

Motherscape

Leiko
Ikemura

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With a conversation between Ralph Gleis,
Elsy Lahner, and Leiko Ikemura, texts by
Catherine David and Brett Littman, and
poems by Leiko Ikemura

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Arboretum of the Mind

I have known Leiko now for more than ten years, call her a good friend, and deeply respect her as an artist. I have been on a jury with her in Japan and have visited and stayed at her studio/home in Berlin. Over the years she has sent me many of her beautiful catalogues and I have read all the essays and interviews and looked carefully at the reproductions of her artistic output over her forty-year career—so I have a good grasp of her complete oeuvre.

Over time, I have noticed, possibly unconscious to Leiko herself, a sub-theme of trees, plants, and flowers in her drawings, paintings, photographs, and sculptures. Maybe, I am extra-sensitive to this visual trope as I have done several interviews and essays recently, *Eugene Von Bruenchenhein: Seed-Action* and *Jeff Zimmerman: Stochastic* are two examples, about how tree and plant growth are related to art and how they can be central to an artist's work as a generator of ideas and forms.

To confirm my hypothesis, I counted about forty works in different media with trees online and in the various catalogues I have and asked her husband, Philipp von Matt, to compile an inventory of other tree-related works that Leiko had made. He ended up sending me almost forty more images, mostly drawings, so at final count I had identified more than eighty multi-media works with references to trees or plants over Ikemura's career, which is a lot for a non-landscape focused artist whose work has mostly been associated with the life and vicissitudes of the female form.

The image of the tree is fascinating to me as it is one of the oldest visuals in Western and Eastern aesthetic lexicons. It is also one of the most symbolically loaded images ever used and has multivalent meanings depending on the artist, the culture, and the time it was made.

The earliest known images of trees in Western art date back to the earliest prehistoric cave paintings found at Chauvet and Lascaux, in Switzerland and France, created between 30,000 to 15,000 years ago. Since that time trees have been considered sacred symbols of life and protection in Egypt, represented cosmic order and divine connection in Mesopotamia, and in Ancient Greece they signified idyllic nature and the gods, such as the sacred oak of Zeus or the laurel tree of Apollo. In Renaissance and baroque times, trees were prominent in religious iconography and symbolized salvation, wisdom, genealogy, or the fall of mankind and were used mark depth and perspective in landscapes, signify life cycles, transformation, and divine presence.

In more modern times, Romantic artists used trees as markers of sublimity and the inherent power of nature. Impressionist artists painted trees in wild colors and often wind-blown to underscore the enduring physical presence of nature while Expressionist and Symbolist artists like Gustav Klimt, Egon Schiele, and Vincent van Gogh, painted trees in stylized and exaggerated emotional ways making them into messengers of and vessels for the full range of human experiences from joy to pain. Abstract artists such as Piet Mondrian, deconstructed the form of a tree to elemental lines to make links between natural forms and modernist ideas, and conceptual artists like Joseph Beuys, in his *7000 Oaks* project, used trees as a form of activism.

In the East, there is more specificity of meaning associated with the species of tree used than in the West. In Indian art the image of trees is strongly related to Buddhist and Hindu traditions. The Bohdi Tree— a sacred fig or peepal tree (*Ficus religiosa*)—under which the Buddha attained enlightenment, is probably the most reproduced tree in any artistic tradition. Peepal trees represent the cosmos and eternal life in Hindu and Buddhist thought, and the Kalpavrksha, a divine wish-fulfilling tree depicted in ancient Indian texts and temple carvings, symbolizes abundance and divine blessings. As well, the nature Gods, Yaksha and Yakshini, are often depicted as dwelling and living in trees.

In Chinese Confucian and Daoist philosophy and art, images of pine trees represent endurance and longevity. Plum blossoms, bamboo, and chrysanthemums used in literati paintings reference the virtues of resilience, modesty, and integrity. In Shan shui ink landscape paintings, trees are integral to visualizing the harmony between humans and nature. The Japanese also give special meaning to trees in their art. Cherry blossoms are emblems of impermanence, pine trees are associated with strength and eternity, and in *sumi-e* ink drawings, trees and their branches are rendered in expressive brushstrokes to evoke spirituality and simplicity.

In a follow up conversation with Leiko in March 2025 about my observations on trees and plants in her work, we discussed what they mean to her and why she uses them in her art. As can be expected, given the long history and many meanings of the arboreal in painting, her answers were wide ranging, multicultural, and complex. Among the things we talked about were how trees are like human bodies to her, how they exemplify the relationships between the earth and the universe, the sense of freedom and



o. *Trees out of Head*, 2015/2020
Bronze, patinated, 27 × 32 × 20 cm

u. *Mexican Afterworld*, 2011
Charcoal on paper, 55,8 × 76 cm

liberation nature gives her, how their trunks look like animals to her, how a single or a group of trees can express solitude or communality, how they are like architecture, how they mark time and changing seasons, how they express energy, growth, creativity, and transformation. One specific comment Ikemura made was very revealing—she said, “I am a tree.”

The earliest representative works in this sub-genre in Ikemura’s practice that I found are all from 1983: an untitled pastel, a charcoal and pen on paper from 1983,¹ and the large charcoal on paper called *Garden of Desire*, 1983.² In the untitled pastel, a large tree is on fire and another group of trees in the background have already been engulfed. There is a huge arched conflagration taking up most of the right-hand side of the drawing and suspended inside the flames is a naked woman. In the charcoal and pen drawing, a woman wears a *kasa*—a conical hat worn by rice farmers in Asia. Her legs are drawn like one of the floating figures in a Marc Chagall painting. She hovers over two large leaves in the right-hand bottom corner. One of the leaves seems to be attached to thread that is held by another more abstract figure perched in the upper quadrant of the paper. Interestingly, the two leaves are almost as large as the bodied figures, upsetting the normal sense of scale and perspective. *Garden of Desire* is a significantly more composed drawing and a real tour de force. Here, an ominous stand of trees, whose roots are detached from the earth, are seemingly on fire and desperately trying to escape their demise by rising into the air. Drawn in dark charcoal, with heavy blacks in the sky and tree trunks, I am reminded of the nightmarish landscapes by Alfred Kubin from the early 1900s. This work was made by Ikemura during her time in Nuremberg, Germany. One feels the palpable sense of her own complex emotions and catharsis about the devastations and hardships of the post-World War II era in Japan, and in her current adopted country, Germany.

The first painting with trees I could find is *Annunciation*, 1985, (there is also a charcoal on paper preparatory drawing called *Study for the painting Annunciation*, 1985) which features two profiles of females lashed to or growing trees out of their bodies. One is upside-down and the other right side up, and both have their wrists bent at a 90-degree angle towards their mouths. One has their eye and mouth opened to accept food (or communion) and the other has their eye and mouth closed. It seems to be nighttime in the painting as the ground is black to dark blue. The trees look tropical, maybe palm trees given the leaf patterns,

1 See Anita Haldemann, (ed.), *Leiko Ikemura: Nach neuen Meeren / Toward New Seas*, exh. cat. Kunstmuseum Basel (Munich: Prestel, 2019) p. 60, cat. 16.

2 Ibid., pp. 132–33, cat. 92.

and on the right top of the painting is a bouquet of tropical flowers with a strange face with a tongue sticking in the uppermost right-hand flower. Given the religious meaning of the Annunciation, when the Angel Gabriel announces to Mary that she will give birth to Jesus, one assumes the painting is a pointed commentary about the pitfalls of creation and birth.

From my further analysis of Ikemura's tree related works, there emerge two dominant themes. There are nineteen pastel drawings of solo or pairs of trees (entitled *Tree* or *Tree Love True Love*) made in 2007. These trees are drawn in red pastel, leafless and bare, and sometimes have gaseous yellow sun-like forms in the background. They seem like they are in winter light, given their sharp features and forlorn appearance. They make me think of the Japanese term *mono no aware*, when the transient pathos of objects is heightened emotionally for a viewer—and in these drawings we feel the passage and marking of time and seasons, and the end/beginning/end of the cycle of life.

The other dominant theme, represented by about twenty drawings, paintings, and sculptures are ones where people or animals are entwined, merged, or have trees sprouting out of them. Over more than a decade, Ikemura has made a series of sculptures in different mediums: *Trees on Head* (2013) in terracotta; *Trees Out of Head* (2015–20) in patinated bronze; *White Head with Trees* (2017) in ceramics; and *Mask* (2022) in cast glass. In all these works, the disembodied head of a female lies sideways with two or three small trees protruding from where the ear should be. The immediate visual metaphor in these works could be the old dictum that we should “listen more to nature.” The idea that humans contain within themselves the organic ability to grow or will trees from their own bodies also makes us think about the thin membrane that separates humans from the natural world. *Mask*, which I have seen first-hand several times in New York, is a masterpiece. Since it is made of cast glass, depending on the light conditions in the gallery, it absorbs the natural light into its opaque mass creating a kaleidoscope of different internal moods. It is almost like watching someone think and change expression over the course of day. There is also a series of nine drawings titled *Tree Creature* from 2007. Made in red pastel like the solo and group trees of *Tree* or *Tree Love True Love*, here bird-like and cat-headed hybrid creatures, a dog, two children, a female, human heads, and trees co-exist and are inextricable intertwined as co-dependent on each other for life.





In *Motherscapes*, Ikemura's current survey at the Albertina, there are eight works that contain images of trees: the aforementioned bronze sculpture *Trees out of Head*; the paintings *Yellow Scape*, *Lago Rondo*, and *B-bay* (all 2020); the large triptych of landscape paintings entitled *Tokaido*, *Genesis*, *Tokaido* (2015); and in one of the series of drawings called *The Mexican Afterworld* (2011).

In the two paintings titled *Tokaido* in the triptych, it is interesting to note that for the first time in Ikemura's work, the trees are verdant and alive with green and full-leaf coverage. In both paintings, oversized figures and human heads either recline or are incorporated into the general landscape, dwarfing the trees and making for an unsettling sense of perspective and scale. In *Genesis*, a strange creature sits with its arm outstretched into a tree hollow at the base of large tree trunk. In these paintings, Ikemura continues her exploration of what, if anything, divides the human realm from nature. Due to their scale, and the fact the trees are alive with foliage, Ikemura might be making an optimistic statement that in the future it is possible to have more harmony and more careful stewardship between the human and animal worlds and the planet we all live on.

Yellow Scape, *Lago Rondo*, and *B-bay* are the amongst the most recent paintings in the exhibition. In my mind, they are directly related to the themes in the earlier triptych. *Yellow Scape* and *B-bay* are ostensibly the same picture only one is painted in a lighter tempera and oil wash on jute than the other. Both feature a tree trunk with a hollow in the right-hand corner and have other similar elements: a figure coming out the ground in a yellow shroud in the right bottom corner; a group of rocks in a small pond; and another tree trunk in the left-hand corner. *Lago Rondo* has another female form in a yellow shroud emerging from the ground, but this time on the right side, with her head resting on a tree trunk. Again, a small pond appears in the center of the painting. In these internal landscapes, we are forced to dream of a small patch of forest where we have come across these mythical visages, unsure of what we are seeing, or how we should feel, we are still grounded by the fact of the unmistakable solidity and endurance of the simple form of a tree, an image we have been seeing in art for millennia.

l. *Yellow Scape*, 2020
Tempera und Öl auf Jute, 160 × 110 × 4,5 cm
Privatsammlung UK
B-bay, 2020
Tempera und Öl auf Jute, 160 × 110 × 4,5 cm
Privatsammlung UK
Lago Rondo, 2020
Tempera und Öl auf Jute, 160 × 110 × 4,5 cm
Privatsammlung UK

r. *Genesis*, 2015
Tempera auf Jute, 190,2 × 290,2 × 6,4 cm
Tokaido, 2015
Tempera auf Jute, 190,2 × 290,2 × 6,4 cm
Tokaido, 2015
Tempera auf Jute, 190,2 × 290,2 × 6,4 cm