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ARTFORUM

Kenjiro Okazaki

Pace Gallery, Seoul By Shinyoung Chung

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Kenjiro Okazaki, *(Duck on Ice Bay)/Sometimes It Snows In April, 2024*, acrylic on canvas, 71/4 × 9 7/8".

Thanks to an overwhelming postpandemic influx of international galleries and fairs, Seoul locals have recently had the chance to get acquainted with a long list of foreign artists—among them, Kenjiro Okazaki, who has been widely recognized in Japan since the 1980s, not only as an artist but as a critic and theorist. His first solo show in Seoul, “Form at Now and Later,” included several groups of mostly recent paintings and sculptures, all of which can be characterized by a tactile material presence that is both literal and abstract.

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The gallery's first room featured nine diptychs, each composed of a horizontal canvas above a vertical one arranged to form a chunky T shape. Perhaps intentionally, the somber associations of these top-heavy structures (they evoked crucifixes), were counterbalanced by the juicy freshness of Okazaki's Crayola-bright colors. Opaque when applied thickly and translucent when applied thinly, high-gloss paint possesses a jellylike viscosity that one can visually feel in the knife-smeared rectangular daubs. Although haphazard, the marks are arrayed in roughly equivalent shapes and sizes, giving the painting a tiled or mosaic look. In an interview, Okazaki links his interest in clarity and viscosity to the opacity of fresco and the transparency of stained glass (a popular medium before oil paint became predominant in fifteenth-century Europe) and posits that there are architectural and multidimensional implications arising from the ninety-degree turn from vertical to horizontal.

Okazaki continues this historico-cultural and religious signposting in these works' paragraph-long quasi-literary titles. These are much too long to quote here; suffice it to say their key words include *virgin*, *bodhisattva*, *miracle*, and *world*, encompassing an expansive range of associations from the Bible to the sutras. Although his confident gesture and the conscious dispersal of energy within the rectangular frame evoke midcareer Joan Mitchell and, by extension, late Monet, Okazaki's stance toward the act of painting differs fundamentally from theirs. Monet and even Mitchell belong to a lineage of artmaking in which representation is still a valid mission, whereas Okazaki occupies a thoroughly conceptual realm, footnoting empty, nonrepresentational abstractions with multifaceted cultural signifiers in his postmodern exercise in painterly reinterpretation.

The much smaller-scale "Zero Thumbnail" series, 2005–, is more overt in its classicism and historicism. Measuring about seven by ten inches, *(Duck on Ice Bay)/ Sometimes It Snows In April, 2024*, is heavily impastoed, with milky acrylic daubs and a layer of sporadic Prussian blue strokes. When I asked, the gallery offered info sheets with texts by the artist and images of art-historical and other references. To decode this piece, they pointed to a work attributed to sixteenth-century master Kano Motonobu, *Birds and Flowers in the Four Seasons*, portraying a flock of ducks lingering by a stream and floating on the water. The accompanying text by the artist explains the use of ducks in East Asian art as symbols of loneliness and of the change of seasons. With the reference image in mind, the viewer might read a blue stroke as a duck and the milky buildup as icy water, turning the abstraction into a landscape. Each of these canvases is mounted to the wall by a wooden bracket partially framing the painting's edges, and each bracket is distinct, designed to complement the image inside. But one can't help wondering whether Okazaki's immersion into the realm of the parergon—whether material or textual—serves to reinforce or to undermine his cheerfully alluring painterly efforts.