paleolithic limestone carving of "The Willendorf Woman", whose symbolic nature remains uncertain after 25,000 or more years. Did she function as fertility symbol, erotic object, or a goddess?

Sometimes Ikemura places figures in the most elemental situations of narrative action: standing, sitting, or lying down. Once the initial position is set, the remainder of the story must be supplied by the viewer's experience or imagination. Her stories are not those of the ancient Greeks who made sculpture to represent the ideal beauty of the human body. Nor are her allegories able to provide images of mediation between God and mankind as did Medieval sculpture and paintings. Rather, they deal with more elemental, perhaps primordial forces not attached to a particular aesthetic principle such as the Greek understanding of beauty, or to a particular doctrine. Instead her stories are generated from her own migration within the world and within herself, as she wrestles with the language supplied by her art.

Ikemura has named Jean Fautrier and Giorgio Morandi as artists whom she greatly admires. It is not difficult to see at least surface resemblance between Fautrier's black nude paintings of 1926 and Ikemura's shadowy figure paintings. Even stronger are seeming affinities of Ikemura's figurative sculptures to Fautrier's sculptures of 1928-1929, for example, "Grand Torse," 1928 and "Buste aux Seines" 1929, and the well known Otage series of the 1940s. Some of her abstract sculptural forms are reminiscent of Morandi's still life paintings and Emil Nolde whose colors and wildly expressive figures (see Nolde's "The Dance Round the Golden Calf," 1910) anticipate uses of color and figure in Ikemura's paintings.

Perhaps the most striking link between Ikemura and these other artists can be found in their radically individual approaches to art, sufficient to preclude affiliation with any art collectivism. Working free of national concerns, Ikemura has succeeded in forging her own place. This approach brings with it a certain charming freshness. She is a visual poet and philosopher as well as a gifted artist.



Leiko Ikemura, *OT (Weises Kleide)*, 1993

Curtis L. Carter
Director

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