

# ARTILLERY

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### GALLERY ROUNDS: ULALA IMAI NONAKA-HILL

by Jody Zellen



Ulala Imai “AMAZING” Installation view courtesy of Nonaka Hill

Although “Amazing” is the first exhibition of Ulala Imai’s works in Los Angeles and the United States, she has quite a following in Japan. Imai is a prolific painter as the presentation of over thirty paintings at Nonaka Hill demonstrates. She successfully combines wit and technique to transform banal objects and simple moments culled from everyday family life including children’s toys and food such as bananas, pineapples, and toast. Her style is expressive and straightforward. Her colors are soft and realistic. In her majestic works, she portrays all that surrounds her, elevating the banal and mundane into something extra-special and provoking thought and awe in surprising ways. Each loosely rendered work is painted with love and care.

Children’s toys have fixed expressions. No matter what the context, their smiles or frowns remain unchanged whether they are placed in dangerous or loving situations. Imai takes this to heart. It is hard to resist feeling ‘all warm and fuzzy’ when regarding an image like *Hold* (2020), a modest-sized painting of a stuffed monkey hugging a teddy bear. In the composition, the background is split in half, the top rendered in a deep blue and the bottom a light gray— perhaps representing a distant wall and a table or countertop. As if lit from above, a subtle shadow is cast on both surfaces. The monkey snuggles with the bear, its head cocked to the side and resting on the ear and arm of the horizontally positioned animal. The bear stares out at the viewer, its down-turned mouth locked into an unhappy frown. The loving gesture of the hug given to the bear by the monkey cannot change its demeanor, yet profoundly resonates. The teddy bear also appears in *Melody* (2020). Here, it is uncomfortably positioned on top of a curved banana on a reflective surface. The implication is that the bear can use the banana to rock to and fro, like a rocking chair; a heartfelt image that elicits smiles and a sense of nostalgia. *Banana Ambassador* (2021), features ripe yellow bananas on a table encircling a small statue of Darth Vader that looks longingly at the viewer like a puppy dog. The yellow bananas contrast with the black and white coloration of the toy figure.

Imai's paintings are personal and intimate. She carefully composes arrangements of household items in real and imagined scenarios. *La Seine* (2020), for example, could be representative of a corner in Imai's home. It is a painting of the edge of a brown bookshelf that is situated next to a leafy green plant. On the shelf sits a selection of toys — Charlie Brown and Lucy, a gorilla's head, a white giraffe, what appears to be Peter Pan — as well as a few horizontally stacked books. Charlie Brown and Lucy migrate from their secure place on this shelf to also appear in the large paintings *Lovers* and *Nocturne*, as well as the smaller work, *Friends* (all 2020). In each of these paintings, Imai constructs different imagined relationships between these comic book characters. It is not unusual for Imai to depict her subjects in a range of scenarios. Like Charlie Brown and Lucy, the teddy bear appears in a number of works.

*Mask* (2021) is a tender painting that alludes to the year of the pandemic. In this work, the teddy bear is dressed in a colorfully decorated bathrobe and rests against the back of a chair in front of a table with a loaf of bread. The bear's head is obscured by a large bright green Loki Mask that covers its face, keeping it safe, as well as socially distanced. It is easy to imagine a child configuring the bear this way to simulate what is going on in much of the world with inanimate objects as human stand-ins.

While Imai's paintings of toys have the most emotional impact, her depictions of plates of food also resonate. Small works such as *Potato*, *Avocado*, or *Peaches* (all 2021) are tightly rendered, yet expressive images of basic foods, whereas *Madame Pineapple* and *Mr. Pineapple* are more playful personifications. Here, Imai has transformed halved pineapples into faces, using grapes as eyes and bananas as hair. These still-life arrangements may be silly, yet speak to Imai's spirited creativity. In the office, one finds a painting entitled *Rodney*, an homage to one of the gallery directors. This wonderful work is a snapshot of a recurring moment. In a green baseball cap, Rodney sits at the table in front of his laptop, surrounded by everyday objects— a cell phone, various cups and beverages, a plant, and his beloved retro Japanese hamburger lamp. On the wall behind him is one of Imai's paintings of a bear and monkey embracing. Rodney is complacent, hard at work, absorbed, and seemingly satisfied, despite what is happening in the outside world. Imai has a knack for capturing melancholic moments that are infused with compassion, allowing us to dissociate from whatever plagues us at the moment and enjoy the pleasure of her creations.

Ulala Imai, "Amazing"  
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