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Migrations

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MIGRATIONS

Leiko Ikemura became involved in making art as a child in Japan, where she lived until 1972. At the age of 21, she moved from Japan to Seville to begin her study of art. There she became immersed in the dark and mercurial richness of Andalusia with its mix of Arabic, Romany, and African cultures. Following a period of six years in Spain, Ikemura migrated again – this time to Switzerland where she lived from 1979 until 1983, and then to Germany, where she works as an artist in Köln and Berlin. Since 1990, she has taught at the *Hochschule der Künste* in Berlin.

Much of Ikemura's work concerns migration as a persistent theme. But migration for Ikemura has more to do with her own unfolding identity, and the evolution of her work than with geography or nationality. Her geographic migrations are important for the experiences they provided, but they are little more than external markers of the artist's inner self in transition. With each geographic move comes an awakening of sensibilities and a new capacity to experience the world. Similarly, 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 has always been important to Ikemura's personal being. To her, art is a special calling that emerges and evolves with the unfolding of the self. Closely linked to personal identity, art in her life has little to do with ambition or commodification. Her art 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 dissolve as older memories merge into the immediate 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.

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 sculpture, 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 inherent in the art of 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. Examples of this process are evident in Ikemura's work throughout her career, and particularly in the sculptures and paintings that she has produced in the nineties. For instance, a group of her recent clay figures exhibit different artistic possibilities for a single form. The basic form remains similar despite changes in its 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. Her paintings of the mid nineties feature the blurred image of a little girl. Subtle changes in the figure's position, scale and coloration make each revisit to the form a new experience both for the artist and the viewer. A recent series of sculptural busts and figurative drawings from the nineties also originate, respectively, from a single formal concept with differences in each work. The repetition in these works is not mere duplication of the initial core, or variations according to a particular system. Rather, the purposeful repetition 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 creating a slightly different nuance each time it is revisited. Each encounter is thus an experience and not merely a variation of the core idea.

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.¹ Perhaps they are metaphors of the self, but with ontological intent. Ikemura's symbolic figures, she admits, are allegories and stories filled with messages. 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 Medieval sculpture and paintings did. 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.

Although each artist must find her own way, she need not be without the support of kindred spirits. Who might these kindred souls be for Ikemura? She herself has named Jean Fautrier and Giorgio Morandi as artists whom she greatly admires, without attributing any direct influence. Even without a detailed analysis of their respective techniques and styles, it is not difficult to see at least surface resemblance between Fautrier's black nude paintings of 1926 and Ikemura's shadowy figures. Even stronger are the 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. Less obvious are the connections to Morandi's work, except that some of Ikemura's abstract sculptural forms are reminiscent of Morandi's still life painting. And her use of color recalls the colors of Emil Nolde, in such works as in his *The Dance Round the Golden Calf* (1910) with its intensely expressive figures. Perhaps the most striking link between Ikemura and these other artists can be found in their radically individual approaches to art, sufficient to preclude affiliations with any art collectivism. This was certainly the case with Fautrier and Nolde both of whom found it impossible to identify with the dominant art movements of their respective times. Similarly, the dynamic consciousness shaping Ikemura's work necessitates that she continue to follow its her own course. Based on an interpretation of her work in midcareer, Ikemura has succeeded in forging her own place, mainly independent of, while not unmindful, of other developments in contemporary art.

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¹ Alexander Puhringer, "A Conversation With Leiko Ikemura," *Leiko Ikemura* (Cantz Verlag) p. 103