

UNCANNY SENSATION

Teruko Yokoi's Search for Lost Time

By Richard Speer ☞



Teruko Yokoi, *À la recherche du temps perdu* (In Search of Lost Time), 1963, oil on canvas, 57.36 × 59".

THE TITLE OF A 1963 PAINTING by [Teruko Yokoi](#) (1924–2020), *À la recherche du temps perdu* (In Search of Lost Time), could be seen as the Japanese Swiss artist's mantra. Hers was an art of Proustian mnemonics, a means for conjuring the Japan of her vanished youth. Although this painting, both pure abstraction and abstracted landscape, was not among the eighteen canvases and thirty-two works on paper in the recent exhibition of Yokoi's work at the [Marlborough Gallery](#) in New York, its ethos of elegiac yearning and homesickness suffused the exhibition. It was the first North American show in forty-two years for this artist who studied under Hans Hofmann and Julian Levi in New York, had two solo exhibitions at the Palace of the Legion of Honor in San Francisco, and was a friend of Joan Mitchell, a confidante of Mark Rothko, and the third wife of Sam Francis. While her fall off the New York radar can be attributed in part to her outsider status as an Asian woman in a white, Western, male-dominated milieu, it was also a product of her impulse toward self-sequestration—the same drive, one could argue, that imbued her paintings with their atmosphere of hushed, immaculate beauty.

Yokoi enjoyed a pastoral childhood, wandering the hills outside Nagoya with her father, a calligrapher and poet who instructed her in both art forms. The pair frequently ventured out on what he called *haiku hiroi* (haiku-gathering) expeditions, soaking up impressions of the natural world to transliterate into poetry. She later described her paintings as “poems written in colors.” After studying with Paris-educated artist Takanori Kinoshita, she left Japan in 1954 on a scholarship to the California School of Fine Arts, nexus of the San Francisco school of Abstract Expressionism. After her first showing at the Legion of Honor, she moved to New York to study at the Art Students League. Pursued romantically by Francis, she married him in 1959 and with him moved to Paris in 1960. Uninterested in café society and the bohemian life, she doubled down on her work, earning the respect of Swiss curator Arnold Rüdinger, who exhibited her work at the Kunsthalle Basel, and Bernese art dealer Eberhard Kornfeld, who represented her for decades.

Yokoi's marriage to Francis was short-lived, a casualty of his chronic infidelities and inattention. Heartsick, she returned with their daughter, Kayo, to Japan, only to discover that the countryside she and her father had wandered gathering haikus had been paved over with roadways and towns. Her soul's homeland had been obliterated. In 1962, unable to abide the change but loath to return to Paris, she settled permanently in picturesque but provincial Bern, where her work was appreciated and she could paint without distraction. Bern soothed her; its proximity to nature reminded her of the mountains of Japan's Aichi Prefecture, where she'd wandered with her father, while Swiss formality resonated with her own natural reserve.



Teruko Yokoi, *Blue Night*, 1966, oil on canvas, 23 5/8 × 27 5/8”

There, one morning while walking to her studio, she had a mystical experience. She felt an uncanny sensation of cold wind blowing through her entire body, as if she were porous and transparent. Somehow, this reawakened her idyll of Old Japan, which she called “my paradise—everything was crystal clear from the mountains down to the Pacific . . . even

the fish were transparent.” It was a turning point in her work. From pure abstraction, her style evolved into semi-abstracted, Japanese-inflected landscapes. Crisscrossing and crescent-shape gestures stood in for grasses, clouds, snow, and poppies. Thin strips of vertical calligraphy, excerpting traditional haiku, sluiced down picture surfaces like raindrops.

In the Marlborough exhibition, paintings with these motifs evinced the artist’s integration of lyrical abstraction and East Asian landscape, by turns calmative and dynamic. Canvases from the late 1950s through the late ’60s feature enigmatic, open-ended diamond shapes, which recall similar motifs in samurai heraldry. In paintings such as *Shizen—Natur* (Nature), 1960, and *Untitled*, 1969, these forms float within billowing intervals of negative space, known in Japanese aesthetics as *ma*.

Surely Yokoi’s work would be better known today had she remained in New York or Paris rather than living for fifty-eight years in Bern, where her career’s radius rarely extended beyond nearby Zurich, Lausanne, Montreux, and Munich. Her themes are anything but regionalist, appealing to the universal longings for lost childhood and prelapsarian ideals. Evocative and quietly poignant, her mnemonic tableaux distill the ache known in Swiss German as *Häiwee*: homesickness, a yearning for times and places that cannot be revisited, except perhaps through poems and paintings.