



CULTURE

## Artist Keita Morimoto on painting the present

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BY AARON CHOW

Following his appearance at WOAW Gallery's *The Descendants* group presentation at K11 MUSEA, we spoke with contemporary Japanese artist Keita Morimoto to better understand his story, influences, and vision.

Over 20 international artists exhibited in the spacious Kunsthalle space for *The Descendants*. Works included "Emperor Manchu the Cowboy," a work by Oscar Yi Hou depicting a Chinese ruler fitted in New Balance 9060s, "Desert Night Walk" by L.A.-based artist Michelle Blade which took us on an overnight camping escape, and other captivating pieces which showcased "a generation of pivotal artists who are at the forefront of guiding contemporary art from across the globe," in the words of WOAW.

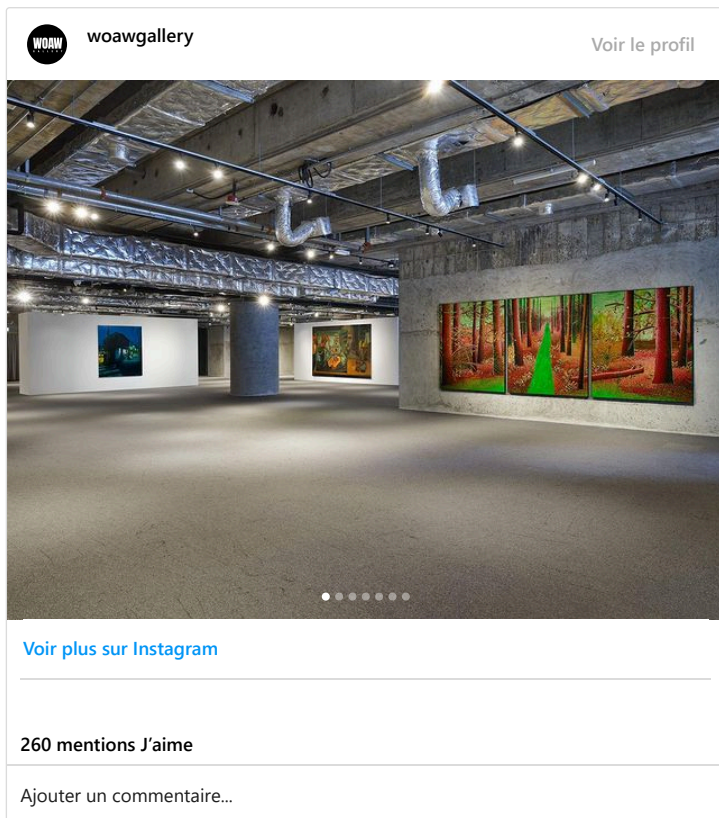
Walking through the space, the piece that stood out to me the most was Keita Morimoto's oil and acrylic on canvas piece, "Echoing Light." The scene reminded me of a feeling I've felt before, wandering down a calm side street in the city after a dinner with friends. From afar, the painting could be mistaken as a photograph. Taking a few steps in however, one will begin to make out the marvellous details carved from single brushstrokes.



Growing up in Japan, Morimoto revealed that he wanted to be a manga artist, but was discouraged by the feedback he got from his stories. He loved art, so stayed steadfast in his dream of becoming a painter, graduating Ontario College of Art & Design University with a degree in Fine Arts. Combining classical training with a distinct style reminiscent of Dutch Golden Age paintings, Morimoto creates narrative works that transport viewers into magical and mysterious realms featuring subtle nods to anime, street fashion, and rebellious subcultures.

Delving beyond the canvas, we uncover Morimoto's artistic philosophy and his desire to capture the present moment, drawing inspiration from the masters of the past while remaining authentic to his own experiences. He reveals the personal connections that guide his selection of subjects and we explore the lasting impact of his work, contemplating how future generations will perceive his depictions of today's landscapes, knowing that they may one day become nostalgic relics.

Join us as we enter Morimoto's imaginative world, where classical compositions merge with contemporary influences, inviting us to reflect on the interplay between history, culture, and personal experiences.



### How was your trip to Hong Kong?

My trip to Hong Kong was surprising in a good way because I was expecting a little more slowness. I didn't expect this super fast, exciting, almost New York-like pace and vibe. It was nice to see it in an Asian city because that's been kind of rare nowadays. Even Tokyo is kind of quiet and slower nowadays. I definitely wasn't prepared for it. When I was there, the art felt integrated into the public as part of their lifestyle, which I thought was really nice as well because in many places, art is often separated from the public.

### I've noticed a lot of your works depict nighttime with a focus on neon lights. What draws you to that particular scene?

That's a good question. I think it's so characteristic of the Tokyo landscape. I was painting both day and night scenes in Toronto, but in Tokyo, the nighttime glow — vending machines, Korean stores, and all these pachinko stores — have their own voice and presence. They feel to be more than just an object but like a living creature. I enjoy capturing that energy at night.

### Oftentimes when I see images of Tokyo night scenes, they often capture the bustle of the city. For your paintings however, they're much more calm and melancholy. Why is that?

I definitely prefer side streets of the cities where there aren't a lot of people. At the same, when I moved to Tokyo, it was during lockdown time. There was literally no one outside and you see these big city lights with no one around at 8:00 PM, so that was so surreal. It felt like these lights were being blasted for no reason other than just being there, so I just felt like there was much more of a living presence of the light. I think I got really drawn to that quality of it. When there's more people around, it kind of takes focus away from the light in a sense.



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**When planning out your paintings, do you take a photograph first, or do you go off your memory?**

Most of the time I take photographs, but I do a kind of abstract drawing study so I can get initial inspiration of shapes and the composition. Then, I often look for scenes that match that kind of quality. It starts with the imagination, and then I go find source images to reference, followed by digital collaging.

**Your pieces remind me of classic films such as *Blade Runner* and Wong Kar Wai's *Fallen Angels*. Are there any films that have inspired you?**

Yes, definitely. I get comments about *Blade Runner* but I look at a lot of different films for colour inspiration. I think *Into The Void* was an interesting film. It's very niche and I don't think a lot of people know about it, but it was very trippy and psychedelic. I really like animations for sure. In terms of colour inspirations, I definitely get inspiration from [Hayao] Miyazaki and Makoto Shinkai. I recently rewatched *Gremlin* and that was amazing colour as well. The '80s and '90s colour grading is pretty wild.

**Have you thought of playing with other mediums other than oil on canvas?**

In terms of mediums, I do want to experiment a little bit more with the textural quality of acrylic and oil. When I saw the abstract works at K-11, I just got so inspired by the textures and build-up of paint, so I think that's something I want to incorporate into my new works — a kind of textural quality. I also started drawing a little bit more. That was inspired by David Hockney's retrospective in Tokyo.

**The characters in your paintings are very life-like, almost like they are based off a real person. How do you choose who appears in your paintings?**

Most of the time, I just trust the natural network of people that I meet. When I meet new people and connect with them, I often ask them to come over to the studio and we do a photoshoot. I use that photograph and digital collage it into street scenes. So often it's really about my personal connection with these people. I try not to seek out models.

I really like the practise of people like Nicole Eisenman. She holds home parties of friends coming over, and then she paints them while they're having drinks, meals and stuff. This kind of organic connection with people is something I'm interested in as well. We do dinner parties often with small groups.

**Your paintings depict the street scenes of today while a lot of your references are depicting how the landscapes were like from decades and centuries past. Have you ever thought about how future generations are going to see your pieces — how they may refer to them as a reference point of this era?**

I think five or six years ago I switched away from painting classical landscape with contemporary figures which were done by a lot of artists and my peers. I started thinking, "OK," instead of using a classical background and creating parody pieces of sorts, maybe I'll think about how these painters would have depicted today's scene. I wanted to be as true to today's experience as possible.

I definitely do think about how maybe even 10 years or 20 years down the road, some of the buildings that I paint might not exist. That happened two times and it just becomes this kind of like commemoration of these places. I find some kind of romanticism in that. I know nostalgia can be dangerous if you keep looking at the past as a good thing, but there's definitely this kind of quality of reminiscing about the past which I find beautiful. I'm not a true documenter, like a photographer, but I depict more of how somebody might have experienced life today.





**What are some of the biggest influences on your personal style?**

Rembrandt was the first big influence for me. I got into painting seriously because of Rembrandt. This quality of real human presence in paintings was beyond what photography can capture, so that was definitely a big influence for me. I wanted to capture the human presence in my work as well, while capturing kind of their own authentic experience like [David] Hockney, Edward Harper and maybe even William Eggleton, and Nicole Eisenman of today. I think I definitely gravitate towards people who capture their own personal experiences rather than global, macro themes.

**With your paintings being described as “hyper-real,” what do you think is the difference between the impact of your works and that of a photographer?**

Because I’ve been trained in classical painting, with lots of knowledge on past methodologies and how they compose, there’s a natural way of where I focus and abstract. I think you could do it if you’re proficient enough with digital paintings, but even a digital painting doesn’t offer the textural differences and stuff like that. So I think when translating photography to painting, there’s a lot of transformation that happens which make the painting a painting.

There’s much more of a conscious decision on where a painter wants the viewer to focus on and stuff like that. So I definitely do think the translation into painting is a very important practise for me. In photography, there’s sometimes almost too much information captured.

**Do you have any concepts that you’ve yet to actualise which you can share with us?**

It’s still very abstract, but I want to create a side alleyway in an urban area that doesn’t really exist. I’ve been messing around a bit with AI softwares as well so maybe I can create something from that, but the concept is something like “The Upside Down” from *Stranger Things*. I really like the idea of an alternate space that mirrors our

reality. There's nothing concrete yet but you might see something like that in the future. That's giving me ideas actually so thank you.

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Keita Morimoto's works are currently showing at the 3-person "Stories After Extinction" exhibition at the MtK Contemporary Art gallery in Kyoto. More details can be found below.

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