

ASASKO TABATA





ASAKO TABATA (b.1972, Kanagawa, Japan)

Asako Tabata is a painter of interior states, rendering enigmatic figures suspended in atmospheres thick with longing, restraint, and quiet volatility. With determined, almost urgent brushwork and a moody, subdued palette, she conjures children, women, and androgynous beings who appear expressionless yet tremble at the edge of emotional rupture. Her haunted spaces—often spare rooms with looming doors or fields of saturated color—evoke the psychological intensity of Edvard Munch, while her animistic sensibility and unsettling whimsy recall the work of Izumi Kato and Yoshitomo Nara. Central to Tabata’s practice is the tension between inner turbulence and outward composure: figures seem caught between anarchic impulse and social obligation, their “infinite scream,” as one critic observed, turned inward rather than released. Motherhood—both her own experience and her reflections on her aging and deceased mother—has become a recurring subject, grounding her dreamlike imagery in lived intimacy. Whether depicting a solitary childlike figure before a closed door or a body poised in uneasy stillness, Tabata transforms personal memory into universally resonant scenes, where vulnerability, containment, and emotional endurance coexist in fragile balance.

Asako Tabata was born in 1972 in Kanagawa, Japan. After studying painting at Tama Art University, she became a mother and homemaker, continuing to make art while working at home. For many years, she kept her practice largely private, exhibiting only occasionally in small galleries in Tokyo. In 2022, Tabata held her first solo exhibition in the United States, Cutting a Loquat Tree, at SEIZAN Gallery New York. Her work is included in prominent private collections in the United States and Japan.

CURRICULUM VITAE

ASAKO TABATA

EDUCATION

1996 BFA in Oil painting, Tama Art University, Tokyo, Japan

SOLO EXHIBITION (by selection)

2025 Asako Tabata: Waiting for Bones, SEIZAN Gallery, New York

2023 Asako Tabata: Wiping Makes it Dirtier, SEIZAN Gallery, Tokyo, Japan

Asako Tabata: Waste Of Cushion, SEIZAN Gallery, New York

2022 Cutting a Loquat Tree, SEIZAN Gallery, New York

2021 Himitsu no Barizogon, Gallery Eco-ann, Tokyo, Japan

2019 Tasūketsu dakara, Art Space Mizu no Oto, Tokyo, Japan

2018 Gallery Echo-ann, Tokyo, Japan

2017 See-Saw, Art Space Mizu no Oto, Tokyo, Japan

2015 Shonandai MY Gallery, Tokyo, Japan

2014 SEIZAN Gallery, Tokyo, Japan

2013 Shonandai MY Gallery, Tokyo, Japan

2012 SEIZAN Gallery, Tokyo, Japan

Gallery Echo-ann, Tokyo, Japan

Shonandai MY Gallery, Tokyo, Japan

2011 Shonandai MY Gallery, Tokyo, Japan

GROUP EXHIBITION (By selection)

2025 A Contemporary Pursuit of the Modern II, SEIZAN Gallery, Tokyo, Japan

2024 Something Precious, SEIZAN Gallery, Tokyo, Japan

2023 ART MIAMI, SEIZAN Gallery booth, Miami, FL

VOLTA New York, SEIZAN Gallery booth, New York

Something Precious, SEIZAN Gallery, Tokyo, Japan

2022 PASSION!!, SEIZAN Gallery, Tokyo, Japan

2021 Ghosts of Summer, SEIZAN Gallery, New York

JOKER, SEIZAN Gallery, Tokyo, Japan

2020 On This Shore, SEIZAN Gallery, New York

A SINGLE ANT BITE, SEIZAN Gallery, Tokyo, Japan

2015 SENSU, SEIZAN Gallery, Tokyo, Japan

2014 Hyakki Yakou-ten, SEIZAN Gallery, Tokyo, Japan

2013 SENSU-ten, SEIZAN Gallery, Tokyo, Japan

2010 Something Precious, SEIZAN Gallery, Tokyo, Japan

2007 HITO HITO-ten, Tokyo Metropolitan Art Museum, Tokyo, Japan

PUBLICATION

2021 Illustration: Kawakami, Hiromi, translated by Ted Goossen,
MONKEY Volume 2: Sea Horse, Switch Publishing Co.,Ltd.

PRESS

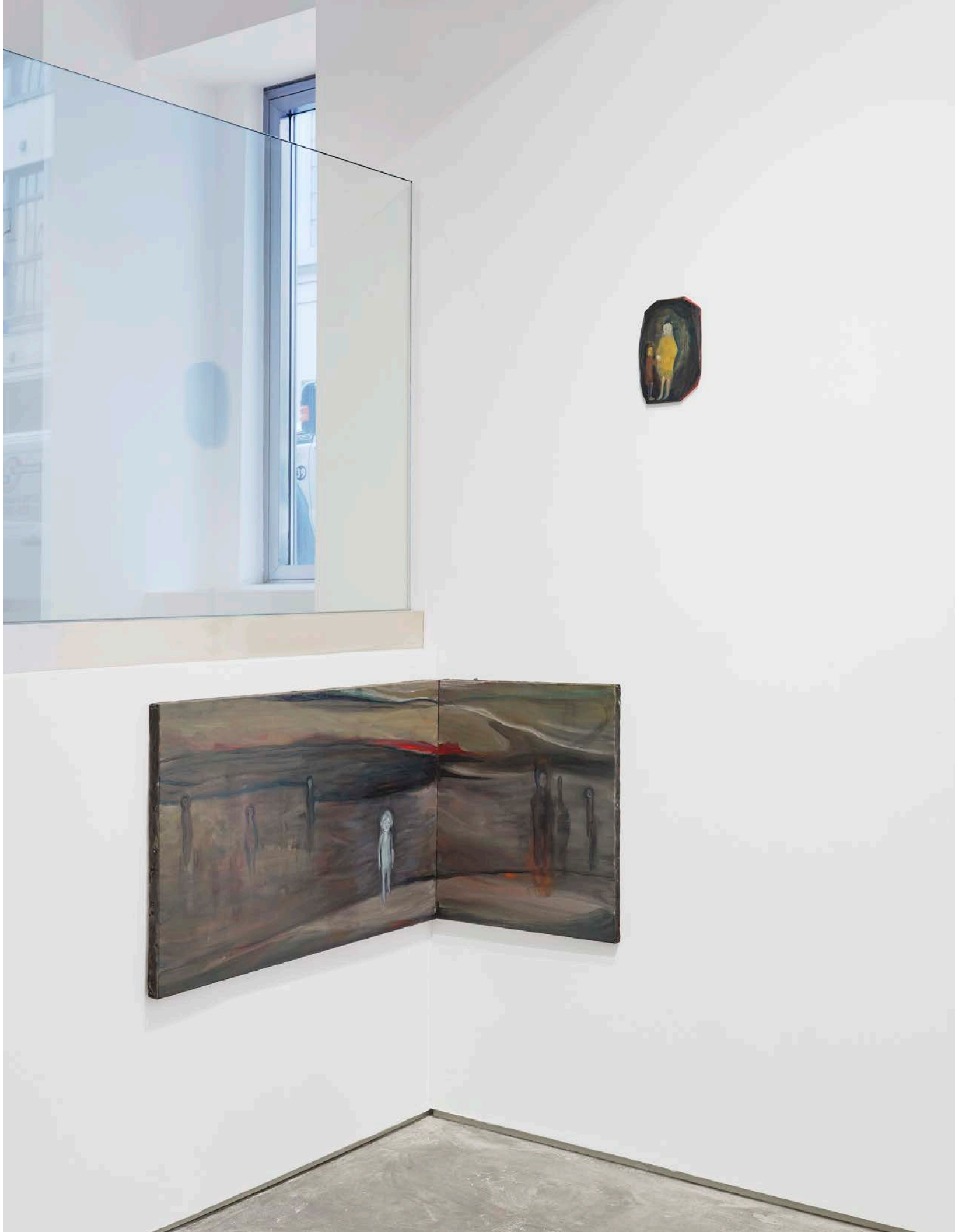
2025 Yau, John. "An Artist's Unexpected Confrontation With Mortality"
Hyperallergic, September 22.

2023 Yau, John. "The Infinite, Never-Released Scream"
Hyperallergic, September 14.

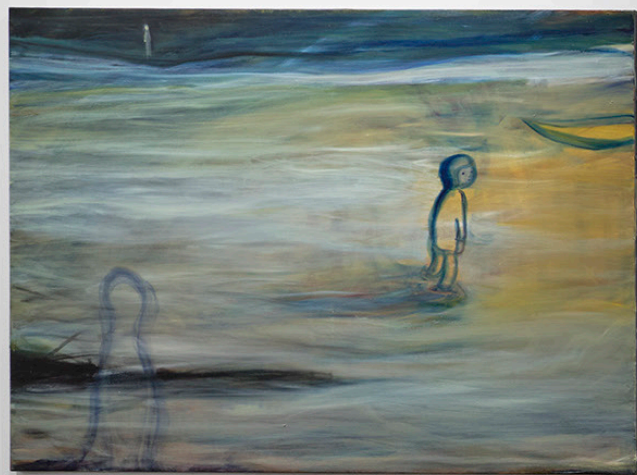
2022 Yau, John, "Asako Tabata Paints a World Between Reality and Imagination,"
Hyperallergic, February 24.

SEIZAN GALLERY

INSTALLATION VIEW OFF: *MOTHER*
FEBRUARY 12 - MARCH 14, 2026







INSTALLATION VIEW OFF: *WAITING FOR BONES*
SEPTEMBER 5 - OCTOBER 18, 2025



INSTALLATION VIEW OFF: *WAITING FOR BONES*
SEPTEMBER 5 - OCTOBER 18, 2025



INSTALLATION VIEW OFF: *WASTE OF CUSHION*
SEPTEMBER 7 - NOVEMBER 12, 2023



INSTALLATION VIEW OFF: *WASTE OF CUSHION*
SEPTEMBER 7 - NOVEMBER 12, 2023



INSTALLATION VIEW OFF: *CUTTING A LOQUAT TREE*
JANUARY 6 - FEBRUARY 26, 2022



INSTALLATION VIEW OFF: *CUTTING A LOQUAT TREE*
JANUARY 6 - FEBRUARY 26, 2022

An Artist's Unexpected Confrontation With Mortality

JOHN YAU

9/22/2025

One of Asako Tabata's strengths is her ability to infuse her work with humor, tenderness, and wistfulness all at once. These are characteristics we do not often encounter in Euro-American paintings about the death of a loved one — a subject that inspired many works in *Waiting for Bones*, Tabata's third solo exhibition at Seizan Gallery. According to the press release, her mother's passing last year "[marked] a period of heightened reflection on mortality and her own eventual death."

The nearly 60 pieces in the exhibition range from a group of identically sized collages of people, flowers, and animals mimicking Japanese culture's reverence for business cards (or *meishi*) to elegiacal oil paintings such as *"Bye Bye"* (2024) and *"Waiting for Bones"* (2025) to a free-hanging papier-mâché sculpture, *"Ascending to Heaven"* (2025). The latter resembles a black shell with openings that viewers can peer into to see numerous lone women standing in boats.

At the center of the exhibition are these last three works. Together, they can be

read as a narrative sequence that turns back on itself in unexpected ways, moving episodically from dying and bidding farewell to cremation to floating up to a presumed paradise that we never see. Instead, *"Ascending to Heaven"* remains suspended in the air. The women who fill it resonate with the lone figure in *"Bye Bye"* who stands in a boat cropped by the painting's left edge. She faces the viewer with her hand raised, bidding farewell. On the opposite side of the canvas is a larger hand extending downward, its fingers spread apart — a gesture of letting go. The resemblance of the hands is open to multiple interpretations, from the similarity of the gesture to the mother's and daughter's shared mortality to the act of seeing each other and themselves off.

Tabata's introspective solitude leads her to an unexpected, even surprising confrontation with mortality. When she was painting *"Waiting for Bones,"* she thought:

"When I become bones, how sad it would be if no one were waiting for me. As I

painted, I wondered—do the living wait for the bones, or do those who have passed on wait for us? In the end, I felt it didn't matter. So I decided that I could wait for myself.

Even when she is dealing with loaded, familiar subjects, such as her mother's death and her own mortality, Tabata never checks the expected boxes. Rather, she depicts quirky views in a direct manner that lays bare her conflicted feelings. Her outlined figure in *"Bye Bye"* is both particular and anonymous. The dots and line that articulate the eyes and mouth of the otherwise featureless woman convey how one's visual memory fades. By rendering the person and hand in the same streaked gray as the background, which seems to represent the ocean, Tabata acknowledges that chaos is inescapable and a part of us.

Another papier-mâché sculpture, *"Hello,"* portrays a gray-haired woman wearing a sack-like dress and holding a cell phone away from her ear. She is seated on a slat supported by four high, spindly legs. Every aspect of the sculpture reflects the precarity of her emotional state: the spindly legs and narrow seat, the distance of the telephone from the ear, the echoing of the dress's vertical black and gray stripes with the seat's thin legs —

which should not be able to support her weight — and the woman's perilously high placement.

No matter the size, support, or material, including found pieces of wood, canvas, and papier-mâché, Tabata's works seem to excavate an inchoate feeling. Nuanced and singular, each piece evokes complex interior states that refute any reductive reading.

The Infinite, Never-Released Scream

JOHN YAU

9/14/2023

In her pared-down, figurative paintings, often of a lone female, Asako Tabata presents a stark, unsettling vision of a society in which women have little chance to achieve autonomy. At first glance “*A Wolf Is Coming!*” (2023) seems to be the artist revisiting Aesop’s fable of “The Boy Who Cried Wolf.” The painting depicts what looks like a blue-haired adolescent girl standing against a Chinese red ground, with her hands at her side and an oval, representing an open mouth, on her otherwise featureless face.

There is no sign of a wolf in the painting. And yet, the Aesop reading doesn’t strike me as quite right. What are we to make of the ominous black cloud in the painting? Does it imply that dangerous forces are present? Does the open mouth suggest that she is crying for help or is the sound stuck in her mouth, unable to exit? The woman’s pose, her arms close at her sides, indicates that she is frustrated and frozen rather than, as in the fable, crying out in false alarm.

Tabata’s painting reminds me of Edvard Munch’s “*The Scream*” (1893). In all of

Munch’s versions of this iconic image, the figure’s hands are pressing against the skull-like face, amplifying its anxiety. If, as Munch once wrote, the figure in his painting expresses an “infinite scream passing through nature,” Tabata’s woman symbolizes the opposite, the infinite scream that is never released by the body. By omitting all other facial features, the artist focuses the viewer’s attention on the mouth. The oval is the infinite silence of women throughout Japan’s history.

In her second US exhibition of intimately scaled oil paintings and painted papier-mâché sculptures, Asako Tabata: Waste of a Cushion at SEIZAN Gallery, the artist continues to explore enigmatic situations that seem to emerge from incidental occurrences in her everyday life. In the show’s largest painting, the 16-by-25-inch, two-panel “*Wiping Makes It Dirtier*” (2023), a woman in red clothing (or is it her raw skin?) wipes a tile floor with a folded, white cloth, on her hands and knees. Behind her is a trail of thinned black paint. Did the woman make the stain? Or is she

moving backwards and cleaning it up? How can the cloth remain so white? In the right panel, Tabata’s previous paint applications peek through. “*Wiping Makes It Dirtier*” compressed the acts of painting, domestic chores, and servitude into a powerful image. As with “*A Wolf Is Coming!*,” we witness a woman doing something that is both ordinary and opaque. The painting’s impenetrability speaks to the split between an individual’s inner reality and outward actions, and between one’s unpredictable desires and submission to social protocols.

In the three papier-mâché sculptures on a table at the center of the gallery, Tabata captures a feeling of hopelessness through her attention to posture. “*Ruler*” (2023) portrays a woman on her knees, leaning forward, with her hands on her thighs as if she is supporting an immense weight. A bamboo ruler extends out of the back collar of her sweater, a constant reminder of her bent posture and a standard of perfection she will never achieve. When I asked Tabata about this, I learned that the ruler was used to remind schoolchildren throughout Japan to maintain the correct posture, and that this was a common practice for many years.

In “*Captured Piece*” (2023), a young

woman on her knees looks at something she holds in her right hand. The figure seems forlorn, as if stricken with an unspeakable grief whose origins the viewer can never know.

Working with permeable materials on a small scale, while addressing subjects such as grief, frustration, impossible standards, and social barriers, Tabata exposes the dark side of contemporary Japanese society, which her celebrated male counterparts, such as Yoshitomo Nara and Takashi Murakami, largely ignore. Her use of papier-mâché and rejection of large-scale or even easel-sized paintings further points to the pressure to conform to marketplace demands. There is nothing slick about her work.

In the exhibition’s largest work, the installation “*Why Should I Even Bother?*” (2023), a sculpture of a woman faces a diptych installed where two walls abut. The sculpted woman stands on a black oval, hunched over, head facing downward, feet turned slightly inward. In the right-hand panel of the Chinese red painting is her doppelgänger, her hands behind her back. She also stands on a black oval, alone in a largely empty room whose walls go back diagonally in space. The sculpted figure’s black hair forms a tight helmet while her

white face is reminiscent of oshiroi, or the white foundation the actors wear in Kabuki theater. While men and women acted in Kabuki, it evolved into a form in which only male actors perform. originally acted in Kabuki, it evolved into a form in which only male actors perform.

Although the figure in the painting appears to be standing erect, the sculpture's pose evokes defeat, depression, and resignation, though nothing suggests why. We suspect the two women are intimately related and that perhaps one mirrors the other, but the nature of their bond is not self-evident. The white face becomes a mask of stoicism, yet the figure's posture conveys weariness over the simplest action, such as walking. In her fierce modesty, Tabata attains a depth of feeling that is rarely encountered in contemporary art.

Tabata Paints a World Between Reality and Imagination

JOHN YAU

2/24/2022

Before I knew much about Asako Tabata, two works got my attention. The first was “*Door*” (2020), an oil painting of an ambiguous, seemingly helpless figure sitting up in an oversized single bed in a red room with a skewed perspective. Together, the stretched perspective, internal scale relationships, and use of a color I know as “Chinese red” pulled me into a fraught world. Later, I learned that the artist had provided a note about the source of the scene: “My mother. Her legs are too weak and she can’t leave the room.”

The second work that grabbed my attention was “*Jump Rope*” (2020), a gray two-panel painting of girls playing jump rope, hung in one corner of the gallery around a foot or two above the floor, with a slightly crouched, dark gray and white papier-mâché figure of a girl (or an older woman) facing it. Tabata provided this note:

Painting: It looks fun, but once you jump you may not be able to come back.

Sculpture: She is worried.

I saw these and other works in Asako Tabata: *Cutting a Loquat Tree* at SEIZAN Gallery (January 6–February 26, 2022), the artist’s debut exhibition in the United States. From the gallery press release I learned that, “Despite the otherworldly imagery, Tabata states that her subjects are based on everyday, mundane experiences.” The press release also explained that:

Tabata was born in 1972 in Kanagawa, Japan. After graduating Tama Art University and soon after becoming a mother and a homemaker, she continued to make art. Not active on social media, Tabata has kept her works private besides occasionally showing in limited galleries in Tokyo.

Although Tabata never announces this, the choices she has made are radical. She has rejected careerism and a life path as a professional artist, choosing instead to get married and raise a family, while continuing to make art. Her decisions are all the more subversive since the culture she is living in is decidedly patriarchal.

What also struck me about her work – inseparable from her life, it seems to me – are the different sizes and supports she incorporates into her process. On the wall opposite “*Door*” were many small works on canvas and irregularly shaped pieces of wood. The subject running through all of the works is the meeting place of one’s inner and outer life, of psychic states and outward responsibility, and the different frictions that can arise in that gap. Tabata looks clearly and directly into the chasm between the wandering, daydreaming mind and the fulfilling of one’s social obligations, between one’s disposition toward anarchic wildness and the recognition of accountability.

Examining that tension and all the contradictory and often unsavory feelings that swirl through us, Tabata pushes her work into a more engaging place than, for instance, the older, pioneering artist Yoshitomo Nara, whose depictions of children in different emotional states have become well known. Whereas Nara places the figure against an abstract ground, essentially isolating it, Tabata locates her figures in a world that exists somewhere between reality and imagination. Another difference is that Tabata drifts between the roles of mother with child and daughter, states that implicitly recognize time’s ultimately

devastating effect on us. Will Tabata one day become like her mother, unable to get out of bed and dependent on her children?

While Nara’s girls don’t grow old, aging is one of Tabata’s underlying themes. That sense of feeling trapped by one’s choices, the resentment that can build up, linger, and threaten to overwhelm, is alluded to in small paintings, such as “*Fit the Mold*” (2019) and “*Run Away*” (2020). By working on an intimate scale (both paintings are less than 13 inches tall and wide), and a seemingly offhand manner, she conveys the possible time constraints that she is working under, again without ever announcing it. Her artworks don’t feel rehearsed beforehand. She is working everything out on her surface, however large or small.

In “*Jump Rope*,” I was intrigued by Tabata’s use of different grays to depict the landscape, figures, and jump rope. She adds to the intrigue by making the papier-mâché figure appear both adult and pre-adolescent. In “*Door*” it is hard to tell if the figure is an adult or an infant. By placing the viewer at one end of the bed, we occupy the same position as the person taking care of her, presumably the artist. Can we be empathetic? After studying “*Jump Rope*,” the figure suddenly seemed too old to be playing this

children’s game. Because Tabata’s note about the and sculpture are about art and being an artist, the artworks stir up all kinds of feelings. Jumping rope never looked so uninviting and emotionally unsettling. All of that is conveyed by the tense pose of her papier-mâché figure. painting and sculpture are about art and being an artist, the artworks stir up all kinds of feelings. Jumping rope never looked so uninviting and emotionally unsettling. All of that is conveyed by the tense pose of her papier-mâché figure.

The fact that Tabata hung the painting “*Jump Rope*” in a corner and so low to the ground, and works on surfaces that fit in the size of your palm expresses the radical nature of her undertaking, which is suffused with tenderness, grief, apprehension, solitude, desire, and anger. Her rejection of the big, slick, and arty — which have become dominant in recent years — is welcome. She is uninterested in filling the large walls of sophisticated collectors. All too happy to please this group, numerous artists try to make art that looks authentic and in touch with one’s inchoate feelings. Tabata doesn’t have to try.





DETAIL
Asako Tabata
I'm Always Watching, 2025
Oil on canvas
10.8 x 8.7 x 6.3 in (27.5 x 22 x 16 cm)



Asako Tabata
Mermaid, 2024
Oil on canvas
8.7 x 10.7 x 1 in (22 x 27.3 x 2.5 cm)



DETAIL
Asako Tabata
Mermaid, 2024
Oil on canvas
8.7 x 10.7 x 1 in (22 x 27.3 x 2.5 cm)

For inquiries
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