

those feelings for nature and transmigration of souls into a future synthetic reality, one that, for the present, can only exist as a speculation based on how we think in relation to the planet on which we abide.

Robert C. Morgan

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Mie Iwatsuki at Freight and Volume

After seeing this exhibition, *Mie: A Portrait by 35 Artists*, I was convinced that Mie Iwatsuki is the 21st century's female version of Baudelaire's *flaneur*. As described by the late-19th-century poet and art critic, a *flaneur* is a casual connoisseur who wanders the streets and avenues of an urban setting, such as Paris or now New York or Hong Kong, from gallery to gallery, party to party, soiree to soiree, in search of aesthetic experience. Born in Yokohama, the slender, tall, attractive, and vivacious Ms. Iwatsuki came to New York in 1999 in order to pursue a career as both a fashion model and a contemporary art curator. This rather unique, if not unusual, combination made an impression on many of her colleagues, including artists, writers, magazine editors, fashion moguls, and other curators. She represented a montage of effects coming from two tangential fields of cultural involvement: art and fashion.

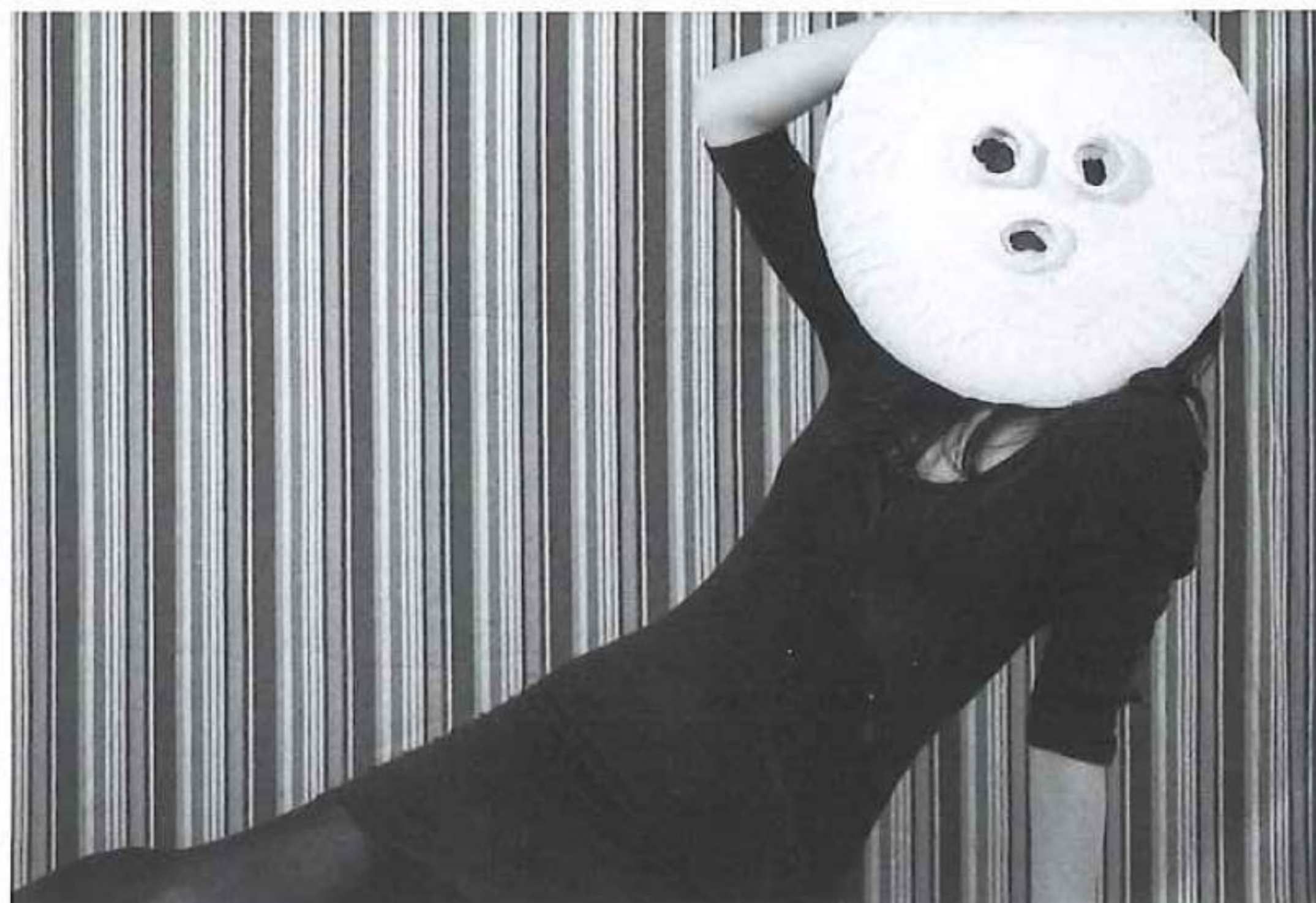
Last year, Iwatsuki decided to join forces with artist and gallery owner Nick Lawrence in a curatorial venture whereby Iwatsuki would select 35 artists to commemorate her unusual career, subtle charm, and unwavering enthusiasm with an exhibition of portraits. One must understand, however, that in Iwatsuki's case a portrait need not be a likeness. Far from it—at least for artists such as David Humphery, Kristen Schiele, Hye Rim Lee, Min Hyung, and Saya Woolfalk. On the other hand, there were artists who went for the likeness and, in many instances, came amazingly close to Iwatsuki's vibrant, yet elusive character.



Paul Brainard, Portrait of Mie, 2011, pencil & pen on paper
12 1/2" x 17 1/2".



Kevin Kay, To Thinly Veil, 2011, three unique polaroids, 4 1/4" x 3 1/2".



Andrew Guenther, Mie Reclining with Plate, 2011, photograph, 8" x 10".



Daniel Heidkamp, Soft Slip, 2012, oil on canvas, 63" x 63".
All images: Courtesy of the Artists and Freight and Volume.

These included Qi Zhilong, O Zhang, Rudy Shepherd, June Leaf, Alex Katz, Thomas Eller, Noah Becker, Paul Brainard, and Robert Frank. In each case, the likeness is not always direct but emerges from an oblique angle of vision, a partial view that somehow manages to capture the whole.

What is interesting about this project is the conceptual premise that lies beneath it all. Iwatsuki is interested in how many different ways a portrait can be achieved—whether or not the likeness is accurate. For example, painter Daniel Heidkamp and photographer Jeremy Kost are respectively vague and partial in their respective interpretations. Even so, I am more attracted to Min Hyung and Saya Woolfalk's anti-likenesses in which each artist explores a synoptic view of Iwatsuki employing cultural parameters quite distant from her origins. Still they capture something of the model/curator's rebelliousness and nonconformity and joy in confronting a structural connection that appears outside her domain, yet internally similar. Ryan Schneider's Op art dress—recalling the painter Nicholas Krushenik (who recently had a moving and successful posthumous retrospective at the Gary Snyder Gallery)—managed to discover an aspect of Iwatsuki that may on one level appear obvious and yet, at the same time, comes forward with the bold assertiveness of his subject that appears necessarily and undeniably true.

Two of the leading stars in this exhibition are the painter Alex Katz and the photographer Robert Frank whose casual nonchalance is, in both cases, absolutely astonishing at every turn. Frank has continually manifested the more straightforward traits held secretly within the human condition, while Katz possesses a contour and indirect sense of shape that is unmistakable to viewers who have followed his fascination with fashion and his eager empathy in abiding close to nature. In each artist, Iwatsuki finds a happy solace, a way of being that is accurate

and commensurate to who she is and how she chooses to live and work in the urban environment.

The diversity of artists in this exhibition is indeed remarkable as is Iwatsuki's ardent eagerness to embrace a concept that transforms an ancient point of view into a new one. Here we are speaking of the outworn role with regard to Asian women. Rather than sit in the background, Iwatsuki cheerfully brings her image forward without force, a kind of metaphorical *aikido* in which the receding momentum of her detractors ultimately works in her favor, and thus strengthens her presence. She has opened a new door that many have yet to realize. This is the truly noble and auspicious aspect that exists throughout *Mie: A Portrait of 35 Artists*.

Robert C. Morgan

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Kaoruko at Mike Weiss Gallery

Formerly involved as a rock singer in Japan, Kaoruko moved to New York several years ago where she has been honing her skills as a painter. In the recent exhibition at Mike Weiss Gallery in West Chelsea, she presented some of her largest paintings to date in an exhibition titled *Aromako*. The paintings involve a theme on which she has been working for the past three years



Kaoruko, **Aroma Nostril Hole**, 2011, acrylic, silk screen and sumi on canvas, 78 x 110".

involving portraits of young women, often dressed in casual clothes or underwear gently cavorting with one another. In *Aromako*, the olfactory senses are brought to the surface of these picture planes, usually showing two, possibly three, young woman giving attention to body odor from under the arms or the feet. There is a gentle eroticism in the work that many Westerners would probably understand as too subtle or "far out" to acculturate. However, I found these paintings original, well-constructed (as long as the pigment stays thin), and capable of transmitting happiness and pleasure.

The more I observed these paintings, the more intimately I perceived them to be. They exist in a world of their own making. They constitute the perceptions of a young woman—presumably the artist, Kaoruko—who is content with her daily rituals, whether eating, brushing teeth, urinating, putting on make-up, or other

forms of exercise. She enjoys the privacy of her own world. Kaoruko's paintings are self-indulgent to a degree, verging on narcissism, but always engaged in the subtle unseen pleasures and enjoyment of life. As an emerging Japanese painter in the great traditions of *ukiyo-e* and *shunga*, Kaoruko reveals the presence of the human body as a natural phenomenon much like the youthful Matisse—an artist satiated with what the French call *le bonheur de vivre* (generally translated as "the good life".)

To communicate such intimate spatial desires in painting is not an easy task: to do so requires distance and restraint. These paintings are not expressionist in the Western sense of exposing one's inner-self. Rather they are gentle explorations whereby the artist searches for a mirror that reflects a way of life to which she is accustomed. Her paintings are essentially about young women who possess a current of

hedonistic desire and who enjoy watching and being with one another. To get into the mode of painting—and thereby to evoke a particular style—the artist assumes a self-assured manner. She understands that her intimate observations will be translated into painting through her imagination. Consequently, Kaoruko's paintings become highly sensitized allegories that reveal how young women in Japan choose to enjoy their daily rituals in the privacy of their own space and time.

The paintings reveal young women in semi-nude, casual attire enjoying their intimacy, which is the major focus of the exhibition. There are certain general thematic aspects in each painting. The faces in her compositions are generic, perhaps more Western or doll-like than traditional Japanese. In addition, much attention is given to color in the various costumes, the lingerie, and the various objects that occupy or "float" in a dream-like pictorial space. There is also a subtle emphasis given to the manner in which she paints details of the female figure, such as eyes, toes, and fingers—all reminiscent of *ukiyo-e* and *shunga* woodblock prints from the early-19th century Japan.

Thus, despite the post-modern or "trendy" appearance given to these youthful women, there is an implicit connection to a tradition that is deeply embedded in her work almost to the point of invisibility. I recall a discussion with the artist in which she spoke caringly about decorative patterns found in different regions of her country—including Nagoya (where she was born)—that would eventually be incorporated into the composition of her paintings. This is the kind of freshness that I find both elusive and purposeful, both passionate and in a certain way compassionate. Kaoruko gives the viewer a very gentle glimpse into her work that awakens a way of thinking, a life-style that induces pleasure in the details, a women's work that holds the moment as in cinema.

Robert C. Morgan



Above left: Kaoruko, **Lotus Foot**, 2011, acrylic, silk screen, and sumi on canvas, 48 x 60". **Above right:** Kaoruko, **Aromako Origin; Close Up**, 2011, acrylic, silk screen, and sumi on canvas, 20 x 16". All images: Courtesy of the Artist and Mike Weiss Gallery.