
ArtSeen

Teruko Yokoi

By **Elizabeth Buhe**



Teruko Yokoi, *Violet*, 1980. Acrylic on canvas, 45 3/4 × 32 inches. Courtesy the artist and Marlborough Gallery.

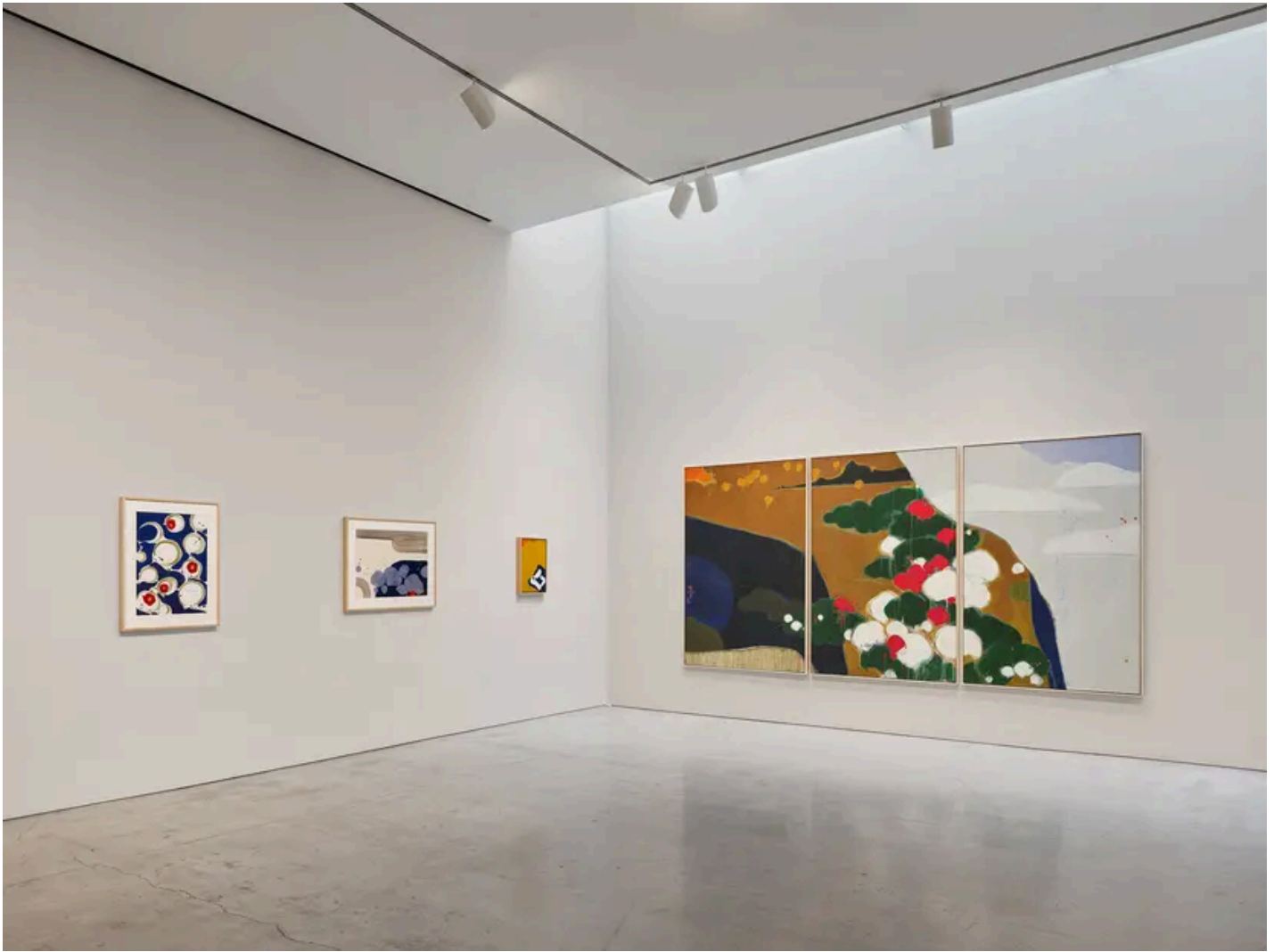
At Teruko Yokoi's retrospective at Marlborough Gallery, which includes fifty works spanning from 1957 to 2012, I had the feeling that the paintings were somehow twinkling or gleaming as I walked through the galleries. This sensation was surprising, since Yokoi, who trained as a painter in both Japan and the United States, primarily used opaque oil paint, often in dark palettes of red or black. That the works seemed to shift nevertheless provides an insight about the difficult-to-achieve balance Yokoi struck between suggesting nature while also leaving the work open to other symbolic or abstract interpretations. These effects additionally result from her unusual but stunning use of metallic medium in certain works, as in the periwinkle boulder-like forms of the egg tempera on paper *Untitled* (1975) or the icy silver ground behind the sweep of drippy blossoms in *Violet* (1980). In total, the effect suggests that Yokoi's pictorial elements are somehow alive. Unlike many of her peers, such as Joan Mitchell, Kenneth Noland, Helen Frankenthaler, or Sam Francis (to whom she was briefly married), Yokoi did not hesitate to hang her compositions around recurrent motifs such as a soft-edged diamond, leaf- or flower-like constellations, or the syncopation of repeated vertical stripes, as if we find ourselves in a grove of trees. Yet Yokoi's work nonetheless demonstrates the exteriorization of abstract content that was so typical of her generation of painters, who largely abandoned abstract expressionism's surrealist-derived reliance on the unconscious self in favor of exploring the reality of nature and its perceptual effects.

ON VIEW
Marlborough
Gallery
Teruko Yokoi
March 7–April
20, 2024
New York



Teruko Yokoi, *Untitled*, 1969. Oil on canvas, 19³/₄ × 13³/₄ inches. Courtesy the artist and Marlborough Gallery.

One example of the works' interpretative capaciousness is the diamond motif that recurs from 1957 straight through the 1960s, and again in the metallic and egg tempera work on paper *Untitled* (1996). We see its angular form in early works like the two-field *Untitled* (1958), where it appears in burnt orange at the lower left, with vertical drips running both upward and downward, evidence that Yokoi painted this canvas in at least two orientations. It likewise appears in the loose gestures of *Shizen – Natur* (1960) and *Untitled* (1969), two works that show Yokoi at the height of her powers. In both of these instances, the artist set the internal articulation of the diamond's boundary askew, so the whole form appears weighted to one side. In the catalogue for Yokoi's 2020 retrospective at the Kunstmuseum Bern, art historians Kuniko Satonobu Spirig and Osamu Okuda note that in Japan the diamond was an emblem for samurai families, and that Yokoi reported feeling self-conscious as a child when discussing a legendary samurai who belonged to a family that was rival to her own. We might thus imagine the diamond in her paintings as embodying, more generally, the exclusion Yokoi experienced as a Japanese woman painting in the predominately white male milieu of American abstraction. Yet this motif is also referred to in Japan as *hishi*, after the form of the water caltrop plant or water chestnut. Thus Yokoi's recurrent diamond form epitomizes precisely the tendency of her paintings to point in separate directions at once: toward the symbolic as well as the observed reality of nature. Such easy movement between realms of meaning seems related to Yokoi's recollection that as a child, her father would take her on a walk to collect haikus, rather than to collect sticks, rocks, or flowers like other children; poems written out in Japanese characters hang like vertical filigree across the surfaces of some of the paintings on view here.



Installation view: *Teruko Yokoi*, Marlborough Gallery, New York, 2024. Courtesy Marlborough Gallery.

Yokoi, who died in 2020, exhibited prodigiously in her lifetime, primarily at galleries in Switzerland and Japan. The Marlborough retrospective is her first meaningful showing in the United States since two shows at the Legion of Honor in San Francisco in 1954 and 1955, which aligned with her year as a student at the California School of Fine Arts, and several group shows on the east coast in the following years. Today, we find an oeuvre of exceptional freshness that retains coherence across the decades. The show's non-chronological hang emphasizes this, because it sets beside each other works made more than thirty years apart. There are momentary glimpses of contemporary developments in painting—for instance, a set of four 1960

gouaches on paper, such as *Red #1*, revel in a proto-pop palette of neon green and electric red. Yet on the whole, there is a remarkable clarity of vision here, pursued fastidiously over nearly seven decades. The temporality the works conjure is not so much the linear progress of a career worked out over time, but that career's engagement, from the first, with issues of cyclicity and renewal, such as the annual change of seasons, as thematized in the virtuoso triptych *Mond/Schnee/Blumen* (1957). The fact that Yokoi filtered much of her imagery through her memories of a no-longer-extant prewar Japan complicates that temporality further, tempering our confidence in the predictable shift of the seasons with awareness that even those things that seem most enduring will one day be irretrievably lost. Yokoi's paintings preserve this transmuted reality, along with the knowledge that the only real certainty is the flickering glimmer of change.

Contributor

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