



**TERUKO YOKOI (b. 1924)****Untitled**

Signed lower left, "Teruko Yokoi"

egg tempera on paper

5 3/4 x 4 1/8 in. (14 1/2 x 12 3/4 x 1 in.)

1989

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**PROVENANCE:**

Private Collection, Arizona

Born in 1924 in Tsushima, in the Japanese province of Nagoya, Teruko Yokoi is the daughter of a calligraphist. Having received painting lessons from an early age, at 25 she became a student of the renowned impressionist Takanori Kinoshita and relocated to Tokyo, where her works garnered prestigious prizes. As early as 1954, when the title of the capital of Western culture shifted from Paris to New York, Teruko Yokoi decided to move to the United States. She received a scholarship and entered the California School of Fine Arts in San Francisco. Her figurative works gravitated toward a cubist analysis and, later, increasingly poetic and oneiric abstractions. The following year, Yokoi moved to New York to study under Hans Hoffman—one of the leading actors in the Abstract Expressionism revolution—and became part of the artistic milieu that introduced a new visual vocabulary when the world, ravaged by war, dehumanized by the death camps, and denied a future by the atomic bomb, was in desperate need of a new description. In New York, Yokoi met Kenzo Okada (who introduced her to Mark Rothko), Joan Mitchell, Franz Kline, Robert Motherwell, and artists gathered around the then famous Martha Jackson Gallery, many of whom shared interest in "Asian Aesthetics." Among them was Yokoi's future husband, Sam Francis, who would soon launch an international career with his large-format tachist paintings. In 1959, Yokoi, then with a newborn daughter, followed Francis to Paris, where she breathed the air of the impending cultural revolution, and where she was influenced by the Art Informel movement. After separating with Francis, Yokoi returned to Japan, but failed to make it her home again, and, in 1963, she decided to move to Switzerland and settle in Bern, where she has been living and working for more than five decades.

The story of Teruko Yokoi is one of passion, curiosity, and persistence. It is also an account of the experience of an artist who has worked despite and through the wounds of history, geography, race, and gender. Indeed, however close Yokoi has been to the most prominent American and European painters, she has never been made one of them—gifted and innovative, yet distinct and coming from a different cultural background. An audacious traveler who dared to cross the Pacific among the restless bohemian students of the Beatnik era, her journeys had an aim of their own. She was a daring artist, and a woman, at a time when the mainstream voices were Western, white, and mostly male. She was a woman among the "sparkling Amazons"—rebellious artists who were part of the famous 1951 "Ninth Street Revolution." However, having only recently arrived to the United States, she was more insecure, not as radical and risky as her peers. She was their friend and ally, but not proficient in

English, and too different to share the same fights. She was seen as a discovery and a success when exhibited by Arnold Rüdinger in 1964 at Kunsthalle Basel, but her work has never made it to any public collection, and neither has it been presented in any extensive survey. As a wife of Sam Francis, even though divorce was quick in coming, her artistic life and reputation suffered.

“Teruko Yokoi. Tokyo–New York–Paris–Bern” brings together an extensive selection of works created between the 1954 and the late 1960s—the period of the artist’s courageous trip to the United States, the exhibition at Kunsthalle Basel (1964), and her decision to settle down in Bern (where she arrived in 1962). These years were not only extremely prolific for Yokoi, but the works she then created also testify to the energy of the animated times in which they were created. Stretched between the cities of three continents and between the modern abstraction and Japanese tradition, they capture Teruko Yokoi in a moment fully committed to creation: it was in this period when, in ever-new contexts and ever-new artistic dialogues, she challenged her vocabulary and, with self-confidence, forged a new one. We accompany her here in a moment of experimentation—before she settled in to this or another more or less distinctive style—when her art appears as a dynamic mirror to the vibrant times of artistic revolt, to the political tensions of the day, and to the meanders of her personal story.

Indeed, even if her practice eschews mimetic associations, the forms she creates bring to mind scenes from landscape painting or still lifes, with windy hills, blossoming trees, flowers, and winding rivers. The violently brushed abstract motifs seem to have a calligraphic quality. The atmospheric delicacy of the palette and artistic touch is juxtaposed with the force of the gesture, while charming harmony abounds in an explosion of colors and forms. At the same time, when Teruko Yokoi introduces calligraphic signs, she often (but not always) deprives them of meaning: they vertically follow one another and melt with the similarly vertical drips of paint. The words lose their meaning and gestures become imbued with content. This vibrant tension—a mix of balance, rhythm, and chaotic turbulence—became a signature of a sort, a way of emphasizing both Yokoi’s general kinship and otherness. Moreover, her choices and strategies, however intuitive and purely aesthetic they seem, turned into an important political statement. In the times of tensions and dependencies in the aftermath of the American defeat of Japan in 1945, the artist openly declared her sovereignty and freedom. In her canvases, the elements of both cultures not only intertwine but strike a perfect balance. Her art became the very place where she could declare and exercise her artistic, personal, and political independence.

Rather than following purely chronological lines, “Teruko Yokoi. Tokyo-New York-Paris-Bern” looks at the tensions fluctuating throughout the artist’s early works and traces her efforts to forge a new language of expression. It follows Yokoi’s erratic itinerary between Tokyo, San Francisco, New York, Paris, and Bern—all places that left marks on her oeuvre. We see the experiments, like when her narrative and still academic sketches were translated into increasingly daring abstractions; we look at how she challenged and attempted to liberate her artistic gesture, how she expanded her color palette and strived to transgress the platitude of the canvas. There is searching and curiosity, and there is impatience. The same motives return in different iterations, as if she needed an anchor in the unsteady, agitated river of her own quest. “Teruko Yokoi. Tokyo-New York-Paris-Bern” traces the story of an extremely prolific and vibrant artist, whose work emerged in the shadow and in the vicinity of those who shaped the major narratives of art history of the 20th century.

The exhibition is accompanied with a publication that offers a timely reassessment of Teruko Yokoi work and life. It features an introductory text by Marta Dziewańska, the exhibition curator, and the insightful thematic essays from Anke Kempkes, Jean-François Chevrier and duet of Kuniko Satonubu-Spirig and Osamu Okuda. It also includes an extensive interview with the artist led this year by Anuschka Roshani. The catalogue is an important contribution to the literature on great female artists.

(Kunstmuseum Bern)

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