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# FIAC 2021

Kenjiro Okazaki

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Booth C26

Grand Palais Ephémère, Paris, France





**Kenjiro Okazaki**  
クルは道に迷ってしまった。どちらを向いても荒っぽい岩山ばかり。ひもじくて水が飲みたくて(カツテモ老人が水ヲ飲ミタクテ若イトキコノ島二来タママ五十年モ井戸ヲ見守ツタトイウ)、クルは疲れ、うたた寝をする。その間に井戸から水、誰も見ていないけれど、落葉が濡れている。茨の生えたところには薔薇が。不毛の荒地には蜜蜂、危険な道にも草木、断崖には川が流れ、正しきヒトは怒りの声をあげる。痩せ土からも泉は湧く。 Kur lost his way. Jagged mountains in all directions. Hungry and thirsty, (like the elderly man who came to this island searching for a drink of water as a young man and ended up staying for 50 years, looking after the well) Kur grew tired and snoozed. Meanwhile, water from the well, though no one watched, wet the fallen leaves. Roses where the bramble grew. Honey bees on barren wasteland, vegetation along dangerous paths, rivers below cliffs, and righteous humans raise their angry voice. And the spring flows out of infertile soil., 2019

Acrylic on canvas  
160 x 260 x 6,7 cm (63 x 102 3/8 x 2 5/8 in.)  
(20192724)

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Kenjiro Okazaki (born in 1955) is a Japanese visual artist whose works span over several genres, including painting, sculpture, as well as landscape and architecture. Many of his works have been featured in public collections throughout Japan and in various exhibitions around the world. In 2002, Okazaki was presented in the Japanese pavilion of the International Architecture Exhibition in Venice Biennale.

From around 2015, Okazaki began to produce large paintings by connecting multiple panels. The brushstrokes of one panel can be linked through inversion of mirror image relation to panels other than the one adjacent to it, thus creating connections between otherwise distant strokes, generating a different plane every time it is looked at.

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Kenjiro Okazaki

"一人でいるときは裸で過ごした。「ここには魚がいっぱいいるんです、たぶん」。自分自身を含め人間の姿などしばらく見ていない。多孔質の皮膚を剥き出しにした岩場まで泳いだ。見えるものすべてが裸だった。世界そして海とは仏陀の裸の体なのだ。私たち魚はその体に包まれている。When I was alone, I spent most of my time naked. ""There's a lot of fish here, I guess"" For a while, I hadn't seen anyone, including myself. I swam to the rocks, which are bared porous skin. Everything I saw was naked. The world's oceans were the Buddha's naked body as it was, and we fish were wrapped in his body.", 2021

Acrylic on canvas

210 x 130 cm (82 5/8 x 51 1/8 in.)

(20212725)

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Kenjiro Okazaki  
*The Lamb Who Is the Lamp/ECCE AGNUS DEI QUI TOLLIT PECCATA MUNDI/The city has no  
need of sun or moon to shine on it*, 2021  
Acrylic on canvas  
25,4 x 18 x 3 cm (10 x 7 1/8 x 1 1/8 in.)  
(20212736)

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Van Eyck, *The Adoration of the Mystic Lamb (Ghent Altarpiece)*, c1432. Saint Bavo's Cathedral, Ghent, Belgium

*TOPICA PICTUS* is a suite of abstract paintings, each paired with a short essay and reference image(s), which function as key components to provide multi-layered experiences to audiences.

In this ongoing series that now comprises over 150 works since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, the works were made in response to the unprecedented condition of isolated co-existence, the suspension of time and space, and the perceived loss of tactile or concrete experience, which has significantly impacted our social reality. For the artist, this condition has provided the “possibility of going everywhere because we cannot go anywhere,” an opportunity to go on a solitary journey. In the process of making these paintings, Okazaki finds that the multitude of issues that historically face painting is akin to the discovery of a place. Namely, each painting confronts a unique issue and allows for a unique topos (place) to emerge. The term *topica* in *TOPICA PICTUS* is derived from Aristotle’s *Ars Topica* (The Topics) on the art of the dialectic, and is associated with topos, which indicates a place. In the course of his work, Okazaki recalled not only art historical objects such as African masks, decorative and colored manuscripts, Kamakura-era picture scrolls, Momoyama-era Japanese paintings, Renaissance, Impressionist, and Modernist art, but also medieval maps, images of Dumbo, Pearl Harbor, and Google Earth.

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Kenjiro Okazaki

カタクナな人、カタクに帰る/ヨシヤ、ゴシヤ、ロクシヤ *Stubborn Person, Returning to the Burning house / Carts pulled by goats, Carts pulled by deer, Carts pulled by oxen*, 2021

Acrylic on canvas  
20,5 x 16,5 x 2,9 cm (8 1/8 x 6 1/2 x 1 1/8 in.)  
(20212715)

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Vincent Van Gogh, *The Yellow House (The Street)*, 1888, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam

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Kenjiro Okazaki  
10 paintings series, 2015-2020  
Acrylic on canvas  
20 x 17 cm (7 7/8 x 6 3/4 in.) each  
(201520202626)

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Kenjiro Okazaki

*I dreamed I saw the Blessed Raniero / Seeing through the Altar Panel /  
What happened in San Sepolcro, 2021*

Acrylic on canvas  
25,2 x 18,3 x 2,9 cm (9 7/8 x 7 1/4 x 1 1/8 in.)  
(20212734)

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Kenjiro Okazaki  
*Squeezing Orange Melk Abbey/Melting ceiling, 2021*  
Acrylic on canvas  
25,1 x 18,2 x 2,9 cm (9 7/8 x 7 1/8 x 1 1/8 in.)  
(20212733)



Kenjiro Okazaki

おかちまち E-3 Okachimachi E-3, 2021

Acrylic, pigment, polypropylene, polyethylene  
27,5 x 25 x 11,5 cm (10 7/8 x 9 7/8 x 4 1/2 in.)  
(198720212730)

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Kenjiro Okazaki's relief works were first presented individually in 1981, and later developed into a series between 1987 and 1989. Although the series of reliefs may appear as an iteration of the same shape, the impression felt when seeing each work becomes detached from the shape that is understood as being the same, displaying instead a unique appearance and evoking a memory of a distinct place. Such discrepancy between what is recalled and what is actually seen is a characteristic that all of Okazaki's works share. It gives rise to a strange feeling that different times and places that are supposed to be distant from one another nonetheless have emerged instantaneously right here and right now as we watch.



Kenjiro Okazaki  
おかちまち E-2 *Okachimachi E-2*, 2021  
Acrylic, pigment, polypropylene, polyethylene  
27,5 x 25 x 11,5 cm (10 7/8 x 9 7/8 x 4 1/2 in.)  
(198720212729)



Kenjiro Okazaki  
おかちまち E-4 Okachimachi E-4, 2021  
Acrylic, pigment, polypropylene, polyethylene  
27,5 x 25 x 11,5 cm (10 7/8 x 9 7/8 x 4 1/2 in.)  
(20212732)

# ARTFORUM

## CRITICS' PICKS



Kenjiro Okazaki, 背後にはなにも無い / *At the crossroads (tried to flag a ride)*

## Kenjiro Okazaki

GALERIE FRANK ELBAZ | PARIS

66 rue de Turenne

March 20–May 15, 2021

Kenjiro Okazaki is perhaps best known in the US for his 2007 collaboration with Trisha Brown, *I love my robots*, in which his custom-designed cyborgs performed Brown's choreography. If the Japanese artist's latest works, small abstract paintings from his series "Zero Thumbnails," 2005–, seem a far cry from mechanized dancers, they still inhabit the nexus of technology and art. The sixteen paintings on view (all works 2020) are each based on at least one work from the art-historical cannon, their models ranging from Renaissance paintings to Greek sculptures and nineteenth-century Japanese woodcuts. Like the series's digital namesake, these works' diminutive scale belies the essential information contained in Okazaki's condensed images.

Okazaki corrals the sense of speed and expanse associated with action painting into a roughly seven-by-nine-inch format by painstakingly crafting his gestural brushstrokes and thick impasto. 蜂蜜の発見 / *Lo, drawn by the tinkle, winged things, bees follow the*

*sounding brass* is based on Piero di Cosimo's fifteenth-century painting *The Discovery of Honey by Bacchus*. Okazaki uses heavy applications of peachy pink, bright green, and turquoise to loosely suggest the central gnarled tree, grass, sky, and Bacchanalia of Cosimo's original. *背後にはなにも無い* / *At the crossroads (tried to flag a ride)* pays homage to Cézanne's terraced landscapes and perched villages. Inspired by the Metropolitan Museum of Art's *The House with the Cracked Walls*, 1892–94, Okazaki's composition features bold strokes of canary yellow and khaki, colors Cézanne used to represent light and shadow on the crumbling farm house and rocky outcrops. In each case, Okazaki has metaphorically scraped off, rehydrated, and reworked paint from the past to create digitally influenced but emphatically painterly *aide-mémoire*.

— Mara Hoberman

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Featured in  
**Issue 222**

## Kenjiro Okazaki's Landscapes of Time and Space

The artist speaks on his latest series of small, abstract tableaux, reflecting on the history of landscape painting and why uncertainty can create a sense purpose

BY [TRAVIS DIEHL](#) AND [KENJIRO OKAZAKI](#) IN [INTERVIEWS](#) | 21 SEP 21



**Travis Diehl** In your series 'Topica Pictus' [2020–ongoing], each small, abstract painting is complemented by a short essay. I'm curious how you see that relationship.

**Kenjiro Okazaki** As soon as I start painting, I immediately recall many things. I don't have a subject in mind before painting. Instead, the painting process is an exercise in finding a specific topic or theme. Each work must have its own unique character. Each character cannot be reduced to the artist's identical style. For example, in *急き立てられた土地所有* [Corn and Summer Wheat, 2020] I started to use this colour and its tonality immediately recalled Thomas Hart Benton's painting *Corn and Winter Wheat* (1948). Then it reminded me of the debate in Japan about whether landscapes could have regional characteristics. This is how I start to think and write simultaneously while painting.

**TD** I don't know how much this is my projection, but the compositions of some of your abstract pictures resemble works by other artists: *巨大な雨粒が石切場を襲う* [Dream of Albrecht Dürer / A huge rain drop raids the quarry, 2020], for example, has echoes of Pieter Bruegel the Elder's *Tower of Babel* [c.1563].

**KO** Yes, they both have that same diagonal. For me, I saw not only that painting, but I also found similarities to works by Paul Cézanne, such as *Mont Saint-Victoire* [1904–06]; quarries were a popular subject for Dürer. Looking at Bruegel's *Tower of Babel*, I see that it's not a tower: it's an existing mountain that has been built upon – it is a stone quarry.

# FRIEZE



Kenjiro Okazaki, 急ぎ立てられた土地所有 (Corn and Summer Wheat), 2020, acrylic on canvas, 16 × 20 cm. Courtesy: the artist and Blum & Poe, Los Angeles

**TD** So, your composition reflects all of these mountains.

**KO** Yes, because they are half art and half nature.

**TD** It also seems like the edges of the colours and strokes are reflected in the notches or recessions of your frames.

**KO** The frame is the mechanism that guides the movement from the painting towards the outside, and from the outside into the world of the painting. It's connected to architecture. This function is the most important thing: to enable a breeze to pass through, but to provide shelter from the rain. Of course, the function of my frame also draws on the history of the shaped canvas, which emphasized the painting as an object rather than the autonomy of painting space. The frame is made after the painting is finished, but I find that, as I am making my paintings, I've already predicted what form the frame will take. Writing, painting, framing (architecture) this multitasking is important to me, always, even if I don't know how everything connects. It's like the three-body problem that the 19th-century French mathematician Henri Poincaré proposed: when there are three or more stars with enough mass to have a gravitational effect on each other, the motion of these stars becomes almost incalculable and unpredictable. Whenever I try to write or draw something, for instance, I feel anxious because I am not sure if I can actually do it well. On the other hand, this uncertain feeling gives me a sense of purpose. It is similar to going to an unknown place, which means joining the ranks of our ancestors who surely would have recognized it. I guess you could say that, through creation, we all belong to this place beyond the present moment in which we are positioned.



Kenjiro Okazaki, / 揺れる眼差しはすでにヨコシマ, (Returning Chryseis), 2020, acrylic on canvas, 24 × 18 cm. Courtesy: the artist and Blum & Poe, Los Angeles

**TD** Is there a sense of humour to the paintings?

**KO** I hope so. It's a difficult thing to answer, but you have to have a little bit of humour.

**TD** A lot of people would disagree.

**KO** To move beyond daily life, the pandemic, everything – to see objectively outside of the world – requires a degree of humour. One joke I like is: The soon-to-be-executed man's stomach growls. He smiles, 'I've got news! In half an hour, I'll be eating ice cream in heaven.'

**TD** To me, your juxtaposition of small, quick paintings with such grandiose art history is also that kind of joke.

**KO** Works of contemporary art are supposed to be located in the present. It's this shared present that was lost during the pandemic. Shared time is a goal of distribution, and the integration of people's consciousness, interests and desires in the same time and space was the premise of the modern state.



Kenjiro Okazaki, 潮水の波、真水の滝 (Open Sea, Stormy Weather), 2020, acrylic on canvas, 18 × 25 cm. Courtesy: the artist and Blum & Poe, Los Angeles

**TD** Is ease of distribution another reason for the small scale of your paintings?

**KO** Rather, it should be thought of as a device that can delay time. When the tableau or the scroll painting was invented, it was first of all movable. You didn't have to look at it in an exhibition, a time shared with many people. Space and time were isolated and could be carried around. Just as a book does, each time you unfold a work of art, its unique time grows. If art has the power to be critical of reality, it is because it is able to hold a time and space that is outside of the shared and rather politically forced present. In fact, even during a pandemic, it is still possible to communicate through such means, without using Zoom.

*This article first appeared in frieze issue 222 under the headline 'Kenjiro Okazaki's Landscapes of Time and Space', as part of a special series titled 'Painting Now'.*

*Main Image: Kenjiro Okazaki, 潮水の波、真水の滝 (Open Sea, Stormy Weather, detail), 2020, acrylic on canvas, 18 × 25 cm. Courtesy: the artist and Blum & Poe, Los Angeles*

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**KENJIRO OKAZAKI**

Kenjiro Okazaki is a multidisciplinary Japanese visual artist, landscape designer and architect.

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