

KUNSTFORUM

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SO CUTE!: POSITIONS ON CONTEMPORARY VIEWS OF CUTENESS

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Ulala Imai, *Break time*, 2022, Oil on canvas, 129.87 x 161.93 cm. Courtesy: Ulala Imai & Karma

Cuteness is... infantile, innocent, mundane, indulgent, de-escalating, gentle, pop, empowering, activist, marketable, manipulative. The attributions are just as diverse as the genres and media in which contemporary artists deal with cuteness.

The selected artists come from three generations and different cultures, they pursue individual concepts and each have their own motivations. Some approach it playfully, others critically. The selection reflects the diversity, but also the complexity of the aesthetics, which have not been sufficiently studied to date. These are positions whose consideration can be enriched by the perspective of cuteness and which, conversely, sharpen the examination of them.

ULALA IMAI

Born 1982 in Kanagawa, Japan

FAMILY CONFIGURATION

The basic principle of every everyday experience is that it is already over. Everyday life does not offer itself to pause, but normally eludes attention. Ulala Imai counteracts this transience by painting scenes from her family life. She works in her apartment and transforms her children's toys, everyday groceries such as buttered toast or avocado and other household items into mysterious and lifelike motifs. As simple and harmless as these cute motifs may seem at first glance, in Imai they become representations of all the drama and emotional intensity that family life and being a mother can bring. In the daily care and occupation of the children, the artist discovers the astonishing and poetic, as if the thought had just occurred to her or the certainty had just arisen that these moments, as insignificant as they may seem at the time they happened, will later be given meaning or sentimentality.

These human feelings are projected onto the toys by Imai. They are not always positive, but can also be relentless in their discomfort, and bear witness to parenthood. Many arrangements reflect the emotional tensions that can be associated with family dynamics, even acting like a family constellation. Sometimes the objects in the pictorial space are not close enough together to warrant intimacy suggest, what a feeling of ambivalence towards family underlines. In contrast, the abundance of toys in pictures like "Summit" embodies the security that feels oppressive at times. "Bananas don't really fit Darth Vader, except in parenthood" - this statement preceded the press release for Ulala Imai's first solo exhibition in the USA in 2021. This sums up the artist's work in a nutshell.