

KEIKO HARA

IMBUING IN MONET



Keiko Hara's Springtime, Shreds of Language

ROBERT C. MORGAN

Keiko Hara's art carries a certain integrity that extends in many directions and holds many points of reference. Given her considerable breadth and technical expertise, the individual works reveal a remarkable fluidity. Regardless of the medium—whether painting, sculpture, collage, printmaking, or her original mixed media installations—the complex layering of her images is often possessed with a startling beauty. Her art is filled with a natural phantasmagoria, with precise and subtle passages, comparable to the sublime sounds of gagaku that accompany the ancient tradition of the Noh theater in Japan. While at first glance, her work may appear extravagant, given the repeated applications of color, form, and patterning, the fragmented resolutions are fully coherent. Over the years, her assembled "Topophilias" maintain a paradoxical and indefatigable presence, an undeniable evocation of interior reality projected outward. The complexity of Keiko Hara's visual world goes beyond the mundane banalities of the spectacle into the very core of life itself.

Her art is about the tactility of things, their reference to nature, and how we perceive, feel, and understand the universe that we inhabit.

While living in New York last summer, Keiko had rented a studio in Brooklyn where she planned to develop a new series of work. One afternoon, I was invited to visit this enormous warehouse space to see her works in progress — mostly paintings and prints. During our conversation, I discovered that Keiko lived in Walla Walla, Washington, near where she worked as a Professor at Whitman College. I immediately recalled a line from the American poet and historian Carl Sandburg who claimed that the city was named twice in order to reassure those who missed it the first time. Sandburg's American-style folk humor identified Walla Walla as a kind of hometown America where people can't afford to be unreal. This seems to suit Keiko perfectly well. As an artist, she cannot afford to be unreal! She is completely absorbed in her work, yet humble about it. She forges ahead with a wellspring of ideas and images from different sources, yet always in compliance with nature, with the turn of the seasons, and with the changing experiences that inhabit her perceptions. In this sense, Keiko coheres her

remarkable sensibility with a longing to develop her own formal language. She is forever in the process of evoking a visual sensibility in response to her own complex history and to the life she observes around her.

So what makes Keiko's work, work so well in Walla Walla? Or for that matter, what makes her work, work so well in Brooklyn? I would argue in favor of color and form and spatial clarity. But these are formal qualities. What then? Finally, I would have to acknowledge her motives: relentless energy and self-confidence! Once Keiko sets out to complete a project, she rarely doubts her ability to succeed. In the process of her on-going artistic pursuit, Keiko transforms our expectations of something into something else. A clear example would be her recent "Topophilia" (2005)—a frequently employed term in Keiko's work—based on the famous three-panel painting of waterlilies by Monet that currently hangs at MoMA, a painting that deeply inspired her to pursue a one-to-one scale likeness on her own terms. Her terms match those of Monet, but through a different multi-cultural filter. She virtually memorized each square inch of this painting by searching out the resonant effects of light on water and on the

fine tracery of nature. Keiko's overall painting still carries the resemblance of Monet's light on water, but through a mediated screen, inhabited with modular images and symbolic interventions purloined from other paintings, textile fragments, notes, reproductions of figures from other times, and other places, that fill this illusionist pictorial space. There is an important iconography to this painting that will be discussed momentarily.

But in terms of a formal language, Keiko has used the concept of a pattern and a modular structure often, for example, in a major work, entitled "100 Gates," completed and shown in 1994. In contrast to the recent "Topophilia—Imbuing in Monet," the images of nature employed in the earlier "100 Gates" were not purloined and recontextualized so much as they were invented or discovered through the process of the monotype. Later the resulting prints were inserted into wooden frames, structured like ladders on two sides, and covered on top. The "100 Gates" suggest open thresholds—each like a Torii—that pass through and into a sacred space, thus recalling her early memories of Shinto and Buddhism in Japan. All phases of nature are evoked in these modular

episodes of “100 Gates.” In such modular mono-print constructions, Keiko transforms images by recreating them in ways that imply decorum, yet are beyond predictability. Through her piercing insight and a carefully hewed intuition, and with the concentrated abandon of a lyric poet, Keiko invigorates each print—whether on paper or canvas—with a heightened aura of concentration and exuberance. This is made evident in her recent “Verse-Imbuing” (2005) series. Her manner of work utilizes inks and color washes, some in striations of different hues, others in textured grids or dense surfaces, mottled and layered with varying transparent forms. Her combination of methods and approaches to the materials inevitably lends itself to a precisely tuned, yet perfectly restrained expressivity.

As an artist steeped in multicultural aesthetics, Keiko no longer thinks in a predictable manner about the superficial merging of East and West. Her way is much more delicate, more sublime, and mysterious — qualities that echo some of the mystery of her own life-story and her rise to artistic prominence over the past thirty years. Her history has been described often in the past in other writings and in various

reviews and catalogs. To summarize briefly, Keiko was born to Japanese parents in what is now North Korea in 1942. After the War, her mother took her to Yamaguchi Prefecture in Japan while her father was detained and then imprisoned for eight years by the Chinese. As a young woman, Keiko studied at the Gendai Art School in Tokyo and the Oita-Kenritsu Art College in Oita. Later she began teaching art to children and exhibiting her own work. In 1971 she came to the United States to study art therapy, but eventually turned to focus full-time on a career as a fine artist. During the seventies, Keiko received both undergraduate and graduate degrees in fine arts, including an MFA degree at the prestigious Cranbrook Academy. She has been teaching at Whitman College since 1985.

At this point, Keiko feels a certain resolve with her past. All the events, uncertainties, and difficult episodes have somehow merged together. They are all part of her life-stream. This has been true for some years. Yet she still carries the stories within her, the difficult memories of her past, the chaos and confusion, that she is bent on re-ordering through her art. In this sense, Keiko's recent triptych, "Topophilia—Imbuing in Monet," is a kind of magnum opus, a tour-de-

force on its own terms, not unlike that of the French Impressionist upon which her painting is based. Monet painted his important three-panel work in Giverny late in his career, well into the twentieth century, after the initial stages of Modernism had already been realized. Keiko's decision to appropriate Monet's famous pond, fluttering with reeds and flowers, reflecting on the luminous surface of the water, was not an incidental decision. Long before her rapturous encounter with Monet, one can trace the development of nature and textual themes in Keiko's paintings and prints from the outset of her career and in more recent installations such as "Topophilia — Semaru" (1999) and "Topophilia — Imbuing Seasons" (2004).

The latter installation was shown at the Northwest Museum of Arts and Culture in Spokane and included rooms with paneled exteriors and interiors crowded with calligraphic imagery, digital prints, and slide projections, representing the four seasons. For the same exhibition, Keiko created a paper installation, entitled "Topophilia — Imbuing/Maru," that involved collaged fragments of fabrics and texts from different cultures around the world. As usual Keiko was interested in the symbolic narrative that lay beneath the

surfaces of these works: “The fragments of fabric are not preserved antiques, but instead were worn items... they reflect and relate the people’s life and place in the world... moreover, they relate a story that reflects on us all.” Specifically, in relation to the thirty-six works on paper that comprise this series, Keiko describes how Japanese orphans in China— fifty years after World War II—were seeking their parents. Japanese parents gave money and family treasures to Chinese families to care for their children. Now the patches and fragments from the various fabrics or distinctive clothing from the regions are used as identity markers in the children’s search for their roots of habitation as elderly adults. This connects directly with Keiko’s use of the word “topophilia”—coined by the British poet Sir John Betjeman, “to describe the sense of attachment and desire each of us has for special places.”

But it is in “Topophilia—Imbuing in Monet” that the most daring and impressive culmination of Keiko’s work is made clear. Still, one may ask: What is its real purpose and function of this painting? Unlike her previous large-scale work, “Imbuing/Seasons,” it is not a multi-media display where the viewer enters into a habitat

and becomes directly involved with the paneled spaces. "Topophilia—Imbuing in Monet" is a collage/painting, a frontal experience that offers another kind of encounter in which the symbolic narrative takes on another aspect, one that is both poignant and conceptual. In Zen Buddhism, the brush reveals the concept of the artist's mind—the nothingness (mu) or "no-mind" (wu-nein). This conceptual aspect within Keiko's painting was once well known and accepted among the Japanese literati, the samurai, and the supremely cultivated sumiye and zenga painters of the late Kamakura period.

I mentioned that Keiko's work relates on a kind of trans-sensory level, specifically to the sounds of gaguka—the ancient Japanese music, the pulsating, intermittent weave of the flute with the beat of the drum, a timeless time of notes echoing into infinity. Gaguka seems a distant cry from Monet, but not when given the touch of Keiko Hara. Somehow they coalesce. Somehow the meeting of these two far distant forms is less a synthesis than an indeterminate antipodal agreement. Like the forces of yin and yang, the contrasting colors interposed by Monet offers a kind of intimacy in his sacred pictorial haven in Giverny. Thus, Monet's vision of the pond offers

a meditative screen on which Keiko adheres patches of cloth and imagery from other sources. The two forms combine as a kind of palimpsest, a form of writing over painting, or painting over writing, an intertextuality. To see this topophilia is to envision a remembrance of lost time where images, seemingly conflicted, are held within a modulated stasis. The form of the painting carries history in two directions, and then coalesces into a multicultural field that touches us on the most personal level. Keiko's comment is both profound and exact: "The manifestation of language bits in a visual cacophony where different languages collide and overlay one another, returns us to a sense of language before it was forced to 'make sense.' We go back to its 'shred' state."

Indeed, "Topophilia—Imbuing in Monet" is about returning to the shreds of language, because in language—any language—there is no perfect sense. Meaning is persistently in flux, yet somehow we are determined to find it, to locate the gravitational pull that gives us a sense of the painting. Through Keiko's meditation on Monet (more a meditation on meaning than an interpretation) we get a fragmentation of meaning, the sense of a tragic loss, but we also

are given a rejuvenated sense of springtime. As in Botticelli's *Primavera* or in Monet's *Waterlilies*, spring offers us a mythic encounter with nature, a kind of re-birth, an energetic repose. Springtime represents the timeless time when hope emerges from the well of hidden desire. It is the unveiling of space and time within the shreds of language. In the springtime, we are privy to complex and composite emotions that remind us that the human experience is meant to be shared by all—not only as televised simulacra but also, as a moment of human inheritance, where the agonizing ululations from another part of the world begin to make sense. In "Topophilia—Imbuing in Monet" they are heard by an artist willing to show the way through the depth of her own experience. As with Monet, Keiko Hara knows that to become universal in spirit one must enter into the agonizing depth of one's Being and come out again. One must enter into the world where everyone lives and where the spirit of humanity echoes through infinity. Some paintings are still capable of becoming catalysts for this to happen. Keiko Hara's is one of them.

GWANGJU (KOREA), SEPTEMBER–OCTOBER 2005