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Shigeru Izumi

“Entrusted: New York Paintings, 1959-1962”

February 8 - March 9, 2024

Opening Thursday February 8, 6-8pm



Shigeru Izumi, “Requiem (To Ei-Q),” 1960, oil on canvas, 68 x 52 inches, 172.7 x 132 cm —
© Shigeru Izumi. Courtesy of the Estate of Jonas Mekas and Microscope Gallery, New York.

Microscope is very pleased to present a solo exhibition of never-before-seen New York paintings by Shigeru Izumi (1922-1995), the Japanese artist and co-founder of the Demokrato Artists Association (Demokrato Bijutsu Kyokai, 1951-1957), a group of artists whose members included Ei-Q (co-founder), Yoshio Hayakawa (co-founder), Ay-O, On Kawara, and Toshiko Uchima, among others, joined in their belief in the democratization of art. “Entrusted: New York Paintings, 1959-1962” marks Izumi’s first solo exhibit in New York since his 1961 show at the avant-garde Mi Chou Gallery.

The paintings on view were made between 1959 and 1962 during Izumi’s time as a resident and visiting professor at Pratt University at the invitation of the Japan Society, which followed the artist’s receipt of the “Newcomer Encouragement” award at the 1st Tokyo International Print Biennale Exhibition in 1957, and inclusion in the 4th São Paulo Biennial that same year. By 1965, his paintings appeared in “The New Japanese Painting and Sculpture,” the largest international exhibition of Japanese artists at that time, first presented at San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA) and at New York’s MoMA, as well as other US institutions.

The works are now coming to be exhibited thanks to a long history of care, safekeeping, and gifting between friends: from Izumi to fellow Japanese artist Ay-O, prior to his leaving for Paris in 1963; from Ay-O, who became involved with Fluxus in New York, to the movement’s founder George Maciunas; from Maciunas to the artist/filmmaker Jonas Mekas, who shared space in the artist cooperatives in Soho and stored the paintings for decades. Now, following Mekas’ death in 2019, his son Sebastian Mekas is fulfilling his father’s intent to have these works publicly exhibited.

With their vibrant colors and experimental treatment of shapes and organic forms — often relating to animal and plant life — the eight paintings on view seem to exist in a liminal realm between the artist's earlier figurative works and the more sparse expressions of his Paris years (1963-1968). "Requiem," a painting prominently titled and dated March 21 1960, is a stunning dedication to artist Ei-Q — who had died 11 days earlier — in which small vivid natural forms, reminiscent of those often appearing in the work of his friend, float above a lush background that might be suggestive of a landscape. In several paintings, Izumi seems to expand upon a recurring subject of his, the bird — and more specifically the peacock — through nuanced and inverted color schemes, and increasingly dense views of the plumage. While similarities to an untitled print of his from 1960 can be seen in the other works on view, in which constellations of round objects, progressively growing in size, appear to be either exploding from or collapsing into a central mass.

The paintings represent a pivotal and yet little known period in the life of the artist, whose influence extends to new generations and is currently undergoing a rediscovery, especially in galleries and institutions in Japan. The winding, cross-cultural trajectory of these paintings — through the hands and studios of fellow artists — exemplifies the manner in which art and ideas transcend mediums, time, language, cultures, national borders, as well as the importance of artistic relationships, friendships, independent thinking, and a radical questioning of the status quo and the hierarchies of the worlds we inhabit.

"Shigeru Izumi, Entrusted: New York Paintings, 1959-1962" opens on Thursday February 8th and continues through March 9th. For further information please contact the gallery at inquiries@microscopegallery.com.

Shigeru Izumi (born in Osaka, 1922; died in Osaka, 1995) was an artist working primarily with painting and printmaking, beginning in his teens, and graduating from Osaka City Kogei School (Osaka City School of Applied Arts) in 1939, with additional studies at the Nakanoshima School of Western Art. He was a co-founder, along with Ei-Q and Yoshio Hayakawa, of the Democratic Artists Association (1951-57). In 1957, his work was included in the 1st Tokyo International Print Biennial, where he won the Newcomer Encouragement Award, as well as at the 4th São Paulo Biennial in Brazil. For nearly 10 years he lived abroad, with three years in New York for a residency and visiting professorship at Pratt University from 1959-1962, followed by Paris in the years 1963-1968.

His work has exhibited extensively in institutions and galleries during his lifetime including in "20 Painters and 6 Sculptors of the School of Paris" at the Museum of Beaux-Arts, Nantes, France (1963); "Artists Living Abroad" (1965) at the National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo, Japan; "New Japanese Painting and Sculpture" (1965-1967) at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA), Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York, and other cities, with solo exhibitions at Pratt Art Center, New York; Mi Chou Gallery, New York; Galerie Suzanne Deconinck, Paris, France; Ban Gallery, Osaka, Japan; Hankyu Gallery, Osaka; Umeda Gallery, Osaka; Matsushima Gallery, Tokyo; Takemiya Gallery, Tokyo; Minami Gallery, Tokyo, Japan; among others. Since 2017, the galleries Yoshimi Arts and the three konohana in Osaka have staged six collaborative solo exhibitions of his work. His work has also appeared in over fifteen institutional exhibitions since 2020. In New York, his work was recently featured in the group exhibition "A Model Workshop: Margaret Lowengrund and the Contemporaries," at the Print Center New York in the Fall of 2023.

Izumi's work is in the collections of the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), New York; Harvard Art Museums, Cambridge, MA; National Gallery of Art, Washington DC; Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia, PA; Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh, PA; National Museum of Modern Art, Paris, France; British Museum, London, UK; Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo, Japan; The National Museum of Art (Tokyo, Osaka, Kyoto); Nakanoshima Museum of Art, Osaka, Japan; The Museum of Modern Art, Wakayama, Japan; and Hyogo Prefectural Museum of Art, Japan; among many others.