

## ‘A Little Closer’

Keita Morimoto



Keita Morimoto, *Plastic Love*, 2023

KOTARO NUKAGA, Roppongi is pleased to present ‘A Little Closer’, a solo exhibition by Keita Morimoto from July 29 (Sat) to September 16 (Sat), 2023. Following his first solo show in Japan ‘After Dark’ in 2021, this exhibition will be his first solo exhibition in Japan in roughly two years, and will feature twenty new works.

Morimoto's paintings elude labels. One may feel that they've grasped the whole picture at first, but as one attempts to layer words and weave sentences into an explanation of the work, the meaning of them seems to slip away. Morimoto's decision to move to Canada alone after graduating from high school and the subsequent 16 years he spent living in Toronto may have some relation to his approach. Morimoto's attitude towards painting does not emphasize forcefully conveying some message through a strong central identity; rather, he consistently puts himself into other people's

shoes and depicts the world from their viewpoints.

In his exhibition 'After Dark' two years ago, created during the time when he had just returned to Tokyo from Toronto, Morimoto looked through the lens of his fluctuating identity as someone from both Japan and Canada and fixed his, and our, gaze upon the "anonymous places" within the vast metropolis of Tokyo after nightfall. He depicted these overlooked places that people pass by on the way to their destinations as "heterotopias"; places where we can temporarily escape from the real world. In contrast to the "difficulty of living" created by our current urban lifestyle where results and goals are the only things that matter, Morimoto's paintings represent the freedom to make the ordinary, everyday special; in other words, the freedom to decide one's own way of being.

From his slightly outside, deviant perspective, Morimoto was able to find the "heterotopia" within us, inspiring empathy and touching the viewer's hearts. 'A Little Closer' is composed of paintings that depict the individualistic daily lives of the same-age youths of his generation, building upon the message he attempted to convey through 'After Dark'.

One of the works in the show, "Plastic Love" is a dimly toned, blue-tinted painting that looks down upon a scene from a slightly elevated perspective. Two hangers hang on hooks on a pillar in a store. On one is a navy down jacket, on the other, another dark jacket and a white plastic bag crammed full with a piece of pink clothing. Behind the pillar is an arrangement of white and red camellias. In the foreground is a sitting woman wearing a yellow and brown checkered dress, her hair tied up in a ribbon, who seems as if she had just been sharing a meal with someone.

*I wonder when it was.*

*That time*

*underneath the night streetlights of this city where you live  
when we walked and talked about nothing in particular  
as we headed towards that shopping street.*

*After fifth period you and I casually decided to meet up, and  
the place we headed to was the same restaurant as always.  
Even though we came to eat, the conversation never stopped,  
to the point that I wasn't sure if we had come for the food or for the conversation.  
"Well, shall we go?"*

*Grabbing your big coat, and your bag stuffed with random things we passed through the rattling door,  
and, close, yet distant, we walked on, side by side.*

*That was my usual.*

*I wonder when it changed.*

*I no longer walk through that shopping street  
or under those street lights anymore.  
To the city where you were  
To the city I will never visit again  
I gave a small wave goodbye.*

In the late 1960s, as photography came to incorporate the personal perspective, it played a large role in contributing to the rediscovery of the everyday as special.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, in the present day, we now mainly see the world through photographs, not directly. Morimoto's paintings, which are based on his own photographs, are not fictional worlds imagined by the artist, but are rather a careful selection and realistic depiction of "special moments" within everyday life. Morimoto himself says that among the photographs he takes for his works, there are only a rare few that become paintings. The moment when the subjects and their backgrounds overlap is when the brilliance of each person's life truly shines. The artist puts himself into other's shoes in order to understand them and further seek out these dazzling, emotional moments.

In this exhibition, Morimoto delves into the daily landscapes of his generation and portrays them in his paintings. The individuals depicted in these paintings are intentionally difficult to categorize at first glance. The works are not an attempt to depict some person's position within society, but rather are a representation of their assertion of individuality—of freedom. They become the protagonists of the places they created and of the stories within these places, not defined by the roles society has assigned to them. Portraying their lives with empathy, Morimoto's works express the colors of the present era and create narratives that multiply and layer on top of each other as they resonate with the viewers. The protagonists in these small stories eventually become the central figures in complex, larger narratives.

It may be difficult to label what Morimoto's works are, but a large part of their charm is rooted in their empathy. It is important to note that it is not 共感 (kyōkan), which is the closest translation of empathy in Japanese. Kyōkan is broader in meaning and refers to both empathy and sympathy; however, it is specifically the English word and concept of "empathy" that Morimoto employs. Empathy involves the mental process of imagining oneself in the other person's position. Always looking from the viewpoint of another rather than asserting his own perspective, Morimoto's works are imbued with his own form of empathy.

Columnist Mikako Brady (b. 1965) has written about empathy as the necessary foundation for understanding others, and discussed the concept of "the identity of belonging" in her book "Tasha no kutsu wo haku anaakikku enpashi no susume" (To Wear the Shoes of Others: A Case for Anarchic Empathy).

The identity of belonging is just one of many patterns upon the skin that each of us wears, and it is the combination of these patterns that makes us unique and one-of-a-kind. We refer to the accumulation of these patterns as our "individual identity". There is no need to believe that one of these is the "real self," just as no one else has the right to

tell you which one of you is “the real you.”<sup>3</sup>

To practice empathy, the act of understanding others, it is meaningless to label individual identities, and necessary to nurture a sort of energy of anarchy in order to dissolve, resist, and find liberation from preconceived notions. Brady argues that individuals do not exist for society or organizations; society and organizations should exist for the sake of individuals.

In our present day era of unchecked capitalism and over-informatization, we may be losing sight of the freedom to be ourselves. Many of us in modern society are constantly comparing ourselves on social media and are exhausted by the rapid pace of consumption. We are continuously labeled with identities of belonging that tell us we are this or that, causing us to become supporting actors for society or organizations. David Rolfe Graeber (1961-2020), the anarchist and anthropologist that was ranked as #10 on the Art Review Power 100 in 2021<sup>4</sup> and known as the author of "Bullshit Jobs: A Theory," suggests that anarchism and democracy share a link that makes them equal in a sense. He stresses the importance of resisting societal labeling, to not surrender the power to determine who you are, what you value, and what moments you find beautiful to some outside force. Through this exhibition, Morimoto continues to show us that this is the key that will allow us to live as humans, and open the door to greater freedom.

1 "Heterotopia" is a term coined by philosopher Michel Foucault to describe the idea of a place that exists in reality but is absolutely different or 'other' to all other places, as opposed to utopia, which does not exist in reality.

2 In 1967, thanks to the MoMA "New Documents" exhibition and others, the incorporation of the everyday in photography became a more widely appreciated form of artistic expression.

3 Mikako Brady, *Tasha no kutsu wo haku anaakikku enpashi no susume*, Bungeishunjū, 2021, pp. 62-63.

4 ART REVIEW POWER100 2021 <https://artreview.com/power-100?year=2021>