



SOUND OF WATER

Feminine Expressions
of Fluidity by Six
Japanese Artists

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Front cover image credit:

Yumiko Glover

Traces of Memory, 2023

Acrylic on canvas, 60" x 36"

Courtesy of the artist





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As an island nation, Japan is surrounded by water. The sea and high annual rainfall provide abundant food but also make it prone to flooding, typhoons, and occasional tsunamis. The complexities of the Japanese relationship with water is reflected throughout its literature and art—from *The Great Wave off Kanagawa* woodblock print to Matsuo Bashō's haiku:

*The old pond –
a frog jumps in,
sound of water.*

In contemporary Japanese art, water features are prominent, particularly in works by female artists—perhaps because in Daoism, water is considered *yin* and feminine, in contrast to fire, which is a male, *yang* element. This exhibition presents artworks by six female Japanese artists—based in the US, UK, and Japan—that explore the many moods and manifestations of water, presenting the element as both a source of beauty and serenity and a threatening force in our lives, as we face climate change.

Curated by Japanese art historian Meher McArthur, the exhibition commemorates the 60th anniversary of Descanso's Japanese Garden.



Water and Femininity in Japan

In Japan's native belief system, Shinto, the god of water is Suijin, a deity prayed to around rivers, ponds, and other water sources. Buddhism arrived in Japan in the 6th century, introducing the Buddhist goddess Benzaiten (originally the Hindu river goddess Sarasvati). By the 12th-13th centuries, Benzaiten evolved into a beautiful water goddess and patroness of "things that flow," such as learning, art, and music. Since then, she has been one of Japan's most venerated deities and is closely conflated with the native Suijin.


Also in the first millennium, Chinese Daoism entered Japan, and with it the belief in yin and yang—two opposing yet complementary forces that interact to direct the primal energy of the universe (*qi* or *chi*) and work with the five elements (wood, metal, fire, water, and earth) to create all life. While *yang* is positive, active and male and associated with the sun, light, fire, heat, and expansion, *yin* is negative, passive and female and linked to the moon, darkness, water, cold, and contraction.

Not surprisingly, water is associated with femininity, fluidity, and gentleness in Japanese culture. Although also depicted widely by male artists, often in its most dynamic manifestations, female Japanese artists tend to approach its various states, textures, patterns, and forms in a more subtle, contemplative manner. The six artists featured in this exhibition explore water a daily weather phenomenon, a metaphor for the transience of memory and reflection, a cause of both anxiety and serenity, and as a sound that enables meditation.



Curator Meher McArthur

Meher McArthur is an Asian art historian who lives in Pasadena and specializes in Japanese art. She worked as Curator of East Asian Art at the Pacific Asia Museum and Creative Director for the Storrier Stearns Japanese Garden, both in Pasadena, as Academic Curator for Scripps College in Claremont, and as Art and Cultural Director for JAPAN HOUSE Los Angeles. She curates traveling exhibitions for International Arts & Artists (IA&A), currently *Washi Transformed: New Expressions in Japanese Paper* and *KIMONO: Garment, Canvas, and Artistic Muse*, and she recently curated two exhibitions for the Sturt Haaga Gallery at Descanso Gardens, *SHIKI: The Four Seasons in Japanese Art*, and *HWAJODO: Flowers and Birds in Korean American Art*. Her publications include *Gods and Goblins: Folk Paintings from Otsu* (PAM, 1999), *Reading Buddhist Art* (Thames & Hudson, 2002) and *The Arts of Asia* (Thames & Hudson, 2005), *An ABC of What Art Can Be* (Getty Museum, 2010), *New Expressions in Origami Art* (Tuttle, 2017), and her recently published memoir, *A Japanese Art Journey: A Curator's Memoir of Polka Dot Pumpkins, Paper Dolls and Woodblock Prints* (Tuttle, 2025).





MINEKO GRIMMER

Mineko Grimmer is a Los Angeles-based sound installation artist. She was born and raised in northern Japan and received her MFA from Otis College of Art and Design in L.A. Her works, which are often finely crafted out of natural materials such as bamboo, wood, stone, and water, are inspired by the notions of time as often found in Japanese Gardens. She collaborated with composer John Cage, on projects at UC San Diego, Stanford, and MOCA.

Sound and silence are key elements in Grimmer's work, and she draws inspiration from both Eastern and Western cultures. For this exhibition, *Musical Vessels*, she selected terracotta jars made in Oaxaca, Mexico. Over the course of the day, ice placed at the mouth of each vessel melts, releasing water droplets into the jar and creating soft, resonant musical tones. The gentle rhythm of the droplets echoing inside these differently sized and shaped vessels denote the passage of time while also demonstrating the power of water to soothe and calm the spirit.





Mineko Grimmer

Musical Vessels, 1993

Installation of 4 large terracotta jars, ceramic, ice

Sizes are variable


Courtesy of the artist



YUMIKO GLOVER

Yumiko Glover is originally from Hiroshima, and her connection to her Japanese hometown is reflected in themes of transformation, reconciliation, and the coexistence of beauty and loss that infuse much of her work. She received a BFA from the University of Hawai'i and an MFA from UC Santa Barbara. Her art training in the US has allowed her to use Western materials, techniques, and styles to explore Japanese motifs and moods and create paintings that examine cross-cultural identity, memory, and impermanence.

Glover's paintings blend Japanese motifs—koi carp and *shoji* screens—with Western architectural motifs and contemporary abstraction techniques, such as pixelation that break down the motifs into questionable forms. The presence of water in the works, implied by deep blues, swimming koi, and the distortion and repositioning of familiar motifs and structures, suggests the fluidity of memory and the transience of life. Water can wash away valued objects and structures, but it also possesses the power to cleanse our lives of bitter memories and painful experiences.





Yumiko Glover

Echoes in Water, 2024

Acrylic on canvas, four panels

48" x 144"

Courtesy of the artist




MIYA ANDO



Miya Ando is a Japanese artist based in New York City. Holding a BA in East Asian Studies from the University of California, Berkeley, she also studied at Yale University and apprenticed with a master metalsmith in Japan. Her works made in metal, wood, paper, and other materials contemplate the cycles of nature and the passage of time and explore impermanence, which is often shown as fleeting natural phenomena – rain, clouds, tides – materialized in ink, pigment, micronized silver, gold, mica, oil, or resin.

This exhibition includes three types of work by Ando, each manifesting different aspects of water. *Kumo (Cloud) Diptych*, 2018, created with ink on aluminum composite, masterfully articulates the ethereal nature of clouds as a manifestation of condensed water vapor. Ironically, though clouds are impermanent, she renders them permanent on a metal ground. She captures the reflective aspect of pooled water in *Mizukagami (The Shadow of the Moon Reflected in Water)*, 2019, crafted in stainless steel. Her three works on Japanese handmade washi paper, dyed with natural indigo and detailed with micronized pure silver, explore the poetic and almost magical interactions between moonlight on falling rain and ocean waves.






Miya Ando
Mizukagami (The Shadow Of The Moon Reflected In Water), 2019
Stainless steel
8' x 8' x ¼"
Courtesy of the artist



EMIKO AIDA

Emiko Aida was born in Tokyo and grew up near Jindaiji, a very old Buddhist temple associated with an important water god. She received an MA in Fine Art from the Tokyo University of Arts and then moved to London to receive an MA in Printmaking from the Royal College of Art. Currently based in London, she works as a painter, printmaker, and mixed media artist. Since Aida has spent her life in the urban settings of Tokyo and London, much of her work explores the fragility of humanity and journeys between reality and illusion – and rain, which falls abundantly in both cities.

Aida's prints in this exhibition feature people interacting with water. In several works, cityscapes and human figures are shown in the rain, with the rain creating a visual rhythm suggesting the soothing music in their titles. In the *Echo Sounding* series, a man stands looking forward over natural and urban landscapes, and as raindrops patter on his umbrella, he appears to transform into the landscape and the weather itself. In the *Swim Around* series, Aida shows a woman swimming in a pool, but without a face, as if her identity is merging with the water.






Emiko Aida
Reverie in the Sky, 2009
Etching
24" x 17"
Courtesy of the artist



YUKO KIMURA

Yuko Kimura was born in Oakland, California, and spent her childhood in Japan. She returned to the US and received a BFA in printmaking from the Cleveland Institute of Art, Cleveland, Ohio, and an MFA in printmaking from the University of Michigan, School of Art and Design, Ann Arbor, Michigan. For the last two decades, her printmaking incorporates multiple processes, including etching, aquatint, and dyeing with indigo on pleated or twisted paper.

Many of Kimura's prints and collages evoke the stillness of seascapes at dusk. Her *Little Waves* and other recent series were inspired in part by *The Great Wave off Kanagawa*, the iconic print designed in 1830 by Katsushika Hokusai (1769-1840). Kimura's waves may not have the colossal scale and force of Hokusai's, but instead, she evokes the silent depths of the ocean with indigo-colored ink and uses paper lace made of soft white paper *kozo* fibers to recreate swirling foam on the water's surface. Kimura creates the effect of raindrops by dropping or spraying water onto wet *kozo* fibers and then prints a monotype with indigo to add various tones of blue, using etched lines to suggest rain and paper lace or empty space to evoke clouds. Overall, the works reflect the soothing nature of water on the spirit.






Yuko Kimura
Little Waves: By the Shore, 2026
Etching, monotype on kozo handmade
paper and kozo bark fiber, thread
11" x 8.5"
Courtesy of the artist



AYOMI YOSHIDA

Ayomi Yoshida is a third-generation artist in the renowned Yoshida family of woodblock print artists. She graduated from Wako University in Tokyo and was an artist in residence at the Mendocino Art Center in California. Based in Tokyo, Yoshida initially specialized in woodblock-printed abstractions of nature printed onto handmade washi paper. From the late 1990s, she began pushing the limits of woodblock printing to create room-sized installations commenting on the fragility of nature and the impact of human behavior on the natural world.

Yoshida created her installation *Blessed Rain* in 2021 out of concern for Japan's increased rainfall due to climate change. In the Edo period (1603-1868), rain was considered a blessing in Japanese life and culture and was often depicted fondly in woodblock prints of the time. Today, heavy rains bring with them annual disasters such as landslides and floods, so rain is often associated with devastation and fear. In this installation, Yoshida uses the same traditional woodblock printing techniques used in Edo-period *ukiyo-e* prints to depict today's heavy rain. She hopes we will consider how to ensure a better tomorrow, one in which we can again be lulled to sleep by the peaceful sound of the falling rain.





Ayomi Yoshida
Blessed Rain, 2021
Installation, *washi* paper,
dyed with indigo and printed
Dimensions are variable
Courtesy of the artist



1418 Descanso Drive
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Image: Emiko Aida - *The Rain Symphony*, 2025 (detail)

