

ART

Keita's Rembrandt: Osaka to Toronto and back again

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by Harvey Solomon-Brady | February 3, 2021



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In Blue, 2020, acrylic and oil on linen 60 x 60 inches

“My high school teacher used to always say how great Rembrandt was, but I didn’t understand how good these paintings were just from the books. It didn’t translate well until I saw it in person. I was blown away. I wanted to capture that sense of tangibility.”

When you see Rembrandt’s paintings in your peripheral vision, it feels as if those people in the portraits are standing right beside you...

It was in the Rembrandt room at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York that Keita Morimoto realised he was behind in his craft, despite being centuries ahead. As a 20-year-old student at Canada’s prestigious OCAD University, the Dutch master intimidated his Japanese admirer into transformation. “When you see these paintings in your peripheral vision, it feels as if those people in the portraits are standing right beside you. That’s the

feeling Rembrandt gave me. I didn't have that feeling from Bouguereau or Sargent.”

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After Dark, 2020, acrylic and oil on linen 48 x 60 inches

And so Keita resolved to study Rembrandt ceaselessly, and was neurotic about it for a very long time. “I was like Tim Jenison [inventor who attempted to recreate Johannes Vermeer's works using pinhole technology] in *Tim's Vermeer*. I'd take thousands of photographs, close-ups and wide shots.” Keita endeavoured to emulate Rembrandt in his portraits, quickly noticing how much more he could achieve with the techniques and knowledge he'd gained at art college. After his method was honed materially, he set about working on the narrative of his work, “I wanted to express the ideas, thoughts, and emotions I saw on the streets of Toronto. That indescribable feeling that isn't necessarily present in commissioned portraits.”

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Born and raised in Osaka in 1990, 16 years later Keita moved to Belleville, Canada – a small town east of Toronto – on his own as part of a homestay exchange to learn English. Instead of insisting he return to Osaka to teach, his parents encouraged him to stay in Canada to pursue his dream of becoming a painter (something Keita points out is very unusual for Asian parents). After completing his Bachelor of Fine Arts at OCAD University (Ontario College of Art & Design), he saw his work exhibited at art fairs and in galleries all over North America, under the auspices of Nicholas Metivier Gallery, Toronto.



After the Rain, 2016, acrylic and oil on linen, 48 x 60 inches



Market, 2017, oil on linen, 48 x 60 inches



Convergence, 2017, oil on linen, 48 x 60 inches

Blending elements of Baroque traditionalism and an almost postmodern magical realism is clearly a broadly ambitious enterprise, so exactly just how much choreography does a Morimoto painting demand? “In terms of composition, a lot of figures aren’t actually in the scene, they’re superimposed with Photoshop. I want to create this cinematic effect like [American realist photographer] Gregory Crewdson. He’ll often have a stage with houses and trees, an outdoor setup. I didn’t have the budget that Crewdson does but I wanted to recreate that sense of choreography in my work as well as capturing the melodramatic quality of the figures.

In order to mimic Edward Hopper, I would need to not only take the photo of a street scene but invent one from scratch...

“One of the biggest influences for me was Edward Hopper. When I studied his work I realised that if I just take a photo of people on the street it doesn't look anything like Hopper's work. Oftentimes, Hopper's scenes have this dead-on narrow focus on these people's faces, in isolation. I discovered that in order to mimic that I would need to not only take the photo of a street scene but invent one from scratch. Some portrait artists prefer people they don't know but I actually feel much better painting people I do know. I'm more engaged emotionally when painting them.”

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504, 2018, oil on linen, 72 x 96 inches

Keita's work transitioned from capturing figures in their immediate environment to something much more pioneering: to explain his subjects and re-materialise them in another time and place. The work that most typifies this is 'Pilgrimage', part of his 2015-16 Strange Guild series. “I was trying to learn from all these all these painters like Gainsborough, Constable, and Thomas Lawrence. I'd look at these very, very English paintings and they'd often have this façade, or an artificial garden that they created as a backdrop for these figures. That's when it struck me like lightning. If I could just have a foreground make sense, I could use an epic backdrop and try to incorporate them together.

“It definitely wasn't easy. I had to study dozens of techniques to make sense of the tonal and colour compositions. That piece then fed into my current body of work with all these works of urban scapes. But in these new works it feels like they're just sitting or standing there. They're not truly on the street, but they're actually composed in the almost identical way to this classical Baroque approach with aristocratic figures.”



Pilgrimage, 2016, oil on linen, 72 x 96 inches



Europa, 2015, oil on canvas, 72 x 96 inches



Afterwards, 2020, acrylic and oil on linen 48 x 60



Diner, 2018, oil on panel, 48 x 60 inches

The future for Keita Morimoto's work is one which will seek to carefully stitch together his divided experiences of Japan and Canada. Now back in Japan and having recently settled in Tokyo with his wife, Keita has lots of cultural relearning to do and still has what he calls 'glitches' in interactions with his compatriots. "It's very difficult," he muses, "because this is my home country, but I think and dream in English now. My adult identity was established in Canada and not here in Japan. Now I'm back here it's like I'm catching up with my 16-year-old self. I don't communicate in the same way as, say, a 30-year-old Japanese person. I'm a bit uncomfortable not being that proficient in the mannerisms and common sense. It's definitely jarring.

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“But the sense of displacement was also felt when I moved to Canada first. For a very long time, about a decade, I was feeling that sense of displacement, so I'm used to this feeling. I've already confronted that fear when I was young, so at this point I'm almost enjoying it. And it'll affect my work. I want to add more of the fantastical to my work like Peter Doig. Japanese art and comic book culture is all about this transformation of reality so, I'm just going to let these things take their own life and leave my future up to destiny.”

Keita Morimoto's work can be viewed on his website, keitamorimoto.com, and on his Instagram [@morimotostudio](https://www.instagram.com/morimotostudio).