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LD XXV, 2014, Oil and water on canvas, 1 x 1.4 m. All images courtesy: DITTRICH & SCHLECHTRIEM, Berlin, © Maki Na Kamura, photographs: Jens Ziehe

In Maki Na Kamura's pictures, you can't see the wood for the trees. The 'trees' in question are motifs borrowed from the history of pre-Impressionist landscape painting – a genre not considered part of the aesthetics of modernism, but whose works our contemporary eyes still scan for things that are experimental rather than traditional, abstract rather than figurative, idiosyncratic rather than allegorical. Things, in other words, that might be modern.

If these references are the trees, then the wood is the experimental, abstract and idiosyncratic content of Kamura's own pictures. Born in Osaka, Kamura came to Germany in the mid-1990s; she studied painting under Jörg Immendorff, initially in Frankfurt and later in Dusseldorf. She seems to have come into her own as a painter around ten years ago, somewhat belatedly, which is in keeping with the character of her work: no cool triumphalism, no ironic transgression, nothing that could be read as (lazy) shorthand for 'Now!' Any 'nowness' of these paintings is obscured if one clings too tightly to their art-historical references. But these references are also impossible to ignore.



LD XXIII, 2014, Oil and water on canvas, 1 × 1.4 m

In a numbered series of works titled *LD* (for Landschaftsdarstellung, landscape representation, 2012–ongoing), a volume runs diagonally across the canvas, like a debris-strewn slope or a dried-out riverbed. When one learns the source of this element, one immediately thinks: of course! Why didn't I see that straight away? In Giorgione's *Sleeping Venus* (1508–10) in Dresden's Gemäldegalerie, the naked goddess of beauty stretches out in a relaxed pose. Eyes shut, her head rests in the crook of her right arm, supported by a red cushion, her left hand on her groin. To her left is a rock, to her right an open landscape with buildings on a hill, two solitary trees, and in the distance the bluish outlines of mountains. Giorgione's Venus revolutionized the portrayal of the human figure and of landscape in equal measure, though has since been overlaid and concealed by countless other pictures of naked bodies and charming landscapes throughout the history of painting. In Kamura's paintings, this Venus is used again and again as a compositional vehicle.

In *LD XXV* (2014), for example, Venus's body is reversed and washed out to an empty beige-white, like a recessed void. The red cushion of Giorgione's painting is reduced to a few red stripes, the tree to a brown smear, while the blue of the mountains melts into the outline of what was once a rock and the goddess's head. But the figurative motif does not simply dissolve into the process of painting, it has already broken down into units as the picture is put together (hence 'LD', the abstract abbreviation for what was once landscape and representation). Just as landscape and body become collage here, this flatness blurs and gains a certain three-dimensionality.

Kamura goes one step further with the motif in *LD XXIII* (2014), placing three stain-like little figures on the Venus outline. From their stooped pose, they are easily recognizable as Jean-François Millet's three Gleaners (1857). Salvaging such once-revolutionary motifs from their fate of mass-reproduced sentimental kitsch can only be achieved by translating them into abstract ciphers. The fact that the gleaners are bending down to reach ears of corn in Venus's groin may be read as an ironic collision between myths about women and myths of the Old Masters. But if one considers the picture as a whole, the gleaners are also visual anchors for compositional axes, forces and balances.



GiL IV, 2011, Oil and water on canvas, 60 × 45 cm

When Caspar David Friedrich meets Katsushika Hokusai (whose coloured woodcuts were demonstrably influenced by Friedrich) – for example in Kamura’s series *fgf* (the ‘fat gold frame’ in question is imagined, not shown, 2010–11) and *GiL* (“geometry in landscapes”, 2011–13) – another cliché seems to have been perfected: that of cultural exchange as export/import. Friedrich’s oil painting of a crooked old tree (*Winter Landscape*, 1811) is one of Kamura’s blueprints; Hokusai’s picture of a man cutting a similarly crooked trunk into planks with a large saw (Fuji from the Mountains of Tōtōumi, 1831–33) is another. As with Giorgione’s Venus, the tree and the piece of timber are deployed primarily as diagonal elements in the composition. But in *GiL IV* (2011) – like most other pieces in the series, a portrait format painted in a strong red on a white ground – all that remains of Hokusai’s motif is the saw stuck in the towering beam, bringing us close to El Lissitzky’s geometrical abstraction. Regarding so-called intercultural exchange, the focus shouldn’t be on accentuating otherness. On the contrary, one should look back at oneself with the eyes of others. Both landscape and culture are thus subjected to a trance-like process of abstraction: as when one deliberately defocuses one’s gaze to capture the overall structure of a highly detailed picture – the trees resolve into the wood.

Translated by Nicholas Grindell

—by Jörg Heiser

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