

CHINO AOSHIMA

POLLY APPELBAUM

PHILIP ARGENT

L.C. ARMSTRONG

TONY BERLANT

SHARON ELLIS

GAJIN FUJITA

CHRISTIAN GARNETT

RACHEL HECKER

MARY HEILMANN

JEFF KOONS

BEATRIZ MILHAZES

TAKASHI MURAKAMI

JORGE PARDO

LARI PITTMAN

MARCELO POMBO

DAVID REED

KIM SOUACLIA

FRED TOMASELLI

populence



The Edenic Splendor of

CHIHO AOSHIMA, SHARON ELLIS, L.C. ARMSTRONG, AND MARCELO POMBO

Chiho Aoshima, Sharon Ellis, L.C. Armstrong, and Marcelo Pombo filter Romantic ideas about the natural landscape through the unsentimental lens of digitally transmitted imagery in a way that enhances the impact of the former while never letting viewers forget that we see in Nature only what we have imagined there. Nature and culture overlap fabulously in these artists' rigorously structured compositions, each of which is suffused with more extraordinary detail than the rational mind can easily take in. All open onto the infinity of deep space, the oceanic vastness of the sea, or both simultaneously, bringing viewers face to face with the possibility of the sublime. Filled with a fecund abundance of plant, animal, and human life forms, these works transform dreamy visions of the cosmos and our small, vulnerable place within it into exquisite objects that serve as points of departure for further flights of fancy.

Aoshima exploits the visual vocabulary of *kawaii* ("cute") imagery, which abounds in Japanese pop culture. She tells seductively tragic tales about the wayward aimlessness of youth, particularly that growing generation of Japanese teenagers, twenty-somethings and beyond, who seem to be trapped in perpetual adolescence. Alienated from their parents' way of life, yet not free of lingering psychological ties to such traditions, they drift through a netherworld as virtual as it is real. Aoshima's zoned-out protagonists float in a literal no-man's-land where tender girls and young women experience dread and daydreaminess in equal measures, their reveries inflected with quietly gorgeous horrors. In the ten-foot-long chromogenic print, *Mujina*, 2002 [Plate 23], a flower-robed girl stares blankly as she plummets, like Icarus's longlost sister, through an expanse of sky and sea while cartoon fish-birds look on. In the nine-foot-long *A Contented Skull*, 2003 [Plate 24], a lithe ingénue strolls through an underwater graveyard toward a giant skull from which emerges a doe-eyed darling whose long black hair becomes the tentacles of an octopus and the branches of a blossoming tree. Beauty is abundant in Aoshima's art, but it's spiked with terrors both real and imagined.

Ellis's paintings belong to a cosmology that is nothing if not cosmopolitan. Nature appears here via the cool glow of the TV screen, the synthetic perfectionism of computer-generated special effects, and the woozy influence of 1960s psychedelia, not to mention the lavish artifice of illuminated manuscripts and the hallucinatory sensuality of Symbolist imagery. *Cathedral of the Dandelions*, 1993 [Plate 25] is a pantheist extravaganza whose rigorous symmetry evokes Gothic dramas laced with twilight loveliness. The memory of symmetry haunts *Night's Regent*, 2000 [Plate 26] like an afterimage or phantom limb, making this crystalline slice of time—laid out in ten horizontal bands of supersaturated color—all the more enticing for being unnaturally theatrical, like a frozen rainbow. Symmetry disappears from *Eucalyptus and Poppies*, 2003 [Plate 27], as does the reassuring solidity of terra firma. By replacing sharp silhouettes with ethereal

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washes of color, Ellis makes the objective world appear to dissolve, first melting into liquid and then evaporating into thin air. Her landscapes do not spoil ordinary pleasures by delivering extraordinary ones so much as they expand the world by giving us something we didn't even know we wanted—and then making us crave it as if we couldn't live without it.

Armstrong's theatrical seascapes, festooned with gigantic flowers in full bloom, reveal that the art of painting is the one place on earth where it doesn't make any sense to talk about too much of a good thing. According to the age-old adage, moderation is the true path to the good life and an excess of sensual pleasure—or any extreme passion—paves the way to downfall. *Happy Hour—Heaven*, 2004 [Plate 28] and *Sunrise Over Sleepwalkers*, 2005 [Plate 29] suggest just the opposite: that knowing how much is too much is essential to knowing what's just right, and that knowing one's limits requires at least a fleeting familiarity with what lies beyond them. Armstrong's paintings traverse this territory with equal parts ease and anxiety, grace and garishness. The calendar-style sunsets draw one in from afar. But the little figures, including ordinary folks dressed for the beach and others apparently on their way to a costume ball, give pause. Likewise, the sunflowers, hyacinths, orchids, and birds of paradise fly forward from the picture plane like fireworks exploding in the night sky. In place of realistic stems, Armstrong has supplied the gargantuan, menacing blossoms with dark lines made by laying bomb fuses across her works, then igniting them. Together, sunsets, people, flowers, and burned fuses describe a world as complex as the real one, and a whole lot more beautiful.

Abundance is all the sweeter when it is seasoned with the memory of scarcity. Pombo's nearly abstract landscapes intensify the experience of lush plenitude by never letting viewers take its richness for granted or grow insensitive to its splendor. In *La batalla suave entre el sol y la tierra*, 2004 [Plate 30], *El aguacero*, 2004 [Plate 31], and *Isla de moluscos*, 2004 [Plate 32], he has painted as if every drop of paint were precious—an exquisite gift marking a moment never to be lived again except in memory. Each of his panels consists of thousands of droplets of viscous enamel. Each bit of enamel has been meticulously dripped, its size, position, and color precisely calibrated with those around it. With a steady hand and a saint's patience, Pombo often layers up to five droplets atop one another to form concentric configurations. Like thousands of miniature mandalas, these forms appear to pulsate, focusing one's attention and inducing a meditative state. Imagine the artist rendering each Benday dot in a printed reproduction as if he were painting a portrait. Then imagine a group portrait, one that expands to include every molecule of every object, without losing sight of the big picture. A painter of the microscopic sublime, Pombo fashions surfaces where time and space implode, fusing past and present, fantasy and reality.