



**YUKI KATSURA**  
*FIERCE AUTONOMY*

**ALISON BRADLEY PROJECTS**

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Yuki Katsura, *Wave (detail)*, 1988-1992, oil and paper on canvas, 40" x 45" (102.5 x 115.5 cm).  
Courtesy of the Estate of Yuki Katsura and Alison Bradley Projects.



Yuki Katsura beneath a beech tree at her home in 1948. Photographed by Tadahiko Hayashi.

Yuki Katsura  
FIERCE AUTONOMY

Alison Bradley Projects  
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Curated by Eimi Tagore-Erwin

Alison Bradley, Principal

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## Introduction

Alison Bradley Projects is pleased to present its inaugural exhibition, *FIERCE AUTONOMY*, seminal paintings by Yuki Katsura (b. Tokyo, 1913-1991). This will be the gallery's first presentation in its new location, the historic West Chelsea Arts Building, at 526 West 26<sup>th</sup> Street, Suite 814. The exhibition features works that have never been exhibited outside of Japan, offering an exceedingly rare opportunity to enter Katsura's realm of unyielding independence, both in terms of the boundaries of modernist expression as well as her own place as a woman within Japanese society and the world.

Despite the many challenges of being a female artist in Japan's male-dominated arts community, Katsura's bold refusal to bend to any conventional mode of expression heralded her impact as a pioneering force in Tokyo's pre- and postwar painting scene. In truth, she was a pivotal figure in the genesis of the Japanese avant-garde. Katsura destabilized dominant traditions throughout her six-decade oeuvre, defiantly proclaiming that she must "resist Fauvism, resist Surrealism, and paint pictures that are no one's but my own."

Embraced by influential critics of her time such as Seiji Tōgō, Takachiyo Uemura, and Ichirō Hariu, Katsura was instrumental in the organization of prominent art collectives that became vital stepping stones for Japanese contemporary art. In 1938 she was a founding member of the experimental Ninth Room Association (*Kyushitsu-kai*) alongside Jirō Yoshihara, who would go on to establish the Gutai Art Association (*Gutai Bijutsu Kyōkai*) sixteen years later. Katsura also co-founded the Association of Women Painters (*Jyoryū Gaka Kyōkai*) in 1946, was an organizing secretary of the Japan Avant-Garde Artists Club (*Nihon Abangyarudo Bijutsuka Kurabu*), and participated in Taro Okamoto's Night Art Society (*Yoru no Kai*) at his invitation in 1948. She served as an important member and juror of the independent oil painting association *Nika-kai* from 1950-56.

*FIERCE AUTONOMY* concentrates on Katsura's lifelong engagement with representation and abstraction, revealing shrewd political proclivities that earned the artist critical acclaim and notoriety within Japan, but may have been impenetrable to western critics at the time. In particular, this exhibition showcases paintings produced during two formative moments in Katsura's six-decade career: representational works from the early 1950s when she was uniquely positioned as a woman in the center of the Japanese painting world, and her experiments into abstraction in the early 1960s following her solo travels to Paris, New York City, and the Central African Republic, where she interacted with luminaries of the artworld including Yves Klein, Michel Tapié, Jean Cocteau, and Yayoi Kusama, as well as Betty Parsons and her circle. Katsura's experiments with materiality, spatial depth, and color can be retrospectively appreciated as mirrors into the artist's psyche as she negotiated the rapidly shifting politics of gender roles and aesthetic traditions that surrounded her in these distinctive locales.

## Biography

**Yuki Katsura (b. Tokyo, 1913-1991)** resisted conforming to any particular aesthetic genre, actively interrogating dominant aesthetic traditions in her works throughout her prolific, six-decade career. Although she is often unrecognized in western art circles, Katsura has long been established as an artist of critical acclaim in Japan—a pioneering female force amongst a very male-dominated society. She took the Tokyo painting world by storm in the prewar years and rose to prominence in the postwar, becoming a central figure in the genesis of the Japanese avant-garde. Katsura's diverse oeuvre reflects her constant pursuit of autonomy, both as she maneuvered the limitations that women faced in Japan's art world, and as she pioneered an independent approach to modernist expression before and after World War II. Her unique ability to bring abstraction and representation together on canvas earned Katsura a formidable reputation in the world Japanese painting scene; her satirical yet sophisticated works refigured Japanese folktales, aesthetic boundaries, and societal norms.

Born in Tokyo into an upper-middle class family of samurai lineage during the Taishō Democracy, Katsura was raised in a household that encouraged her to be independent-minded, but also expected her to uphold Japan's traditional gender roles. Rather than studying western-style oil painting (*yōga*) like many of her male peers, Katsura's parents directed her towards Japanese-style painting (*nihonga*), which was considered more lady-like. From the age of 12, she trained under renowned ink painter Shūho Ikegami, a specialist in Chinese bird and flower painting (*kachōga*). When she was 17, Katsura's parents gingerly allowed her to study oil painting in the Tokyo ateliers of *yōga* painters Kenichi Nakamura and Saburōsuke Okada—but much to the young artist's chagrin, both men expected her to strictly paint 'feminine' subject matter, such as dolls and flowers.

Katsura's career ignited in 1933, when she transferred to the Avant-Garde Yōga Research Institute (*Abangyarudo Yōga Kenkyūjo*) where she was able to study under the more radical Tsuguharu Fujita and Seiji Tōgō, both of whom had recently returned from France and were proponents of European abstraction and Surrealism. Having long been a 'collecto-maniac,' Katsura began to incorporate unconventional subjects into her work, such as crumpled leaves, cork shavings, wood grain, rope, and Japanese *kasuri* fabric. She experimented extensively with non-art materials, creating collage and assemblage works that were groundbreaking at the time. These inventive explorations allowed Katsura to make a name for herself in art circles as a distinctly female modernist with a critical spirit—she held two solo exhibitions in Tokyo and participated in annual exhibitions organized by the independent oil painting association *Nika-kai* from 1935-1943. Katsura was a contemporary of influential Gutai artist Jirō Yoshihara; they were both commended as being at the forefront of Japanese abstraction and worked together in 1938 to found the Ninth Room Association (*Kyushitsu-kai*), an avant-garde subgroup of *Nika-kai*.

Like most of her peers, Katsura was mobilized into Imperial Japan's total war effort, but she was able to largely circumvent political conversion (*tenkō*) by avoiding natural figuration, instead painting animals with folkloric references in her paintings. Katsura's engagement with zoomorphic folklore was a rebellious act, showing subtle signs of her political voice even at a time when national sacrifice was legally and culturally mandated by the state. After Japan's defeat, Katsura continued to make political works, using caricature and allegory to negotiate the tumultuous political landscape surrounding women's rights, nuclear power, and nationalism in the immediate postwar. She co-founded the Association of Women Painters (*Jyoryū Gaka Kyōkai*) with Setsuko Migishi in 1946, participated in surrealist painter Taro Okamoto's literary-artistic group Night Art Society (*Yoru no Kai*) at his personal invitation in 1948, and created many illustrations for her close friend and cultural critic Kiyoteru

Hanada. In 1947, she also became an organizing secretary of the short-lived Japan Avant-garde Artists Club (*Nibon Abangyarudo Bijutsuka Kurabu*), which contributed to the regrouping of significant artists after the war and held two *Modern Art* exhibitions with the backing of the Yomiuri Shimbun. In 1950, Katsura was recommended as a full member of the *Nika-kai*, and served as a juror until 1956. At this point, Katsura had effectively expanded the margins of the avant-garde, both in her artistic practice as well as through her rare position as a prominent woman at the center of the Japanese painting world.

In 1956, Katsura suddenly left Japan for Paris and New York. Claiming to be too comfortably situated within art institutions in her home country, Katsura decided to confront the unknown overseas as part of her endless pursuit of autonomous expression. She spent two years living and working in Paris where she was much more than a tourist—she participated in exhibitions in Paris and Italy, even displaying her painting in a group show next to works by Pablo Picasso and Jean Arp. Katsura then spent three months living in the village of Bambari in the Central African Republic before moving to New York City, where she set up her studio and worked for almost three years, furthering her experimentation with materiality, texture, and abstraction with new influences from her experiences abroad. She was active amongst various circles of the western avant-garde, socializing with luminaries of the artworld including Yves Klein, Michel Tapié, Jean Cocteau, Sam Francis, Mark Tobey, Franz Kline, and Louis Nevelson. She frequented the highly artistic and notable circle around Betty Parsons, one of New York's most influential art dealers of the time. Katsura was also in contact with Yayoi Kusama; in 1960, the two prolific female painters were included in a seminal group exhibition of six abstract Japanese painters at Gres Gallery in Washington D.C., alongside Minoru Kawabata, Kenzō Okada, Toshinobu Onosato, and Takeo Yamaguchi.

Katsura returned to Japan in 1961 following the death of her father, where she continued to exhibit her work in major venues around the nation, including major solo exhibitions at Tokyo Gallery in 1961 and 1979. Throughout the next three decades, Katsura continued her critical engagement with gender and form, publishing four autobiographical memoirs and returning to her previous artistic engagements with non-art assemblage, folkloric allegory, and zoomorphic social satire. She continued making works that confronted socio-political issues; from 1963-1964 she illustrated the serialized translation of James Baldwin's novel *Another Country* for the Asahi Journal, taking on themes of miscegenation and homosexuality that were considered highly taboo in Japan. Katsura was a fiercely independent, influential and active force in the Tokyo art world until her death in 1991.

Her prolific oeuvre refutes the popular notion that the art world of pre- and postwar Japan are marked by an irreconcilable split—rather, Katsura's position as central to the genesis of the Japanese avant-garde reveals the key to the continuity of expression within Japanese modernism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

## Exhibitions

Katsura has been the subject of solo exhibitions at Tokyo Gallery, Tokyo (1961, 1979, 1989, 2015); Gallery Garando, Nagoya (1980); Ina Gallery, Tokyo (1985); Taka Ishii Gallery, New York (2018); Yamaguchi Prefectural Museum of Art (1980); Shimonoseki Municipal Museum of Art (1991); Ibaraki Prefectural Museum of Modern Art (1998); Ichinomiya City Memorial Art Museum of Setsuko Migishi (2007); the Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo (MOT) (2013); and the Shimonoseki City Art Museum (2013). Her work has also been included in significant international group exhibitions, such as the *International Female Artists Exhibition*, Musee d'Art Moderne, Paris (1957); *Micro-Salon Exhibition*, Iris Clert Gallery, Paris (1957); *International Contemporary Painting*, University of Arizona Art Gallery, Tucson, AZ (1959); *11<sup>th</sup> PREMIO LISSONE International Art Exhibition*, Lissone, Italy (1959); *Abstract Japanese Art*, Gres Gallery, Washington, D.C. (1960); *Twenty-seventh Corcoran Biennial*, Washington, D.C. (1961); *Carnegie International Exhibition*, Pittsburgh, PA (1961); *Resounding Spirit: Japanese Contemporary Art of the 60s*, The Gibson Gallery Collection, New York (2004).

The artist's work is included in the collections of the Museum of Modern Art, Kamakura & Hayama; Ohara Museum of Art; Itabashi Art Museum; the Museum of Contemporary Art Tokyo; the Yokohama Museum of Art; and the University of Arizona Museum of Art.





**Work** (1940)

作品 *sakubin*

Signed

Oil on canvas

20 7/8 x 17 7/8 in

53 x 45.4 cm

PROVENANCE

Artist

Katsura's greatest challenge in the prewar years was overcoming the patriarchal notion that female artists were inferior to males. This belief was readily accepted by the public, perpetuated for years by art educators, critics, and artists. *Nihonga* (Japanese style) painting was considered a cultivated, ladylike pursuit for amateur 'lady painters' (*keishū gaka*), but the thought of a woman becoming a professional artist was frowned upon—and doing so as a *yōga* (western-style) painter was unthinkable. Katsura's training in both *nihonga* and *yōga* enabled her to push beyond the boundaries imposed upon female artists. She gained critical acclaim by the mid 1930s by experimenting with unconventional subjects and materials in ways that were unprecedented, even among her male peers in Tokyo. Despite being labeled an "otoko masari" or "manly woman," a term used to denigrate women who dared to achieve as much as men, Katsura did not waver in her pursuit of autonomy, painting and collaging a wide array of collected materials into her work such as paper, *kasuri* fabric, rope, cork, wood grain, and leaves.

Katsura participated in annual Nika-kai exhibitions from 1935-1943, and by the age of 22 had held two solo exhibitions in Tokyo—the first at Kindai Gallery in 1935 and the second at Galerie Nichido in 1938, the same year she worked alongside Jirō Yoshihara to found the Ninth Room Association (*Kyushitsu-kai*). During this period, Katsura produced a remarkable body of works in which she investigated female creativity. She titled several works from this period with names that referenced feminine authorship in Japanese literature, such as *Letter* (1936), *Diary* (1938/1979), *Genji* (1938/1979), and *Crown* (1939/1979). The artist deliberated on her own identity as a female artist and the role of women within cultural and artistic fields in Japan, hoping to "paint pictures according to [her] own self as a woman without imitating anyone." But even as she gained prominence among the male-dominated avant-garde, Katsura also had to face the realities of war in the Pacific—in 1938, mobilization of the national populace into Japan's war effort began in full force. The reproductive role of women in the war was emphasized; women were expected to perform their patriotic duty as "good wives, wise mothers" (*ryōsai kenbo*), and produce "pure" national subjects of Japan.

**Work (1940)** characterizes the dilemmas Katsura faced during the launch of her artistic career and the intense social pressure of being a young Japanese woman in a nation on the brink of total war. In this dynamic oil painting, the artist combined elements of representational realism, trompe-l'œil, and Surrealism to layer two motifs upon the canvas in oil paint—a rope and a piece of fabric, both tied into knots. Arranged in a collage-like manner, the two realistically rendered motifs emerge three-dimensionally against the flatness of the abstracted background. The rope is recognizable as a *shimenawa*, or "enclosing rope," which designates a space of spiritual purity in the Japanese Shinto religion. But Katsura carefully wound the sacred shimenawa into a rigid knot—alluding to the restrictiveness of purity, or its impossibility—perhaps a critical commentary on the limitations placed upon her gendered and nationalized body. In front of the shimenawa, Katsura painted a piece of white cloth with a blue dot pattern, also arranged skillfully into a knot. Katsura is known for collecting and depicting scraps of blue and white *kasuri* fabric, Japanese textiles with distinctive woven patterns traditionally hand-loomed by farm women. The fabric in *Work* (1940) may be a length of knotted kasuri, another allusion to the constraints of domesticity and Japanese womanhood. However, upon closer observation, Katsura's use of precise, smooth strokes does not seem characteristic of the distinctive woven kasuri pattern found in her other

works—could this instead be a portrayal of a western textile, a nod towards the female artist's 'improper' adoption of western painting techniques?

At first *Work* seems to be a kind of accolade to Japan's agrarian past, a representation of traditions now lost to modernity and westernization. But paired together like this, the knotted shimenawa and fabric gesture toward the discord of identity Katsura felt in 1940. She purposely rendered motifs of Japanese tradition with recognizable discrepancies, highlighting the tensions she felt about her place in the world and her desire for freedom from stifling, sociopolitical pressures. While *Work* appears to be a kind of allegorical, natural still life, Katsura's careful use of light and shadow on the two knotted forms is not extended to the rest of the painting. Indeterminate shapes rendered in coarse, angled strokes upon a dark green background contrast heavily with the verism of the foreground, guiding the eye back to the focal twists of detailed straw and textile and making them appear to be floating in space. Further still, the artist seems to have scratched through parts of the dark background to reveal the green underpainting beneath. This spatial ambiguity reflects the artist's frustration and disillusionment as well as her early use of tradition, folklore, and allegory as a subterfuge for her political thoughts. Katsura struggled to respond to Japan's wartime situation; in the same year she painted *Work*, she turned down Hasegawa Haruko's invitation to help organize the women's wing of the Army Art Association (*Rikugun Bijutsu Kyōkai*) and exhibited *Human I* and *Human II* at the Kyūshitsu-kai exhibition, two paintings that responded critically to Japan's National Mobilization Law of 1938. As many of her works were destroyed in the devastation of wartime Tokyo, *Work* is a rare example of Katsura's prewar body of work; it is evidence of a distinctive continuity in her oeuvre that links the pre- and postwar Japanese avant-garde.

*"Twentieth-century Adam must wash away the filth of naturalism, and Eve, who has been idle until now, has said she'd lend him her hand. In the present world where there are few Eves, I can say that Katsura is one of them."*

Tamiji Kitagawa, written for the pamphlet of her solo exhibition at galerie nichido in 1938

*"I place my faith in Katsura Yuki's velvety textures, and works that incorporate strands of ceremonial rope into depictions of political incident."*

Ichirō Hariu, "Shin gūsho no hō kō," 1954



***Still Life*** (1951)

静物 *seibutsu*

Signed & dated

Oil on canvas

19 3/4 x 24 1/8 in

50 x 61 cm

**PROVENANCE**

Artist

**EXHIBITIONS**

"The World of Yuki Katsura – The Vision of a Female Artist in Paintings and Collages," The Museum of Modern Art, Ibaraki, Japan (1998)

"Yuki Katsura - A Fable," Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo, Japan (2013)

**PUBLICATIONS**

The Museum of Modern Art, Ibaraki "The World of Yuki Katsura – The Vision of a Female Artist in Paintings and Collages," Exh. cat. 1998, p.17 (Illustration).

Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo "Yuki Katsura - A Fable," Exh. cat. 2013, p. 10, 90 (Illustration).

Rather than studying *yōga* (western-style oil painting) like many of her male peers, Katsura was directed by her parents towards *nihonga* (Japanese-style painting) which was considered more appropriate for a refined young Japanese woman. From the age of 12, she trained under renowned ink painter Shūho Ikegami, a specialist in Chinese bird and flower painting (*kachōga*). When she was 17, she had the rare opportunity to begin studying *yōga* from established painters Kenichi Nakamura and Saburōsuke Okada—but much to the young artist’s chagrin, both men expected her to strictly paint “feminine” subject matter, such as dolls and flowers. Katsura’s training in naturalistic realism and *kachōga* can be clearly observed in the artist’s meticulous attention to detail in the work *Still Life* (1951). After surviving the wartime devastation of Tokyo, Katsura felt that her prewar works had been too disassociated from the reality of life in Japan. She dedicated herself to new works using folkloric motifs to respond to the tremendous political upheaval following Japan’s defeat—the war and its fallout, the American occupation and the end of Japan’s emperor system, as well as the adoption of a new democratic constitution that promised gender equality for Japanese women. 1951 in particular was a year of great change for the artist and Japan at large—the San Francisco Peace Treaty was signed two months before *Still Life* was painted, re-establishing peaceful relations between Japan and the U.S. and signaling the end of the American occupation. Katsura, having recently won the Female Painter Association Award (1949), was filled with the promise of a new start, building and moving to her new art atelier in Shinjuku that same year. The delicate subtlety of *Still Life* appears to be in contrast to the artist’s more overtly political paintings of the same time, such as *What Shall I Do!* (1950), *Now Piling Up...* (1951), *Resistance* (1952), *History of Mankind* (1953), and *Towering Rage* (1953). But Katsura’s purposeful selection of objects in this beautiful still life reveal a deep, affective allegory that addresses the seasonality of life, death, and politics in postwar Japan.

Katsura regularly incorporated materials that she collected into her paintings. In *Still Life*, viewers are presented with two chrysanthemum flowers and a persimmon on a straw sieve; a large, crumpled leaf that appears to be a lotus or *fuki* (butterbur); several pieces of Japanese *kasuri* fabric and ribbon arranged in various ways; and a *mingei* plate with a famous *uma no me* (horse’s eye) pattern. Katsura arranged these distinctly autumnal, Japanese motifs to follow the traditional style of a western still life, but also complicated the spatial depth of the piece by rendering them one in front of the other like a collage, forming a sharp visual hierarchy against the soft, flat background of the tabletop. The artist layered one swath of woven *kasuri* as a flat rectangle atop the dish, floating in the middle of the picture plane. While the leaf and knotted ribbon to its front cast a shadow upon it from a clear light source coming from the right, the oblong shape produces no shade of its own. It is very likely that these aesthetic decisions were due to the influence of glass painting, which experienced a surge of popularity in the early 1950s. In fact, in 1951, the same year that she produced *Still Life*, Katsura participated in the formation of the Glass Painting Association (*Gurasu E Kyōkai*). In glass painting technique, the background of the painting—usually a deep red—is the final layer to be added; paint is applied on the glass, progressing from the foreground to the background in collage-like layers that are then observed from the other side of the glass. Katsura’s use of deep red in the background of this work seems to illustrate her interest in combining glass and oil painting techniques; the edgework makes it clear that she added the red at the end, and even left the paint translucent at times. Striking similarities can be observed within *Still Life* and her figurative glass painting *Early Spring* (date unknown) which also included a chrysanthemum, *kasuri* fabric, and a dead leaf.

The objects nearest to the viewer in *Still Life* are immediately provocative: the chrysanthemum is a symbol of the Japanese nation and the seal of the emperor, and the persimmon is the national fruit of Japan, a symbol of good luck and longevity. However, Katsura painstakingly rendered the chrysanthemum petals into a fragile tangle and placed the browning Hachiya persimmon upside down, subverting these national symbols in a manner that may allude to the demise of emperorism and the imperial state. The crumpled leaf is depicted upside down, torn and crumpled, also an allusion to decay and the changing of seasons. It could be a lotus, a common symbol of enlightenment; or a fuki, a plant native to Japan and motif frequently used within Japanese nativist mythology and indigenous Ainu folklore. The leaf in *Still Life* has two holes that resemble empty eyes, a subtle inclusion that is characteristic of Katsura's zoomorphic style. All are characteristic of autumn, and the work was painted in November. Behind these organic materials, Katsura included blue and white kasuri fabrics, Japanese textiles with distinctive woven patterns traditionally hand-loomed by farm women and symbolic of tradition and simpler, agrarian life. Similarly, the mingei plate, arranged furthest away from the viewer, is a quintessential example of the Mingei Movement to preserve and appreciate Japan's traditional, everyday folk craftsmanship in response to the rapid industrialization of the nation. The artistic and intellectual movement gained popularity in the 1920-30s, and the uma no me plate is considered a coveted piece for all mingei enthusiasts. Taken together, the chrysanthemums, persimmon, leaf, kasuri, and mingei dish in *Still Life* portray a quiet scene of national decay, the end of a political and cultural "season" in Japan, only accentuated further by the artist's decision to paint it as a western-style still life.

Also significant to note is that the mingei plate belonged to Katsura's mother Keiko, who had passed away in 1948. Katsura combined intricate detailing to depict the plate's pattern and glaze with dry, sweeping painterly brushstrokes along its edge, an approach that makes the dish appear to begin abstracting at its edges, almost leveling its three dimensionality to join the flat plane of the background. Katsura added a hairline crack in the edge of the dish, another allusion to the fragmented state of Japanese culture and politics at the time. The artist's precision with the brush was intentional, and the inclusion of her mother's dish alongside these distinctive national motifs is particularly potent, revealing an acute sense of the cultural, political, and social dissolution that emerged at the end of the war. Although Katsura was certainly critical of the nationalism and social expectations in Japan of her time, the artist never questioned her identity as Japanese despite the cultural upheavals and conflicting social norms that followed the devastation of the war. 1951 marked a new beginning for Japan, but was also the end of an epoch of "pure" and conservative Japanese tradition that the artist likely associated with her parents' generation.

*"My mother was not an affectionate person, nor was she an intellectual, but her critical and strict dispositions had a certain uniqueness that was intense...She was perceptive to any kind of lies, and she foremost respected people who spoke in their own words, with their own ideas of life, and their own world view that truly came from their own inner selves."*

Yuki Katsura, passages from her 1974 memoirs *Fox's Epic Journey* and its sequel, reprinted in *Existing within a white space [Yohaku wo ikiru]* in 2005. (Translated in "Demythifying Japanese Women Artists" Exhibition Catalogue, Nukaga Gallery, 2016)



***Towering Rage*** (1953)

怒髪天をつく *dobatsu ten o tsuku*

Signed & dated

Oil on canvas

20 7/8 x 17 7/8 in

53 x 45.4 cm

PROVENANCE

Artist

EXHIBITIONS

"Yuki Katsura, Works from 1950's, 1960's & 1970's," Tokyo Gallery, Japan (1978)

"Between Objects and Images: Yuki Katsura Exhibition," Ikebukoro Seibu Department Store, Tokyo, Japan (1986)

"New Images of Man," Blum and Poe, Los Angeles, (2020). Curated by Alison Gingeras. Lent by Alison Bradley Projects.

Katsura's work took on a brazenly political edge in the postwar period. Having survived the wartime devastation of Tokyo and the political conversion (*tenkō*) of many of her artist peers, Katsura felt that her earlier works had been too disassociated from the reality of life in Japan, so she dedicated herself to a bold new body of work that satirized postwar societal contradictions. She continued to draw upon folkloric motifs, painting allegoric satires in response to living through tremendous political upheaval in Japan after the nation's defeat—the U.S. Occupation (1945-1952), the end of Japanese imperialism, and the adoption of a new democratic constitution. The new constitution codified the emperor as a symbolic sovereign and promised women improved civil liberties including the right to vote for the first time. But as it was written by Americans, women like Katsura felt a mixture of hope and apprehension at the promise of gender equality in Japan. Nonetheless, Katsura proactively embraced the notion of increased independence in the postwar, moving out from her parents' home to live on her own for the first time in 1945 and co-founding the Association of Women Painters (*Joryū Gaka Kyōkai*) with Setsuko Migishi in 1946, which aimed to raise the status of female artists as individuals.

Katsura's work from this period has been referred to as her engagement with political satire and “black humor,” investigating the “tragicomic” nature of human existence in works that responded to the instability and unpredictability of contemporary life. In many of these works she recast old folkloric stories and characters in novel ways—shifting the tales from didactic narratives to more open-ended interpretations that allowed audiences to discern the moral lessons for themselves. Katsura's allegoric critiques of society sought to destabilize fixed meanings, reflecting the artist's hope to be “able to paint only what [she] wanted, without being beholden to anyone.”

In *Towering Rage* (1953) Katsura used thick strokes of oil paint to depict the wide-eyed glare of a menacing yellow figure, which could be read upon first glance as an *oni*, a villainous ogre that is a well-known icon of Japanese folklore. However, upon further consideration of the painting, it becomes clear that Katsura has skillfully rendered an optical illusion—what appears at first to be a single face emerges as a *three-headed figure* with shared eyes and protruding jaws and teeth on either side. The original Japanese title of the work, *dohatsu ten o tsuku* (怒髪天をつく) is an idiom that conveys a fury so intense that one's hair stands upright and reaches the heavens. Significantly, the word *dohatsu-ten* by itself also evokes an irate image of *Batō Kannon* in Buddhist iconography (*Hayagriva* in Sanskrit), one of the six transformations of the Bodhisattva Kannon, who usually takes on a three-headed, wrathful form. In this case, *dohatsu-ten* can refer to the angry-haired heavenly being. In Japanese folklore, *Batō Kannon* is known as the guardian of the animal realm, a furious sentient with sharp fangs, a lion's mane, and equine features such as a horse's mouth—all of which can be observed in *Towering Rage*. Katsura's decision to include distinctive horns atop the figure's head is unusual as it complicates whether the figure is in fact *Batō Kannon* or an *oni*, perhaps combining visual archetypes as a way to recast both allegoric figure's presumed roles within folklore and Buddhism. Similarly, the painting does not include any direct reference to a horse or include a “third eye,” as are typical in representations of *Batō Kannon*. The artist moved away from realist convention in this work, instead employing caricature to interpret the mythical being. His wild, piercing eyes are off-kilter and framed by sharp bundles of golden hair that seem to explode outward,



echoing the title of the work as they are barely contained within the pictorial frame. Katsura emphasized the materiality of her chosen medium through the use of contrasting colors, dark outline, and the flattening of the figure's intimidating features. She complicated the depth of the pictorial frame with selective application of light and shadow, using a collage-like technique to build up the paint with dynamic blocks of color that bring the looming head to life, even as it almost appears to float upon a demure blue background. While the piece is figurative, the artist's clear understanding of the principles of abstraction come through in her unique construction of the figure; she deliberately positioned the fangs to articulate three sets of jaws, splaying outward to mimic the horns above in a visual echo that corresponds to his bristling hair.

While oni are typically cast as the wicked enemies of mankind, the more merciful Batō Kannon is known for removing sicknesses, curses, and obstacles. With its crazed expression peering back at audiences with all three faces, the striking subject of Katsura's painting seems to scrutinize humanity itself. The artist's deft depiction of the Kannon's fearsome expression indicates the artist's political thoughts and activities at the time; it was one of many of Katsura's works that strongly critiqued society in the early 1950s, such as *Resistance* (1952), *March* (1952), *History of Mankind* (1953), *Women's Day* (1953), *Human and Fish* (1954), and *We're all Suffering* (1954). During this time, Katsura was an active member and juror of the progressive group *Nika-kai*, an influential position that may not have been possible for a woman in the prewar. She moved in the same circles as other politically-engaged cultural figures of Japan; for example, the artist became close friends with cultural critic Kiyoteru Hanada and participated in Hanada and acclaimed artist Tarō Okamoto's Night Society (*Yoru no Kai*) along with Kōbō Abe, Yutaka Haniya and others. Several members of the group had strong Marxist inclinations and emphasized the importance of art's engagement with politics; they were highly critical of the guise of liberal democracy and the dangers of nuclear power. At this time, Japan was still reeling from the dropping of the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and were wary of the American's continued engagement with nuclear testing at the Bikini Atoll in the Marshall Islands between 1946-1958, a territory formerly occupied by the Imperial Japanese Navy. Katsura was personally invited to participate in the Night Society by Okamoto—both artists shared a deep interest in the incorporation of folklore and the combination of different artistic styles in their work. With its strong palette—especially the use of stark black and white and the contrast of warm and cool tones—*Towering Rage* in particular appears to be resonant of Okamoto's work of the same era. Katsura produced one other painting piece also entitled *Towering Rage* in the same year, another work reminiscent of Okamoto's murals in its stylistic approach and palette.

Katsura painted *Towering Rage* in the same year as *History of Mankind* and *Women's Day*, two works that critiqued the limitations of freedom and the empty promises of democratic society. It also precedes her most political works, *Human and Fish* and *We're all Suffering*, both painted in 1954 following the Daigo Fukuryū Maru (Lucky Dragon) nuclear incident that resulted in the irradiation of 23 Japanese fishermen caused by the U.S. military's critically miscalculated "Castle Bravo" test at Bikini Atoll. Katsura painted *Towering Rage* in 1953, one year before the incident, and if the menacing yellow figure she painted did refer to Batō Kannon, it is eerily prophetic. Batō Kannon has also been popularized as a guardian of local fishermen, his large, horse-like mouth is said to have the ability to swallow the power of the ocean without difficulty and save those lost at sea.

Katsura has used Buddhist and folkloric motifs in many of her works, including the detailed rendering of what could be an oni or Batō Kannon in her prewar oil painting *Work* (1936), as well as the figuration of the oni in her postwar paintings *Oni and Flower* (1954) and *Oni in a Yukata* (1955), the latter of which was awarded a prize by the Nika-kai.

*“If you’re a modern person, you must always carry the spirit of criticism...and there’s an attitude that you shouldn’t only paint what you can sense around you.”*

Katsura, “What is a Motif?” *Atelier* No. 330, August 1954



**Work** (1961)

作品 *sakubin*

Signed

Oil and paper on canvas

38 1/4 x 49 3/4 in

97 x 126.5 cm

#### PROVENANCE

Artist

#### EXHIBITIONS

"The Path of Postwar Art 4: Yuki Katsura The Works from 1957-1962" Tokyo Gallery, Tokyo (1989)

In September of 1956, after winning the member's prize at the 40<sup>th</sup> Annual Nika-kai exhibition, Katsura decided to leave Tokyo for Europe, Africa, and the United States. Claiming to be too comfortably situated within art institutions in Japan, Katsura traveled to Europe as part of her endless pursuit of autonomous expression, like her teachers Tsuguharu Fujita and Seiji Tōgō at the Avant-Garde Yōga Research Institute (*Abangyarudo Yōga Kenkyūjo*). Katsura spent two years exploring, sketching, and exhibiting in Europe with Paris as her base. She was much more than a tourist—she participated in exhibitions in Paris and Italy, even displaying her painting in a group show next to works by Pablo Picasso and Jean Arp. She then spent three months living in the village of Bambari in the Central African Republic where she experienced big-game hunting, which she later documented in her 1962 book *A Woman Alone Enters a Primitive Village: Memoirs from Africa and America* (*Onna hitori genshi bu- raku ni hairu: afurika, amerika no taikenki*). The artist moved to New York City in June of 1958, where she set up her studio and furthered her exploration of abstraction and texture for almost three years.

Katsura began making collages with handmade Japanese *washi* paper while in New York, finding that it was readily available for purchase in Greenwich Village. She was able to move to a large, sunny studio near Washington Square Park in 1960 and devoted herself completely to her new body of work, in which she turned away from verism almost entirely, investigating the materiality of the paint and washi to create textural paintings with large, oblong shapes that filled the majority of the canvas. **Work (1961)** is one of these prolific works. She affixed fibrous washi paper to the canvas and applied oil paint on top it, both in washes and with dry brushstrokes, letting the paint settle into the wrinkles of the washi to highlight the tactility of her chosen medium. Katsura called these new paintings “forms,” and they are often referred to as the artist's experiments with Abstract Expressionism. In 1960, the Katsura and Yayoi Kusama (who coincidentally moved to NYC the exact same month as Katsura) were included in a seminal group exhibition “Japanese Abstraction” at Gres Gallery in Washington D.C., alongside Minoru Kawabata, Kenzō Okada, Toshinobu Onosato, and Takeo Yamaguchi—all were Japanese artists living in the U.S. at the time. The artist had been negotiating with surface quality of the pictorial plane in her works since the 1930s, incorporating cork, paper, fabric in works with elements of collage and trompe-l'œil—groundbreaking experiments that had gained her critical acclaim amongst her male peers in Tokyo. Her continued interest in surface, materiality, and texture are indicated in the detailed sketchbooks while she was in Europe—for example, while in Heidelberg, Germany, the artist created frottage rubbings of the side of buildings. These frottages have some visual and material similarities with her washi and oil paintings produced in New York, especially in her careful, deliberate application of dry paint to emphasize the three-dimensionality of the wrinkles, creases, and tears of the washi.

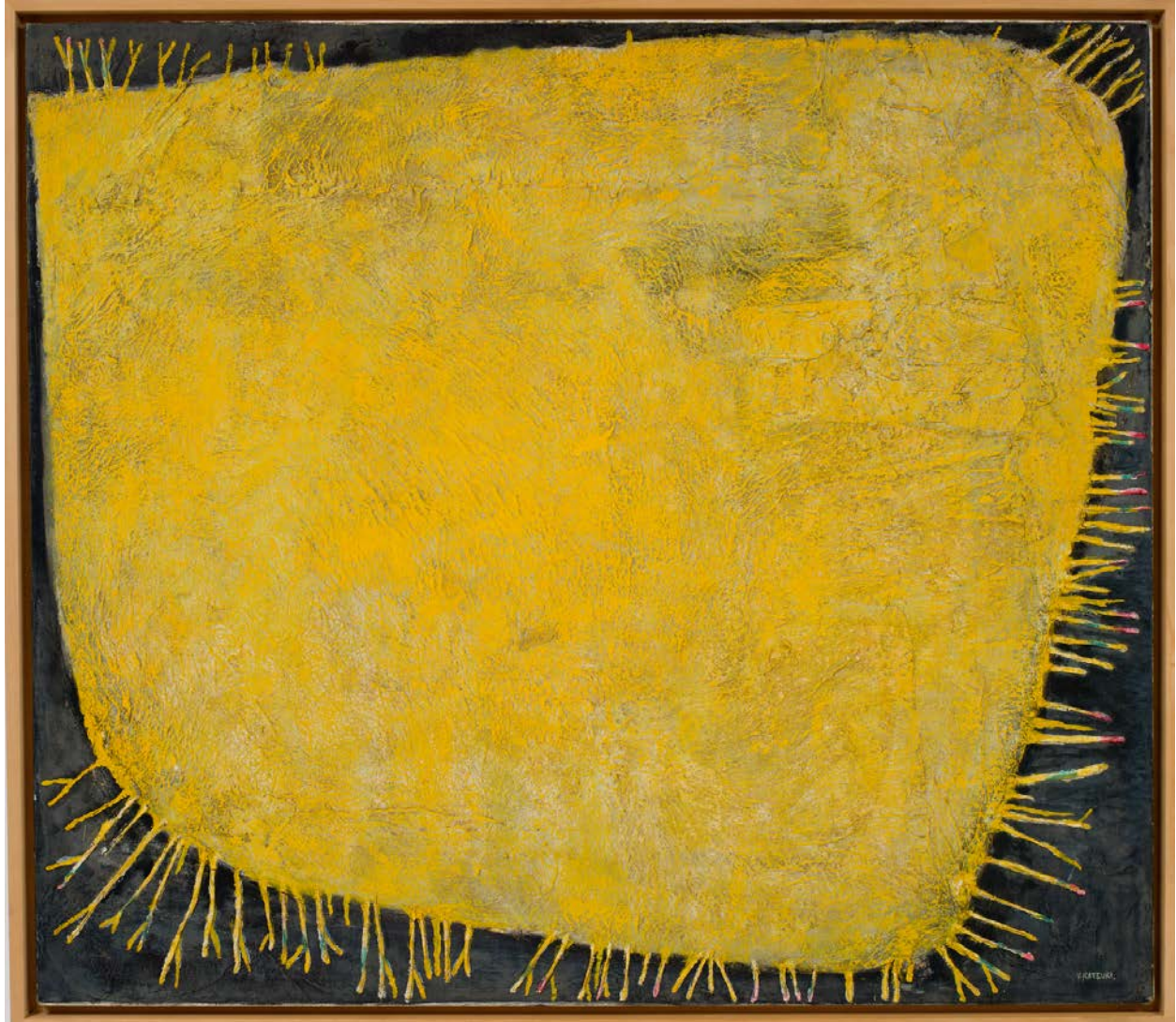
At first Katsura rendered the indeterminate “forms” with sharp, defined edges, but as can be observed in *Work* (1961), she soon began to emphasize the torn edges and disintegrating fiber of the washi paper, bringing formerly abstracted shapes to life with dynamic, whimsical “legs” that extended outward. *Work* is rendered in a saturated green, with washes of bright red showing through the velvety brushwork beneath—a tactic that created volume and body within the form. The artist rendered the background of the piece in thick, heavy layers of neutral paint around the washi paper, even further diversifying the surface of the canvas. Especially in the transitions from washi to thick paint along the “legs” of the green form, Katsura's well-known precision with the

brush reveals moments of soft deliberation that showcase the artist's attention to materiality and detail. As its "legs" appear to propel the form towards the right edge of the frame, giving it movement and life, *Work* showcases that Katsura's experimentations in New York were not purely abstraction—limiting the artist's works from this period to a singular genre may be reductive to her oeuvre. In fact, beneath the form is a curious light-yellow shape that appears to mimic the form like a shadow, making it appear to be some kind of multi-legged creature.

*Work* is a truly seminal piece, connecting Katsura's explorations into abstraction while overseas to her signature styles of zoomorphic allegory and folkloric caricature. It precedes her seminal painting *Millipede* (1962) as well as *Caterpillar* (1965), two works in which Katsura embraced representative painting again, but continued to use washi to add textural qualities in a unique approach that the artist would continue exploring for the rest of her career. Katsura returned to Tokyo in May of 1961 following the death of her father. Less than a month after her return, she held a major solo show at Tokyo Gallery, displaying her bold new body of works in Japan for the first time.

*"Indeed, Katsura did not depict plain abstracts. Something chaotic indwells in the central form; one can feel the buried emotions being aroused by the expression created via the folds in the washi paper and...use of colors."*

"Demythifying Japanese Women Artists" Exhibition Catalogue, Nukaga Gallery 2016



**Work** (1958-1962)

作品 *sakubin*

Signed

Oil and paper on canvas

40 3/8 x 45 7/8 in

102.5 x 116.5 cm

#### PROVENANCE

Artist

#### EXHIBITIONS

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For *Work*, Katsura used the washi paper to create a large, saturated yellow “form” that is nearly filling the entirety of the canvas, floating upon a background produced with a thin wash of dark gray or black oil paint. The striking use of negative and positive space in this composition showcases the artist's deft skill with layers, contrast, and the picture plane—there is a palpable tension due to the closeness of the form to the edge of the canvas. As in many of her works created at this time, Katsura lengthened the disintegrating fiber of the washi paper's edges to line the four-sided form with dynamic “legs” that extend outwards dynamically to add movement to the form and fill the remaining negative space. Beneath the chalky texture of the yellow form's

surface, areas of dark gray and white show through, demonstrating the accumulation of layers painstakingly added to this four-year production. The tactile accumulation of paper and paint is resonant of earthy materials like stucco or stone, perhaps influenced by Katsura's experiences in Central Africa shortly before she began working on this painting in 1958. The "legs" the artist added in *Work* are distinctive—thick paint was used to create slender lines that are raised substantially from the dark background, and almost all of them end in two prongs. She added subtle dashes of red and green to these fringe-like legs, complementary colors that balance the composition and may have also been another reference to Africa.

The sheer materiality of *Work* is remarkable, a testament to Katsura's commitment to finding her own original style and approach to artistic expression. Katsura finished the painting in 1962, after returning to Japan in May of 1961 following the death of her father. Less than a month after her return, she held a major solo show at Tokyo Gallery, displaying her bold new body of works in Japan for the first time. Katsura continued incorporating washi paper into her paintings after her experimentation in New York City; the wrinkled surface it created became part of the unique style that she continued exploring for the rest of her career.

*Katsura-san has returned to Tokyo for the first time in 5 years.  
From Europe to Africa,  
And from there to America,  
She went around the world.*

*During this time, I've met Katsura twice in Paris and once in New York,  
So you could say that I've seen the lifestyle of this woman relatively well.  
And, in a few words, my impression was that  
Yuki Katsura is Yuki Katsura,  
No matter where she was.  
And nothing else.*

*Among my fellow countrymen who have gone abroad,  
I don't think there was ever anyone else who held true to themselves as firmly as she.  
From the ashes of Paris to the hustle and bustle of New York,  
[Katsura] was always able to stand precisely upon her own feet.*

Shinichi Segui, Introduction to the Yuki Katsura Exhibition Catalogue, Tokyo Gallery, 1961





***Untitled*** (c. 1960s)

Signed

Acrylic and paper on canvas

24 x 19 3/4 x 1 in

61 x 50.2 x 2.5 cm

PROVENANCE

Artist

*Untitled (c. 1960s)* is another of Katsura's bold experiments with material and form, most likely painted in her studio in New York City in the early 1960s. Katsura used her unique technique of affixing fibrous washi paper to what appears to be untreated canvas, depicting two "forms"—one large and one small—with velvety shades of black, green, and blue. Smoky, dry-brushed edges surround the upper form as the smaller, darker shape grounds the composition. The artist deftly created a subtle variation in the tonality and variation of the two forms, negotiating the tension between balance and precarity as they seem to balance atop one another like stones. As in her other works from this period, Katsura emphasized the materiality of the oil paint, allowing it to settle in the wrinkles and folds of the paper to create variation and texture on the surface of the canvas. She left the area around the forms unpainted, a rare choice that further accentuates their weight and plasticity, as well as the woven surface of the canvas itself. The darker tones in this piece are similar to two larger scale works Katsura produced in 1961 (both entitled *Work*). They stand in contrast to the more vividly saturated paintings she created while in New York, attesting to the artist's experimentation with colors and tonality during this period as well. *Untitled* has a jewel-like quality, catching the light like obsidian against the subdued background.

*"Katsura shows work of great delicacy and strength. Using collage, she builds up textural abstractions that sometimes recall Tapié. However, she also uses strong colors as well—orange, strong green, deep brick red. The surfaces have great variety and depth."*

Leslie Judd Ahlander, article in the *Washington Post* about Gres Gallery exhibition, November, 1960

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Thank you to Ise Henriques Sharp

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