ALMINE RECH

Keita Morimoto
To Nowhere and Back

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Almine Rech New York, Tribeca is pleased to present 'To Nowhere and Back,' Keita Morimoto's first solo exhibition with the gallery, on view from March 14 to April 26, 2025.

Keita Morimoto's paintings investigate the interplay of light and shadow, offering a reimagined perspective on the modern urban landscape. Rooted in classical techniques and infused with contemporary sensibilities, his works transform everyday scenes into cinematic tableaux that hover between reality and dream. Morimoto challenges viewers to uncover beauty in the mundane and magic in the overlooked by marrying meticulous observation with an otherworldly atmosphere. In 'To Nowhere and Back' at Almine Rech in New York City, he continues his exploration of light as a transformative force, turning the quotidian into the paranormal. Through the construction of liminal spaces, his paintings create thresholds between the concrete urban world and the ethereal realm of memory, inviting viewers to discover enchantment within the unnoticed.

Morimoto uses his paintings to cultivate a peculiar space between belonging and displacement many of us inhabit in the modern world. Neither strictly past nor present, neither entirely physical nor conceptual, Morimoto's works transcend time and space, inviting viewers into a world that is at once familiar and otherworldly. At their core lies an abiding fascination with light—not merely as a visual medium but as a means of conveying emotion, crafting narratives, and bridging the mundane with the sublime. "The anonymous, liminal spaces in my paintings echo the feeling of never fully belonging," Morimoto shares. "I'm drawn to the way emotions can transform a familiar setting into something entirely different, revealing deeper truths about the human experience."

In 'To Nowhere and Back,' Morimoto captures the ephemeral allure of urban life while exploring more profound questions of identity, memory, and transcendence. These works are not merely windows into Morimoto's world but mirrors reflecting our shared experiences of solitude, connection, and the fleeting beauty of modern life. Each exhibition Morimoto creates unfolds as a journey through the hidden corners of cityscapes—those overlooked spaces that become supernatural realms through Morimoto's gaze. Whether it's a convenience store glowing under fluorescent lights or a quiet street illuminated by a solitary lamp, although the city of Tokyo serves as the source material for the landscape that informs this body of work, Morimoto renders these locations into a familiar urban backdrop and a poetic narrative of light and shadow. The fluorescent glow becomes both a beacon and barrier, where illumination reveals and conceals. Morimoto's use of light does more than create atmosphere; it underscores a sense of duality, highlighting contrasts between isolation and connection, between the ordinary and the extraordinary. Each painting serves as a physical and cerebral universe where viewers are invited to reflect on their experiences within these spaces of transit, both emotional and corporeal.

This exploration of transitional spaces extends beyond the city's limits, where Morimoto's work becomes a meditation on time and memory. His ability to capture fleeting moments and infuse them with a haunting luminosity evokes the feeling of being suspended between worlds. 'To Nowhere and Back' is as much about the destination as the journey. Through Morimoto's lens, even the most mundane urban moments become imbued with deeper meaning, inviting introspection and connection. Each piece feels like an invitation to step into the artist's world, where the ordinary is charged with emotional significance and light serves as both a beacon and a guide.

The Liminal Glow of Urban Spaces

In Keita Morimoto's hands, light becomes a transformation tool, infusing the ordinary with an otherworldly glow. "I wanted to create pieces that reflect the constant state of transition in both Tokyo and New York," he explains, underscoring his fascination with liminality—those moments and spaces that hover between the familiar and the unknown. Neon signs, vending machines, and fluorescent-lit streets transcend their utilitarian roles, turning into portals of introspection. "There's something about these spaces that feel anonymous but universal, inviting the viewer to step into their memories or dreams."

His journey between continents and cultures profoundly influences the universality of Keita Morimoto's practice. Having trained in Canada, he initially focused on figurative painting, capturing peers and fleeting urban moments. However, his return to Tokyo marked a pivotal shift in his practice. "I began to focus less on figures and more on the environments they inhabit," he says, recognizing that spaces can become powerful carriers of narrative and emotion. Exploring the relationship between figures and their environments has profoundly shaped his artistic vision, adding greater depth to his work.

His paintings often depict twilight or nocturnal scenes where artificial light dances with natural darkness, creating a delicate balance between what is illuminated and what remains obscured. In these moments, light becomes active, carving out space, texture, and meaning within the frame. For 'To Nowhere and Back,' Morimoto presents vending machines and convenience stores as luminous sentinels in the urban night. These mechanical and radiant structures take on their own lives. They are rendered in extraordinary detail, emitting an almost supernatural glow that transforms them from mere commercial fixtures into autonomous characters within the urban landscape. Through Morimoto's lens, these everyday spaces and items transcend their commercial functions, becoming autonomous characters that embody what he describes as "a robotic harmony in Japanese urban life." His paintings capture the complex tension between technology, tradition, and human experience in contemporary society, transforming transitional spaces into moments of profound contemplation.

Tradition and Transformation

Keita Morimoto's ability to juxtapose tradition with modernity is one of his strengths, blending influences from centuries of art history with his contemporary sensibility.

His works draw deeply from the chiaroscuro techniques of Caravaggio and Rembrandt yet are equally shaped by contemporary photography by artists like William Eggleston, cinema, and Japanese aesthetics. "I'm inspired by artists like Edward Hopper and Hughie Lee-Smith," he shares, "but also by Japanese animation and manga. Growing up, I wanted to be a manga artist but struggled to write stories. Painting became my way of constructing a visual narrative." Morimoto's urban environments exude a quiet stillness, yet they are alive with the echoes of human presence. The lone figure—a recurring motif in his work—often occupies the threshold between isolation and connection, anonymity and individuality. These figures, seemingly at once introspective and suspended in time, draw the viewer into their world, evoking a sense of shared vulnerability. Through their presence, Morimoto offers an emotional anchor, connecting his exploration of the external cityscape to the internal landscapes of human experience. He shares, "My work reflects a lifetime of navigating conflict, loneliness, and the desire to escape within urban environments. When I moved from Osaka to Canada at 16, I experienced a profound sense of isolation, as though severed from everything familiar. Over time, some connections emerged, but it was always accompanied by subtle discomfort. Returning to Japan in 2021 brought a similar disorientation—moments when even my birthplace felt unfamiliar, as if reality itself had shifted."

What strikes me most about Morimoto's work is how he makes emptiness feel full. His urban landscapes—rendered with an attention to detail that borders on the devotional—capture those in-between moments when the city feels most like itself: not in the rush of day or the deep of night, but in those threshold hours when reality seems to slip sideways. Morimoto brings his sensibility to bear, one informed as much by manga and animation as by the Western canon. This synthesis of influences is further enriched by Morimoto's artistic influences, such as the visual artist Kerry James Marshall, whose precise and intentional compositions taught him to think deeply about every element within his works. "It taught me to think deeply about every element within my compositions," Morimoto explains. Similarly, his approach to landscapes evokes the lyricism of Peter Doig, combined with the structural rigor of Piet Mondrian's abstract grids, which offer a sense of order amid chaos. Morimoto also draws from Pieter Bruegel the Elder, particularly in how Bruegel imbued his landscapes with narratives that transcend their visual splendor, using the environment as a vehicle for storytelling.

Keita Morimoto's artistic process begins with a deep immersion in his environment. He traverses cities like Tokyo with sketchbooks and a keen eye, capturing fleeting moments of light and shadow. These sketches serve as documentation and inspiration, forming the foundation of his more significant works. He meticulously layers oil paint in the studio, creating rich textures and a luminosity that brings his imagined worlds to life. The interplay between spontaneous observation and deliberate execution defines Morimoto's practice, allowing him to bridge the immediacy of urban life with the timelessness of classical composition. These influences converge in cinematic and immersive works, where the stillness of a Baroque masterpiece meets the dynamic energy of modern urban life.

"I want the experience to be cinematic," Morimoto says, "as if the viewer is walking through a movie." His unique visual language emerges from a rich tapestry of inspirations, blending tradition with transformation, where urban spaces become stages for human drama and stories unfold in the interplay between past and present. These paintings speak to something more fundamental: how we construct meaning in a world that increasingly resists it. When they appear, his figures seem suspended between action and repose, caught in moments of quiet contemplation that feel deeply personal and universally resonant.

An Invitation to Reflect

In Keita Morimoto's *Green Room*, one of the standout works of the exhibition, the artist transforms a seemingly quotidian scene into a profound exploration of isolation and connection. At the center of the composition is a convenience store, an iconic element of urban life, rendered with a surreal glow against an empty sky. The store—reminiscent of the ubiquitous 7-Eleven—serves as more than just a backdrop; it becomes a character in its own right. Morimoto gives this familiar figure a subtle twist by replacing the "7" with a "6." This small yet significant alteration deepens the meaning of the work, suggesting a blending of cultural references while highlighting the way these stores have become symbols of modern life across the globe. The shift also introduces a bit of humor, as the change from "7" to "6" creates a playful, almost absurd twist on the familiar, inviting the viewer to reconsider the significance of such everyday symbols.

The convenience store, often seen as an anonymous part of the urban landscape, takes on new significance in Morimoto's painting. In *Green Room*, the store's artificial light emanates from within, acting as a lighthouse and a barricade. It draws the viewer in, offering a moment of refuge yet simultaneously creates a sense of separation. The figures in the painting, friends of the artist, are caught in a moment of quiet introspection or motion, their presence grounding the scene and adding to its disorienting atmosphere. In this way, Morimoto uses the store not only as a physical space but also as a vehicle for exploring the tension between connection and solitude, offering a subtle commentary on the role of such spaces in our daily lives. Morimoto shares, "My work avoids fixed narratives, instead serving as a 'device' for viewers to confront their own questions and emotions. It explores the unease and solitude of life in a society that demands belonging, while capturing the quiet tension between connection and alienation."

Using the convenience store as a character in the painting also speaks to Morimoto's broader thematic interest in liminality—the space between the known and the unknown, the mundane and the extraordinary. By shifting the 7-Eleven to a 6-Eleven, Morimoto hints at the fluidity of cultural boundaries while emphasizing the universality of these stores in Asia and the West. "These spaces are like portals, offering moments of reflection and escape." In *Green Room*, the convenience store becomes a gateway, offering a space for contemplation while embodying the complexities of contemporary life. Through this transformation, Morimoto solicits the viewer to enter a world where the ordinary is imbued with deeper meaning, reflecting the subtle intersections of memory, identity, and the search for connection in a rapidly changing world.

Bridging the Mundane and the Sublime

Keita Morimoto has created a visual language for that atypical journey we all undertake—the one that leads us through the familiar shadows of our daily lives into moments of unexpected transcendence, only to return us, changed but grounded, to where we began. Through his skillful use of light as a device, Morimoto bridges dualities, crafting a visual language that is both deeply personal and universally resonant. His paintings are not merely static scenes but dynamic spaces that beckon viewers to linger, question, and connect. "I hope visitors find a moment of pause," he shares. "Whether they feel curiosity, solace, or discomfort, the work becomes a space for personal reflection." In 'To Nowhere and Back,' Morimoto takes us on a journey through the thresholds of modern existence, urging us to look beyond the surface and find beauty in the interplay of light and shadow. His luminous, enigmatic works confront the contradictions of our humanity and transform everyday spaces into metaphysical realms.

By rendering the urban environment in and around Tokyo universally familiar, Morimoto reminds us that, even in our most solitary moments, we are united by the shared experience of city life and the common language of light. This visionary practice makes the journey between nowhere and somewhere a destination. In this space, the physical and metaphysical converge with the temporal, transmuting his pictorial planes into the magical. In this way, Morimoto's art creates an environment for reflection, offering a sanctuary where the ordinary is imbued with more profound meaning anchored by the complexities of connection, solitude, and the mysteries of existence.

— Larry Ossei-Mensah, Curator and Co-founder of ARTNOIR.