

# WELT*am* SONNTAG

## “I have no use for nature”

**When one picture paints the next: a visit to the studio of Japanese artist Maki Na Kamura and her radiant landscapes**



Maki Na Kamura in ihrem Atelier. Sie hat es sich in einem früheren Schafstall eingerichtet

**By Tim Ackermann**

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Old Caspar David Friedrich couldn't have known that his tree would one day travel halfway around the world. Day in, day out, the tree stood patiently in a wintry field, somewhat curved by the wind. The lonely wanderer had observed its stem in awe. And now the tree suddenly finds itself in a strange place, where a bridge by Hokusai spans its branches and a blood-red sun rises from the sea in the morning. Bathed in the red light is a remarkable land, a world which refuses to be placed in a strict scheme of conventions. In one spot, white and red blend together to form dancing waves; in another, a smudge of aged pink is drying like smeared lipstick. One can imagine that the tree feels right at home in this mixture of Baselitzian frenzy and New York School abstraction. There are worse places to be.

To meet this delicate artist who can move trees, one has to climb into a car and drive about an hour out of Berlin, until one reaches a castle, the garden of which is filled with Markus Lüpertz sculptures. The studio is located a short distance away, in a converted sheep stable. Sunlight falls through the windows, but the windows were installed too high in the unadorned wall, rendering a view outside impossible. “I have no use for nature,” Maki Na Kamura says. Trees grow in the mind.

How the young Japanese artist exchanged the tower blocks of Osaka for the walls of her Brandenburg studio is a story in its own right. After her teenage years, Na Kamura tells us, she found she had matured quickly. “I only felt a strong urge to be free and independent. I didn't want to belong anywhere, I didn't want constraints.

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(cont)

I couldn't stand collectivism." Japan became a disagreeable country for her – especially as her family from Osaka had consistently been looking toward the West. And so one talks to Na Kamura about intercultural exchange for a while, which has always taken place in one form or another. From Japonism, which inspired 19th century French painters like Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec to use clear colours and shapes, to Japanese cigarette packets that were designed in the style of Toulouse-Lautrec, and which her grandmother collected almost a century later in Osaka. The desire for the foreign, which then fits seamlessly into one's own world.

In Japan, Na Kamura painted abstract images like an American, learning about art history through catalogues: the Impressionists, Koons, Hirst, Beuys and Immendorff. She secretly copied their work from the catalogues. "I was fascinated by the pictures. Back then I thought Immendorff was a painter from the early 20th century. I thought he might have been a colleague of Matisse," Na Kamura says. "Eventually I came to the last page of the catalogue and read his biography. It was then that I found out that he was still alive. I was dumbfounded." In the mid-nineties, barely of age, Na Kamura boarded a flight to Frankfurt am Main without a return ticket (in her pocket. She was making her way to Immendorff. "I wanted to get to know him; I had the conviction

of a groupie." But to remark that she studied under Immendorff would explain nothing. "I learned absolutely nothing there." She remembers little from her years at the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf, except for her incomprehension of fellow students, who weren't obsessed with art like she was, and her wish to better understand the European painting tradition.

Some older paintings hang on the walls of Maki Na Kamura's studio, in which landscapes seem to burst apart in painting experiments, made with colours which don't suit one another and certainly don't relate to what they represent. But her latest works, which go even one step further, can currently be seen in an exhibition at Dittrich & Schlechtriem in Berlin. The artist painted them almost exclusively in shades of red. Tower blocks faintly appear in the background out of the chaos of different brushstrokes, forming a dense forest, like in Osaka. One can also see mountains, bridges, a telegraph pole, and some people, like actors who've forgotten their lines on stage.

In the studio, Maki Na Kamura digs up two art catalogues. She shows how the curved tree in Caspar David Friedrich's 1811 "Winter Landscape" was transformed into a skewed beam, which Hokusai placed in the middle of one of his "Views of Mount Fuji" 20 years later. The clever Japanese painter copied Friedrich's composition, replacing the lonely wanderer with a carpenter who is climbing the beam. But – Na Kamura asserts – Hokusai painted his landscapes for the Western market, not the Japanese market. He focused on woodcuts because they were „typically Japanese“. And so the intercultural interplay continues.

One begins to see how analytically and precise Na Kamura works. Her art can be understood as post-structuralist painting, in which one work paints the next, explaining it while being painted. "Caspar David Friedrich plus Hokusai minus Romanticism minus Japonism is still painting," Maki Na Kamura says. That's her magic formula. She can move trees with it, relieving them of the boredom of standing around in the same old wintry field, day in, day out.

Until 13th October, Galerie Dittrich & Schlechtriem, Berlin