

Teruko Yokoi



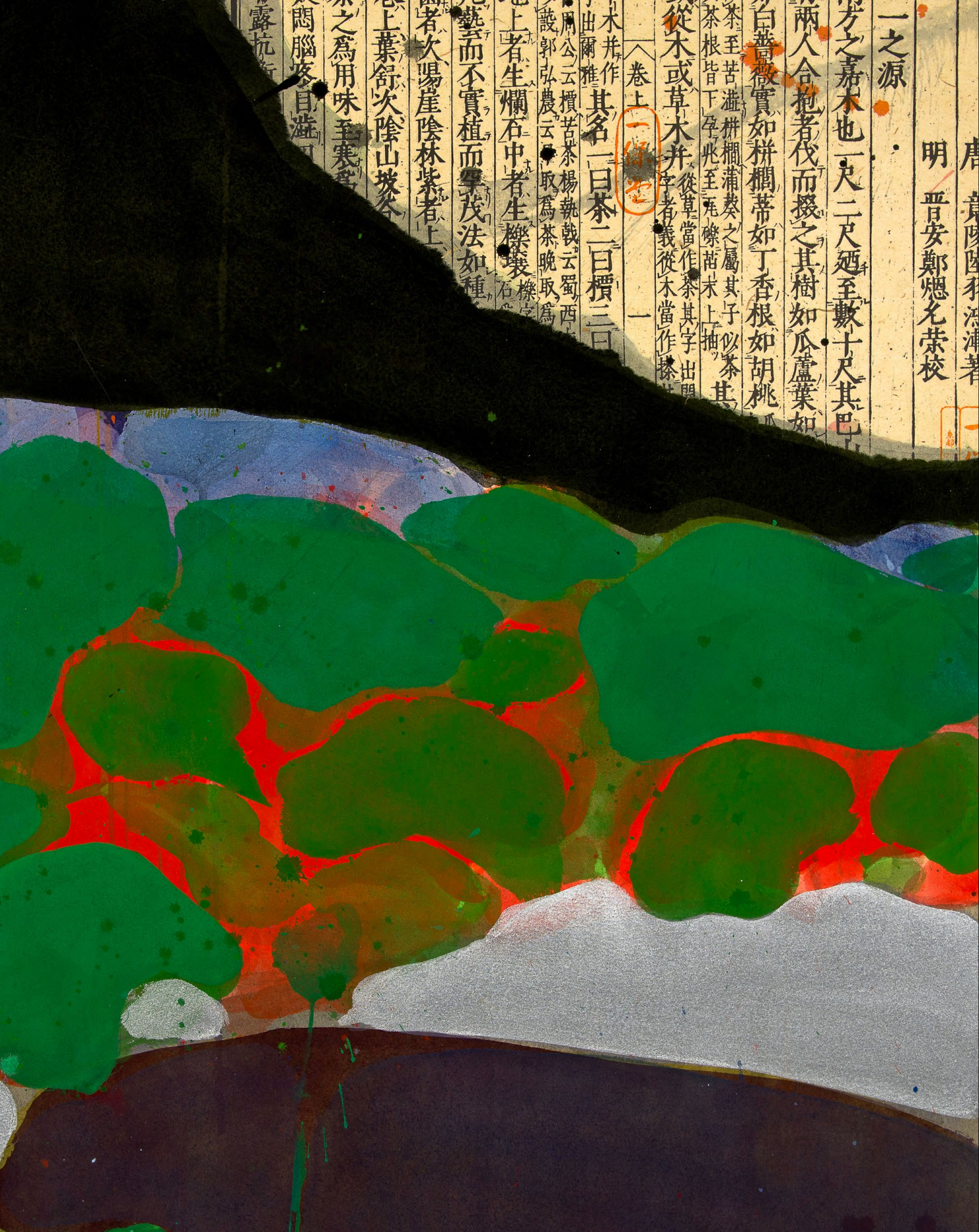
Teruko Yokoi *Noh Theater*

May 1–June 14, 2025

Essay by Tai Francis Wallace

HOLLIS TAGGART

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Teruko Yokoi's artistic journey was defined by resilience, reinvention, and a relentless pursuit of personal expression. Born in Japan in 1924, she came of age amid global upheaval. Her path took her from post-war Japan to the San Francisco Art Institute in 1954, then to New York's vibrant 1950s art scene, and later to Paris and Bern, Switzerland, where she spent the remainder of her life, continuing to hone her distinct visual language. Navigating diverse cultural landscapes, Yokoi absorbed and reinterpreted many of the modernist aesthetics of the time, all while maintaining a close visual connection to her Japanese heritage.

Arriving in the United States in 1954, Yokoi entered the charged atmosphere of post-war American art, a period defined by bold experimentation and the rise of Abstract Expressionism. She studied under Hans Hofmann, whose emphasis on dynamic composition and the push-pull of form deeply impacted her work. She later situated herself at the heart of the New York School, living in the Chelsea Hotel with her then-husband, painter Sam Francis, and maintained friendships with luminaries such as Joan Mitchell, Kenzo Okada, and Mark Rothko, to name a few. Her paintings pulse with an energy that reflects the artistic climate of the era as well as her own lived experience, bridging the traditions of East and West.

FOREWORD

Beyond its formal qualities, Yokoi's work embodies a larger narrative of post-war artistic exchange. As a Japanese artist engaged with American modernism, Yokoi contributed to an evolving dialogue that reshaped the landscape of contemporary art. Two museums dedicated to her work attest to her art historical significance: Teruko Yokoi Hinageshi Museum and Teruko Yokoi Fuji Museum of Art in Shizuoka, both in Japan.

In presenting Yokoi's work within the framework of Noh theater, we bring to the fore Yokoi's innate ability to harness tradition yet stay resonant with contemporary sensibilities. Noh theater, through its deliberate pacing, layered symbolism, and distilled emotion, provides a compelling lens through which to consider not only Yokoi's artistic practice, but her life as a whole. Much like the masks used in Noh performances that express both restraint and depth, Yokoi's works reveal multiple facets at once: movement and stillness, control and spontaneity, memory and presence.

We are profoundly grateful to Kayo Malik for her unwavering dedication to advancing the legacy of Teruko Yokoi and for her exceptional stewardship of the Estate. Our heartfelt thanks also go to Tai Francis Wallace, whose tireless efforts and thoughtful collaboration have been instrumental in bringing this exhibition to life. Tai's deeply considered personal essay, which accompanies this catalogue, offers invaluable insight into Yokoi's work. Special thanks to Douglas Walla for his steadfast commitment and collaborative spirit in championing this project. We also extend our sincere appreciation to the entire Hollis Taggart team, whose collective dedication makes it possible for us to share these remarkable artworks with the public.

Severin Delfs Hollis C. Taggart



Ceremonious Rebellion: Teruko Yokoi and the Art of Perseverance

Tai Francis Wallace

My grandmother Teruko and I were born on the same day, April 2nd, nearly six decades apart. The year before she died, four generations of our family gathered together to hear many of her stories. Teruko's stories, some which have not been shared outside of a small group of people, are memorialized in her archive, which I draw from for this essay. Since taking on responsibility for Teruko's work, our family has endeavored to honor her legacy and tell her story from her point of view. It is in this spirit that I write this deeply personal essay.

"Poems written in color." That is how Teruko Yokoi described her own artworks. This lyrical phrase evokes the blend of precision and emotion that defines her artistic journey, as well as her penchant for weaving tradition with contemporary expression. This essay explores how Noh theater, a significant influence in Teruko's practice, served as both a conceptual lens and a physical material in her work.

Noh theater is one of Japan's oldest forms of theater dating back to the fourteenth century. It is renowned for its juxtaposition of traditional structure and expressiveness. Emotions are conveyed to the audience through masks frozen in expression, worn by a skilled actor moving across the stage in a series of meticulously codified, controlled gestures. Noh theater is known for its minimalist sensibility: "Little 'happens' in a Noh drama . . . the total effect is that of a metaphor made visual."¹ Plots are often drawn from traditional materials: legends of ghosts and spirits, history, and literature.

Noh is best known for its emphasis on slow, deliberate, and symbolic movements, lyrical song and poetry, and highly stylized, sparse landscape visuals. These elements resonate with the visual and narrative themes found in Teruko's paintings. Traditional Noh theater in its earliest iterations often took place in fields, gardens, and temples, with the natural landscape becoming the stage. In these settings—and as often reflected in Teruko's paintings—a well-timed gust of wind blows snow or plum blossoms across a clearing at dusk or bending tall grass across a field could bring the environment into the forefront, adding drama to the performance. The landscape became the subject of her canvases, awash with bold hues and earthen tones, and stages where tradition interlaces with modernity. Symbolic forms, often expressing subtle movement across the stage, add order to her abstraction.

**Yokoi in her Bern studio with her
body of work known as "postcards."
Photo by Hanseuli Traschel**

Many works in this exhibition feature collage elements culled from tea paper made from mulberry bark fibers, which was typically used at traditional Japanese tea ceremonies. Teruko often selected a specific antique paper called mulberry Washi paper. This paper, in addition to being used for tea ceremonies, was also deployed to print the pages of Noh theater books or guides accompanying Noh plays. In some of the works in this exhibition, such as *Autumn Day* (1983, pl. 10) or *Untitled* (1987, right), collaged pieces of ceremonial tea paper provide fragmented information pulled from Lu Yu's literary novel *The Classic of Tea*, written in the eighth century Tang Dynasty and representing an anchor point for the origins of some of Japan's most significant cultural traditions. The notes and fragments of Lu Yu's story emphasize themes expressed within the works themselves—a color, plant, element, or sentiment. *Autumn Day* includes old world Kanbun calligraphy referencing “wood” in the “shadow of the mountain,” with torn sheets forming a wooden mountain range in the background. The tea paper moon in *Im Garten* (1980, pl. 7) reflects messages of “white roses” and “garden” upon the landscape. Throughout her life, Teruko cultivated a collection of books on traditional Japanese theater, poetry, and music. When she was away from Japan, these mementos brought her great comfort, serving as a centralizing anchor for her spirit. Later in her life, when she visited Japan more frequently, Teruko was able to re-experience the traditional theater, ceremonies, and rituals that had been part of her distant memory.

Particularly important in Noh theater is the use of masks. The main character wears a hand-made mask of Japanese cypress, glazed and primed with a matrix of crushed shell. The mask, often asymmetrical, represents a different character, emotion, or narratological archetype, depending on the angle of the viewer. The same

mask could convey different emotions or moods depending on the degree of its tilt.

The concept of changing masks, in the tradition of Noh, closely parallels Teruko's own life, and through her work, this fluidity of expression finds new resonance. Just as the Noh mask shifts its character depending on the viewer's perspective, Yokoi's paintings reflect the many transformations she underwent—moving from Japan to San Francisco, New York, Paris, and ultimately Bern, Switzerland. With each relocation, she absorbed and reinterpreted the artistic influences around her. Her work stands at the confluence of these experiences, blending Eastern tradition with the bold innovations of Western abstraction, creating a visual language that is at once deeply personal and universally evocative.

Born in the interwar period in 1924, Teruko grew up in occupied Japan. As a Japanese woman arriving in San Francisco in 1954 during the post-war art boom, Teruko began her journey as a figurative painter and portraitist before exploring her curiosity in different modernist movements. Teruko settled into student life at the California School of Fine Art, which would be renamed the San Francisco Art Institute. Much like a Noh performer bound by tradition, Teruko was an outsider adhering to a strict artistic discipline, yet channeling deep emotions beneath the surface. Post-war America was not an easy arena for a young Japanese woman.

In an interview with Marc Whitney, Teruko tells a story of a moment she was painting alone and saw a view of the San Francisco Bay from up high on Russian Hill and began to cry. Looking west across the Golden Gate Bridge and imagining Japan, she watched the sun set on Alcatraz, casting a golden glow on the water beneath the bridge. She wept because the beauty was transitory as the night consumed the bay and she had no one to share it with. The next day, Teruko had a



UNTITLED, 1987
Egg tempera, metallic paint, and collage on paper, 26 ⁷/₈ × 19 ⁵/₈ in. (68.2 × 49.9 cm)

conversation with her professor Ralph Johnson, sharing with him this moment of sadness triggered by immense beauty and loneliness. Johnson told Teruko that she was lucky to be a painter as her gift as a painter was her ability to capture these fleeting moments.

The young artist found early success at the school, earning a scholarship to study abstraction in New York under Hans Hofmann. Teruko navigated the extraordinarily patriarchal environment of Abstract Expressionism with determination and resilience. There, she became close friends with artists such as Joan Mitchell, who also resided in the Chelsea Hotel. In 1959, Teruko married the artist Sam Francis, and the two lived with their daughter—my mother—in the penthouse of the hotel. These early experiences in the Abstract Expressionist circles of 1950s New York and San Francisco can be seen as another personal Noh stage in Teruko’s life.

All the collage works in this exhibition were created after 1970, upon Teruko’s move to Bern, Switzerland. The themes of nature, drama, beauty, darkness, and melancholy have always been subtly present in her works, but at this point they were being formalized into an oeuvre that was like the script of a play. Teruko’s works are elegant Noh dramas: tightly composed yet resonant with unspoken feeling. These works balance spontaneity with deliberate control as the paint becomes an extension of her hand. Even splashes and action strokes were precise directional flings filling in a predetermined void.

There is a bit of irony in itself that Teruko enjoyed Noh theater. The actors in Noh theater are traditionally all male, and it remains male dominated today, though the actors don masks that represent a wide variety of identities, including women, ghosts, deities, and demons. That Teruko was a foreigner and woman artist moving in a male-dominated field is a significant factor in why and how she became a master of the (symbolic) mask

and was able to sustain her craft for eight decades, even as a divorced, single mother and immigrant.

Even as Teruko pushed the frontiers of abstract art, she remained deeply rooted in Japanese cultural customs, often wearing a traditional kimono at her exhibition openings and treating these events like thoughtful gatherings. Her personal reverence for tradition stood in vibrant contrast to her artistic independence. In her studio she might fling paint or experiment freely, but in the gallery she moved with the measured elegance of a tea host, acknowledging her guests, her heritage, and the moment’s singular importance.

In 1961, at Teruko’s solo show at the venerated Minami Gallery in Japan, she put on a stunning presentation of her oil canvases, but only after nearly giving up and turning to her fellow artist friends for support. This show at Minami was Teruko’s first major solo show on the international stage and she was one of the first western-trained modernist painters to be given a show at Minami. Many of the works shown at Minami carried her diamond motif, symbolizing the heart, happiness, and festivity, but personally she was at a turning point in career deciding if she would continue painting or give up. Her marriage was starting to disintegrate as her husband Francis showed up to her opening with Kiki Kogelnik by his side, later leaving Tokyo to go back to Germany. The show was ultimately a success and one of the centerpiece works would become the catalyst for her 1964 Kunsthalle Basel exhibition. Even with the drama that ensued at the opening, Teruko moved through the moment with grace and returned to Paris with an ever increasing intensity in her works, leading up to her Kunsthalle Basel show.

In the 1970s and ’80s, the period of most works in this exhibition, Bern became Teruko’s sanctuary. What began as a practical relocation—a fresh start after her divorce and a chance to work closely with Swiss gallerists like Arnold Rüdinger,

the director and curator of the storied Kunsthalle Basel, Swiss Kunst Museum, and eventually Galerie Kornfeld—evolved into a long and fruitful chapter of Teruko’s life. The move to Bern also became another turn of the mask for Teruko, who chose to remain in the country and eventually claim residency. Switzerland has one of the most rigorous citizenship requirements for immigrants and the process for obtaining an artist’s visa was not well defined during this time.

As a testament to her life and career, Teruko was effectively stateless until she was granted Swiss citizenship and Bernese residency nearly three decades after moving to Bern. She became an integral part of the Swiss art scene, exhibiting regularly and contributing to the dialogue of European abstraction. In 1975, she was featured in a prominent Kunsthalle Bern show titled *Five Painters from Abroad in the Canton of Bern*, where she presented a monumental triptych, a sweeping landscape abstraction that signaled a confident new phase in her work. Critics in Switzerland praised her “fusion of representational and abstract” tendencies,² noting how her bold compositions still evoked natural forms like mountains, rivers, or the changing seasons back in Japan. Indeed, the natural world re-emerged in Teruko’s art during the Bern years.

In Bern, Teruko began to produce lithography, working with at least four printmakers on over ninety editions: some commissioned, others self-published, but each meticulously etched in stone by the artist and pressed with master printmakers. These collaborations sometimes numbered ten editions per year and were executed almost like a Noh play—repetitive, choreographed, abstract, and often completed in a minimalist fashion with no assistants.

Teruko had always retained the lessons of Japanese art, including calligraphic brushwork and the appreciation for blank space (what she referred to as “blank space sentiment,” perhaps

echoing the concept of *ma* or meaningful emptiness). In some of the mixed-media works of this exhibition, she embedded fragments of Kanji characters—key words or poems—within abstract washes of paint, literally layering her mother tongue onto the visual field. In centuries past, entire books of Noh theater plays were printed by woodcut on this same mulberry tea paper, flat bound into books and owned by the elite as guides to interpreting various Noh plays. By transforming linguistic symbols into elements of design, Teruko connected to the landscapes of her memory. A snippet of old ceremonial mulberry parchment might form the textured and bright rising moon, as in *Im Garten* (1980, pl. 7), creating the illusion of luminance in what would be an otherwise dark landscape work of a twilight landscape. One might imagine that in arranging these pieces of paper—torn from sheets of her personal collection of mementos—Teruko was performing a private tea ceremony, each scrap placed with intention, each Kanji character a whispered sentiment. Such works became ceremonies on paper and backdrops for theater, uniting the tactile presence of Japanese paper (perhaps even carrying the faint scent of tea or ink) with the momentary visions of her symbolic landscapes.

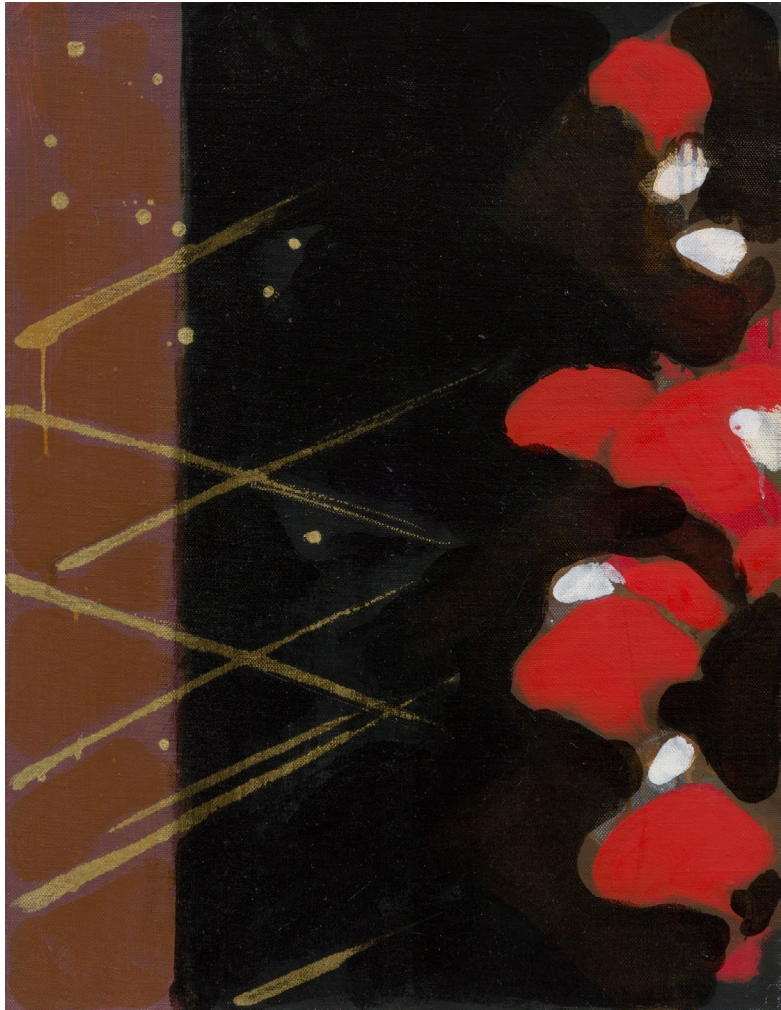
Teruko was born to paint and she never stopped. Painting was both her vocation and her solace. The soft melancholy of being far from her native Japan seeped into her work in a poetic way; Teruko’s memories were cast forward in her art. This sense of impermanence, akin to the wistfulness (“mono no aware”) found in Japanese art, lent her later paintings a reflective, autumnal quality.

NOTES

1. “Noh theatre,” *Britannica*, britannica.com/art/Noh-theatre.
2. “About Teruko Yokoi,” *Teruko Yokoi Hingageshi Art Museum*, terukoyokoi-hinageshiartmuseum.or.jp/en/art/#:~:text=Teruko%20Yokoi%20is%20an%20artist,colorful%20sense%20and%20bold%20composition.

I.
HERBSTLANDSCHAFT, 1957
Oil on canvas, $48 \frac{3}{8} \times 57 \frac{1}{8}$ in. (122.9 \times 145.1 cm)





2.
UNTITLED, 1970/2007
Oil, acrylic, metallic on canvas, 25 ⁵/₈ × 19 ¹/₄ in. (65.1 × 48.9 cm)



3.
AUTUMN LIGHT, 1976
Acrylic on canvas, 19 ³/₄ × 24 ¹/₈ in. (50.3 × 61.3 cm)



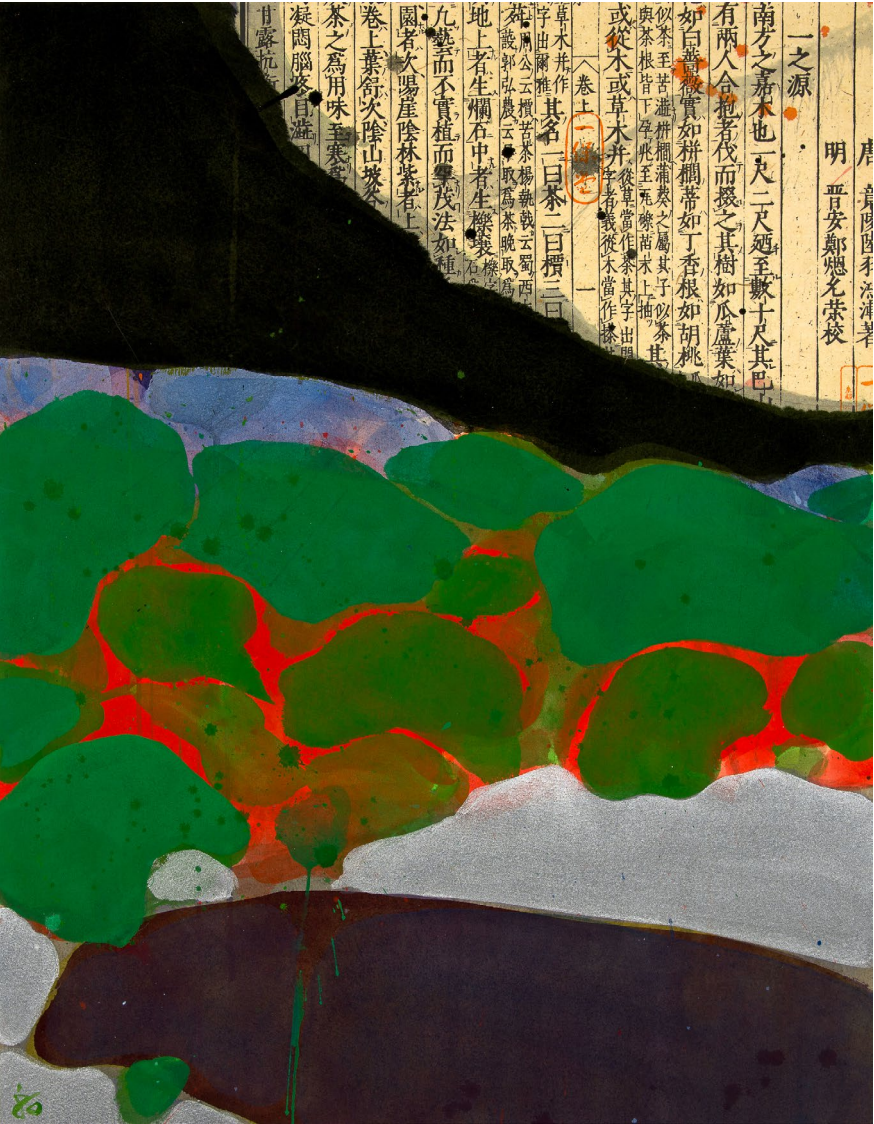
4.
UNTITLED, 1978
Egg tempera and metallic paint on paper, $11 \times 10 \frac{7}{8}$ in. (27.9 \times 27.6 cm)



5.
MAGNOLIA, 1979
Oil on canvas, $56 \frac{3}{4} \times 57 \frac{1}{2}$ in. (144 \times 146 cm)



6.
UNTITLED, circa 1970s
Egg tempera and metallic paint on paper
10 ⁵/₈ × 14 ⁵/₈ in. (27 × 37.1 cm)



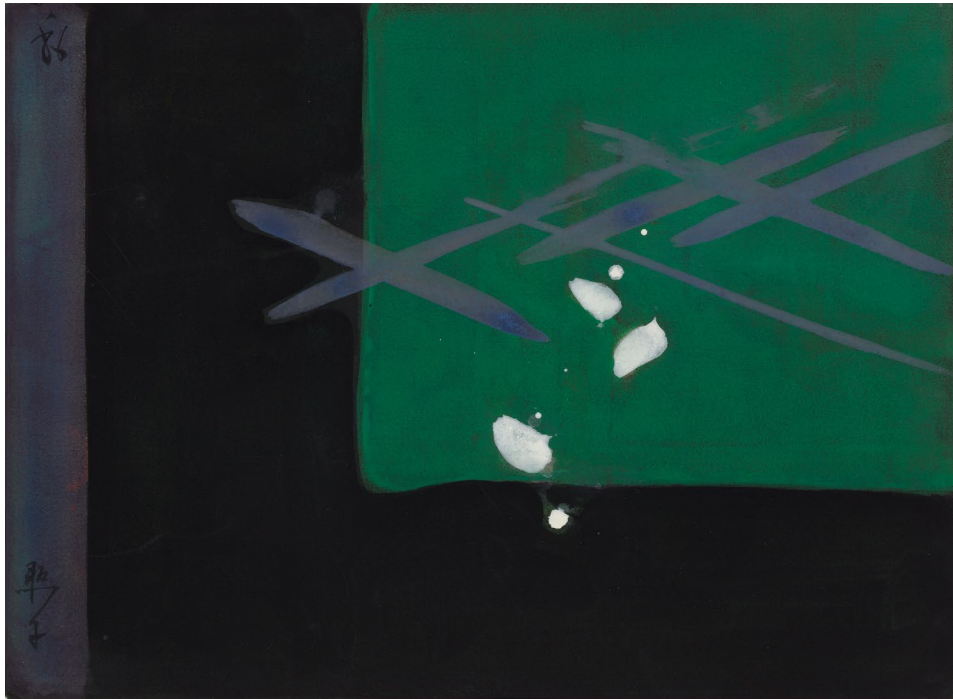
7.
IM GARTEN, 1980
Egg tempera, metallic paint, and collage on paper
27 ¹/₄ × 21 in. (69.1 × 53.4 cm)



8.
IRIS II, I, III, 1982
Egg tempera, metallic paint, graphite, and collage on paper
26 ³/₄ × 19 ¹/₂ in. (68.1 × 49.5 cm) (left)
18 ³/₈ × 25 in. (46.6 × 63.5 cm) (center)
26 ⁷/₈ × 19 ⁵/₈ in. (68.5 × 49.8 cm) (right)

9.
UNTITLED, 1983
Egg tempera with collage on paper, 5 ⁷/₈ × 4 ¹/₈ in. (14.8 × 10.5 cm)

10.
AUTUMN DAY, 1983
Egg tempera and collage on paper, 26 ³/₄ × 19 ¹/₂ in. (67.9 × 49.6 cm)



11.
SNOW AS DARKNESS FALLS, 1986
Egg tempera on paper, 15 1/4 × 20 1/2 in. (38.7 × 52.1 cm)



12.
NOCTURNE, 1989
Egg tempera on paper, 11 3/4 × 17 3/4 in. (29.8 × 45.1 cm)



13.
UNTITLED, 1993
Egg tempera and metallic paint on paper, 61 ³/₄ × 69 ¹/₄ in. (156.8 × 175.9 cm) (diptych)

14.
UNTITLED, 1996
Egg tempera with metallic color on paper, 25 ¹/₈ × 18 ⁷/₈ in. (63.8 x 47.9 cm)

15.
BAUME D, 2005
Egg tempera on paper
18 ⁷/₈ × 7 ⁵/₈ in. (47.9 × 19.4 cm)

16.
BAUME G, 2005
Egg tempera on paper
18 ⁷/₈ × 7 ⁵/₈ in. (47.9 × 19.4 cm)

17.
BAUME A, 2005
Egg tempera on paper
18 ⁷/₈ × 7 ⁵/₈ in. (47.9 × 19.4 cm)





TERUKO YOKOI
1924–2020

**Yokoi at Galerie Kornfeld's 2019
exhibition in honor of her ninety-fifth
birthday, and eightieth year of painting.
Photo by Michaela Muhmenthaler**

Describing her own paintings as “poems written in colors,” Teruko Yokoi often wandered the hills near her home in Japan as a child with her father, a calligrapher and poet who taught her both art forms. At a time when it was difficult to move within the art world as a single young Japanese woman, Yokoi was one of the few women artists in the 1950s New York milieu of Abstract Expressionism. Through friendships with Joan Mitchell, Kenzo Okada, and Mark Rothko, Yokoi developed her unique, masterful integration of lyrical abstraction and East Asian landscape.

Yokoi settled in Switzerland, after her early daring trajectory living in Tokyo, San Francisco, New York, and Paris. Several years earlier in 1960, Yokoi separated from her husband, the American painter Sam Francis, and briefly returned to Japan. They had met in 1957 in New York and married in March of 1959. Yokoi’s work was eclipsed at the time by the attention given to the rising success of her male artist partner.

In Switzerland, Yokoi recognized in its pristine landscapes the characteristics of Japanese landscape that she had so loved and remembered from her past but by the 1960s were largely gone at the expense of post-war urbanization. Critic Willy Rotzler, upon Yokoi’s artistic debut in the Swiss art world, described her painting as “an imaginary inner landscape that does not exist in this form, neither here in the West nor in the Far East . . . pictorial and metaphorical concentrations of emotive devotion to the unutterable, to the experience.”

Born in Japan in 1924, Yokoi trained in traditional Japanese painting before exploring European abstract art. In 1953, in the wake of World War II, she left Japan for San Francisco. As one of two Japanese students at the California School of Fine Arts, Yokoi turned to abstraction and received many scholarships and grants, one which allowed her to move to New York in 1955 to study with Hans Hofmann. After her separation from Francis, Yokoi permanently moved to Bern, Switzerland in 1962, where she remained until her death in 2020. There are two museums dedicated to Yokoi’s work in Japan: Teruko Yokoi Hinageshi Museum (opened in 2004) and Teruko Yokoi Fuji Museum of Art in Shizuoka (opened in 2008).

Yokoi has had over ninety exhibitions, including two solo shows at the Palace of the Legion of Honor, San Francisco, as well as group shows at Martha Jackson Gallery, New York, Galerie Kornfeld, Bern, and Marlborough Gallery, New York. Her last major retrospective entitled *Teruko Yokoi: Tokyo–New York–Paris–Bern* was presented by the Kunstmuseum in Bern in 2020.

This catalogue has been published on the occasion of the exhibition *Teruko Yokoi: Noh Theater* organized by Hollis Taggart, New York, and presented from May 1–June 14, 2025.

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© Tai Francis Wallace

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Front cover: Yokoi at the opening of her solo exhibition at Galerie Bernhard, Solothurn, Switzerland, September 1967. Photo by Roland Schneider
Frontispiece: Yokoi at an exhibition opening, Galerie 57, Biel, Switzerland, March 1977. Photo by Peter Friedli
Page 4 and back cover: *Im Garten* (detail), 1980, pl. 7