



KEIKO HARA: TOPOPHILIA IMBUING



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AMERICAN UNIVERSITY MUSEUM  
COLLEGE of ARTS & SCIENCES

September 4 - October 21, 2007

## FOREWORD

Thirty years ago Ainslie happened to attend Keiko Hara's first US show in Milwaukee and bought her first piece. Twenty years later Keith walked into Ainslie's apartment in Washington, DC, which by then held what Keiko Hara referred to as "her biography on the walls." Soon we were married. Keiko Hara's work fills our walls. Our lives are enriched by thirty years of her work. We have become familiar with *Topophilia*, *Verse*, *Maru*, and now, *Imbuing*, the terms Keiko Hara uses to define different series.

Fearless creativity and hard work characterize Keiko Hara's art. Works on paper and canvas, after many hours of labor and thought are heavy, their surfaces rich layers of color and material. Hara's explorations of light and space have lead her to increasingly sophisticated use of transparent material, even to patenting her own glass-making process. Her large-scale Monet piece is another example of a bold foray--incorporating pieces of sometimes rare or sometimes common fabric and text to add another layer to the Monet mix--offering a chance to both see a masterpiece freshly as well as a chance to see its radical reworking.

Many of Hara's works contain references to the sea or landscape near the sea in which stenciled shell shapes and aqueous forms and colors recur. Gates are another recurring theme. They often offer an entrance into another world, but sometimes they deny entrance even to the picture plane, as when they are applied paper that reads flatly against the heavily worked surfaces. Her circles, sometimes small, near-round, and in profusion or sometimes large and on their own, can be like characters of subtle narratives. Then there are the more gestural, atmospheric pieces.

It is a great pleasure to see Keiko Hara's work at the American University Museum in the Katzen Arts Center. Of course, we thank her first for producing this body of work. Special thanks go to Dorothea Dietrich for her thoughtful essay, to Jack Rasmussen and the staff of the American University Museum for making the show possible, to Perimeter Gallery which has long supported Keiko Hara's work, and to the Whitman College *Aid to Faculty Scholarship* for contributing to the success of this exhibit.

**Ainslie and Keith Peoples**  
**Washington, DC**

## KEIKO HARA: SENSE OF PLACE

How are we to understand Keiko Hara's preoccupation with topophilia, with love of place? And what is its relation to "imbuing," the term she uses to characterize so many of her works? Standing in front of her massive triptych, *Topophilia-Imbuing in Monet*, 2005, we are transported to Claude Monet's garden at Giverny with its famous water-lily pond that became the obsessive subject of his painting for the last two decades of his life and, judging by the countless photographic reproductions, of our contemporary psyche as well. Hara's triptych repeats the exact measurements of Monet's *Reflections of Clouds on the Water-Lily Pond*, ca. 1920 (Museum of Modern Art, New York) and brilliantly captures the varied color modulations of Monet's work. Its sweeping expanse conjures Monet's uncertain space in which we can no longer distinguish between form and reflection, the water's surface and the dark spaces below inhabited by the dense tangle of roots. Much of Monet's triptych is devoted to the depiction of clouds, or rather their reflection on the water where they create a pronounced contrast to the dark shadow cast by the willows surrounding the pond; Hara's triptych authoritatively repeats the effect. Her colors are built up and saturated, supported by thick pigmentation much like Monet's own. Topophilia, for Hara, we conclude, coincides with Monet's love of place, his water-lily pond. Why else would she have labored on such a faithful and painstaking copy?

But is that so? Why, if her love of place is so strongly attached to Giverny did she not visit Monet's restored garden to see the beautiful place first-hand? Instead, Hara directed her attention to Monet's painting. She visited it almost daily over the course of a year at the Museum of Modern Art, internalized its composition inch by inch and then repeated it faithfully in her studio. And why, if the goal was verisimilitude as a kind of homage to Monet, did she

destroy her meticulous, authoritative transcription with the incorporation of collage elements, the numerous bits of newsprint and small pieces of textiles that are embedded in the entire surface of the composition?

The collage elements add indeed a surprising new dimension to Monet's triptych and transform Hara's copy into a full-fledged original work. However, as we return to Monet's work to check for the sources of Hara's inspiration, we discover—most likely with a certain amount of astonishment—that his canvases, too, were anything but flat even though we typically think of them as being so, especially the water-lily paintings because of their focus on reflective surfaces that blur the distinction between sky and water. Monet had tried to capture the quality of light and reflection with sharpest attention to detail; he carefully built up each area of the canvas with multiple layers of pigment and complex brushwork and created dry, almost parched, raised areas that in turn would soak up the pigment layered on top differently than the adjacent flat areas.<sup>1</sup> In this manner the refraction of light on the canvas mimicked the refraction of light on the water. Hara, in contrast, inserted little rectangular pieces of newsprint cut from newspapers from countries all across the globe—we see texts in French and English, but also Arabic, Hebrew, Korean and Japanese, among others—paired with handwritten calligraphic flourishes; there are also small bits of photographic reproductions and drawings which together with a multitude of tiny pieces of textiles cut from precious antiques and ordinary cloth create a dense material layer partly squeezed into the pigment, partly sitting on top.

Hara underscores the optical effect of a surface breaking apart into segments with an endlessly repeated though arbitrarily shaped series of small painted rectangles which are placed next to, or on top of the collage elements so that they function much like small frames within a frame that draw the viewer's attention to the details of the collaged-in pieces but also to her play

with two and three-dimensional effects. Her densely worked surface makes the work dialogic, not only in the sense that it critically engages Monet's work, but also establishes internal dialogues with the different compositional elements in which a particular characteristic like a local color relationship, brushwork, pattern, or spatial configuration is echoed in another part of the canvas. The viewer is called upon to thread together the different fragments into a conceptually unified whole and so becomes a partner in the making of the composition.

When Monet began work on his many water-lily paintings, some of the fiercest battles of World War I were being fought barely twenty miles away from his property. In fact, the front was so close to Giverny that Monet feared his village would be overrun any day by the troops and that he and his work both would then perish. Yet, he wanted his paintings to show no trace of the horrors of war or personal trauma, considering instead his art much like his garden a place of refuge and contemplation.<sup>2</sup> Hara, in contrast, by inserting bits of newsprint from the daily International press into her composition, draws attention to current political and military conflicts while the small pieces of textiles gleaned from different cultures and periods introduce a more complex sense of time that extends beyond the here and now to an interweaving of the personal with the public and the current with the past.

Hara's *Topophilia—Imbuing in Monet* teaches us to look closely, to truly study a work of art not only for its optical effects but to probe beneath the surface. In contemplating Hara's rich augmentations, we discover that neither Monet's paintings nor her own repetition is meant as the representation of a particular site. The site of topophilia is the canvas itself.

The pieces Hara calls "verse" or "space," often also in conjunction with the term topophilia, are most typically concentrated excursions to a particular



site within a site, such as a detail of a water-lily on Monet's pond. In the group of four lithographs, *Verse-Space M 1-4*, 2005, for example, Hara engages in a focused exploration of the patterns of light, the visual properties of darkness, or the quality of line. More formal than a sketch or study, they offer full-fledged investigations of a pictorial problem and present fully formulated solutions. These lithographs create a significant counterpoint to the large *Topophilia-Imbuing in Monet*; as planographic prints, they seem to contradict the intense focus on the built-up surfaces that define the triptych. But once again Hara, who is an outstanding master printer herself and has collaborated with the best printers in the world, invites us to train our eyes on minute differences and explore nuances of representation. When we look closely, we discover infinitely subtle but complex modulations in the ink that together with the actual sequence of printing create an illusion of a densely layered space without the help of built-up pigmentation or the use of perspective. Only the most careful analysis of the properties of color, or non-color, and a profound mastery of printmaking processes can produce such rich modulations within one hue.

Other works, such as the diptych, *Verse-Imbuing in Yellow*, 2004, or *Verse-Imbuing in Red*, 2003, are conceived as independent works but are equally dialogic and as always evince a similar interest in surface. Here as in many other works, be they painting, mixed media, or prints, Hara's dissolving lines, patches of loosely applied brushwork and rich colors create a complex visual web reminiscent of Jackson Pollock's drip paintings or Cy Twombly's scribbles but also, particularly when employed in conjunction with varied collage material, like the twelve pieces of *Topophilia-Maru*, 2004, of Kurt Schwitters. The diptych format, or the organization of individual works into a larger grid, invites us to compare left and right, above and below and register differences in form, color, and treatment while the collaged-in pieces of fabric make us aware of the fragmentary nature of our perception

and so enhance our desire for formal, but by extension also psychological wholeness.

How, then, does the concept of “imbuing” contribute to Hara’s sense of topophilia? Here it might be useful to turn to Hara’s recent diptych, *Imbuing in Sesshu*, 2007. Much as she did with Monet in regard to Western painting, Hara chose one of the key figures of Asian painting and one of his most important works with which to ponder her own art.

Toyo Sesshu (1420-1506), a Zen Buddhist monk, is Japan’s most revered artist and is credited with establishing a truly Japanese style of sumi-e, or monochrome, ink painting. He is best known for two distinct painting styles, one marked by forceful, angular, complex brushwork, the other a so-called *haboku*, or “splashed ink” technique which he developed after his intensive study of Sung Dynasty painted scrolls by such Chinese painters as Xia Gui (c. 1200-1250) and Ma Yuan (1190-1224) on his three-year stay in China as a diplomatic envoy to the Ming court. Landscape painting constitutes the most important category of his work and Hara took two of his most famous hanging scrolls, the *Landscapes of Autumn and Winter*, 1470-90 (Tokyo National Museum) with which to engage Sesshu’s art.<sup>1</sup>

In *Topophilia—Imbuing in Sesshu*, 2007, we recognize on the left side Sesshu’s famous ink drawing, although now covered with a multitude of grey and white marks and textures which lend it a soft, atmospheric appearance only hinted at in the original drawing; on the right side, however, the original drawing is obscured and we can no longer be certain whether Hara bothered to recreate Sesshu’s second scroll or merely built up a densely layered web of soft white tufted strokes and black calligraphic marks.

Right: Verse — *imbuing in Red*, 2004  
Oil on linen and panel  
49" x 78" (Diptych)



It is in this uncertainty where we begin to gain a fuller understanding of Hara's enterprise. The tradition of establishing a dialogue between past and present is a key concept in both Chinese and Japanese art and practiced by the scholar-artist. Each work is conceived of as part of an ongoing dialogue unfolding over time and eliciting commentary from subsequent generations of scholar-artists who would typically inscribe their observations on the painted scroll itself. We learn a great deal about this practice from the inscription of one T'ang Hu, a fourteenth-century Chinese theorist, who after studying a master's scroll, inscribed the work with his colophon and then following encomium:

The embodiment of a single moment  
Is the treasure of a hundred ages,  
And one feels, unrolling it, a fondness,  
As if seeing the man himself.

The topic of art is not the landscape but the encounter with the mind of the artist.<sup>4</sup>

Hara does not want to be characterized as a Japanese artist and it surely would be wrong to do so—she has spent almost her entire life as a practicing artist in the United States and her work is too deeply informed by American and European painting to be easily categorized as Japanese. Indeed, Hara should properly be understood as an international artist indebted to, and in dialogue with, many different traditions. Nevertheless there are distinct resonances of East Asian artistic practice in the manner in which Hara conceives of artistic work. “Imbuing”, then, can be understood as a practice that builds on the work of an earlier artist and through a sustained dialogue keeps the earlier work alive and makes it part of the formation of today's culture. The study of scrolls and the writing of commentary—in other

words, the establishment of a conversation that can unfold over centuries – was the domain of the male artist-scholar. Hara accomplishes a significant shift in this tradition. Her *topophilia* describes a mental state and not the gendered domains of cultural privilege, that through the means of collage, image, and text can easily reach across time and space while exploring new territories.

I would like to thank to Keiko Hara for graciously answering my questions and showing me her work and Ainslie and Keith Peoples for allowing me such frequent access to their collection.

### Dorothea Dietrich

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of Art History at the Corcoran College of Art + Design.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> See the detailed analyses in Virginia Spate, *Claude Monet: Life and Work* (New York and London, 1992); and Robert L. Herbert, "Method and Meaning in Monet," *Art in America* (September 1979), pp. 90-108.

<sup>2</sup> Spate, *Monet*, pp. 270, 274-5.

<sup>3</sup> "Sesshu," *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 2007, *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*, 18 July 2007, <http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-9066899>; Taniō Nakamura, *Sesshū Tōyo* (Rutland, VT and Tokyo, Japan, 1957, translation Elise Grilli).

<sup>4</sup> James Cahill, *Chinese Painting* (Geneva, 1960), p. 95.

## ARTIST'S STATEMENT

Keiko Hara

My art is facing and examining with my personal language that which cannot be said or written otherwise. My art reaches and touches people as individuals, at levels where the political and social frameworks do not exist.

The "Topophilia-Imbuing In Maru" is my response to the current global conflicts about which I feel deeply. Along with my painted marks, I have collaged the fragments of fabrics and texts from different cultures around the world. They are the fossilization of aesthetics and histories of human lives.

I am redefining the fabrics as shared to make a new whole. "Maru" is Japanese for circle – it has no beginning and no ending. It embraces open-ended possibilities and hopes. "Topophilia" is a term to describe the sense of attachment and desire each of us has for special places.

The large-scale installation painting entitled "Topophilia – Imbuing In Monet," is the same scale and appearance as Monet's "Water Lilies" at the Museum of Modern Art. Embedded throughout the painting are various fragments of fabric from different cultures around the world. The fragments of fabric are not preserved antiques, but instead were items that were worn. Such items truly cover their culture's fossilization and reflect people's place in the world and experience of their own shared history. Often, moreover, they also communicate a special story that reflects on all of us.