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ULALA IMAI AT NONAKA-HILL

Text by Kate Caruso



Ulala Imai, *Lovers*, 2020, oil on canvas, 102 x 76.5 inches. Image courtesy of the artist and Nonaka-Hill, Los Angeles.

AMAZING, Ulala Imai's solo exhibition at Nonaka-Hill, takes its title from an elementary school project. When prompted to create a new country for a class, naming it and designing its flag, the artist's daughter invented *AMAZING*, and Imai extended the project to her own practice, creating a series of paintings that chart out the new country. Imai turned to her immediate surroundings, rearranging the figurines, foods, and objects that existed in her periphery so that they took center stage, narrating their interior lives through each of her paintings. The result is world-making that, by treating minor objects and experiences as main events, captures intimacy in sweetly humorous ways.

In one of Nonaka-Hill's two galleries, the paintings depict a series of adventures featuring Charlie Brown and Lucy of the Peanuts comics. For each painting, the artist staged the figurines in various scenes around her home—the two characters dancing atop piano keys (in *Friends*, 2020); sitting high amidst the trees (likely an indoor plant, intentionally close-cropped, in *Lovers*, 2020); and even picnicking at *La Seine* (2020), a bookshelf complete with books, plants, and other figurines that each play a part in the imagined storyline. In each of these works, the painting style hangs somewhere in between loose and hyperreal, with the cartoon figurines seemingly floating within these domestic spaces. The works, created over the last year of lockdown, not only fictionally construct the escapades of Charlie and Lucy, but also cast the two as proxies for our own fantasies of adventures outside of the homes that many of us now rarely leave.

In the second gallery, the scenes are more overtly domestic. For each painting, Imai sentimentally rendered miniature still lifes from snack foods. Each avocado, lambchop, or banana is depicted gently, with visibly loose and tender brushstrokes, suggesting a feeling of hazy nostalgia. Buttered pieces of toast—which recur throughout Imai's works—sliced figs, and baked potatoes are served up on pretty, quickly-painted ceramic plates. The two paintings of pineapple faces, *Madame Pineapple*

(2021) and *Mr. Pineapple* (2021), whimsically blend Imai's snack still lifes with her narrative toy portraits. Sliced open and dressed up with facial features made of grapes, they delve into the realm of play, pushing past the general seriousness of the still life genre. These snack paintings are perhaps the most intimate in the exhibition, personifying seemingly-inconsequential foodstuffs with intimacy and ethos.

Additional toy portraits share space with the snack still lifes in the second gallery. In *Distance* (2020), two stuffed bears and an E.T. doll (complete with red hoodie) band together to return the viewer's gaze, alerting the viewer-cum-rude-intruder of their voyeuristic interruption. The largest figure, the central bear, dons a bathrobe—comfy, private attire—while the figures' fixed expressions (stitched on, assigned to them by toymakers) seem shocked, perhaps in reaction to our intrusion on their domestic scene. Though Imai invites us into her world with tender renderings and playful subject matter, there is a distinct sense that we are stepping into a space that may only be known to her. As such, *AMAZING* sits somewhere at the intersection of intimacy and voyeurism. Imai's personifications reveal abundant relationships and inner-narratives that demonstrate the tenderness and true intimacy of her world, both imaginary and otherwise.

Ulala Imai: AMAZING runs from February 6–April 3, 2021 at Nonaka-Hill (720 N. Highland Ave., Los Angeles, CA 90038).