

Izumi KATO

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Izumi Kato's exhibition at Perrotin dispatches us to long-forgotten realms of childhood, when the world was full of benign, sinister, weird, and mysterious beings.

by **John Yau**



Installation view, *Izumi Kato* at Perrotin, New York, 2021 (Photographer: Guillaume Ziccarelli, © 2020 Izumi Kato. Courtesy the artist & Perrotin)

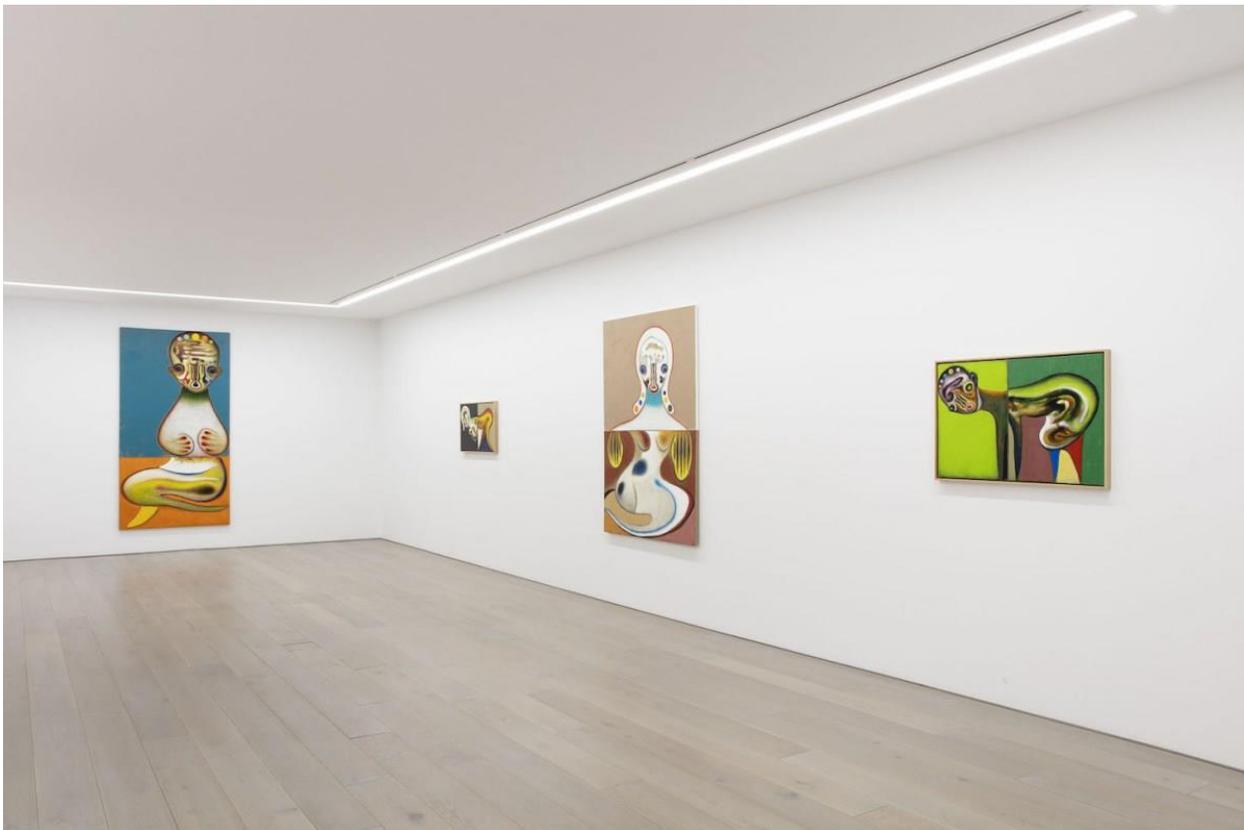
Izumi Kato was born in 1969 in the Shimane Prefecture, located on the southwest coast of Japan. One of the primary reasons tourists travel there is to visit Izumo-taisha (Izumo Grand Shrine), which many scholars and historians now believe is the oldest Shinto temple in Japan.

Shinto is a polytheistic religion that is centered on *kami* (spirits or sacred essences), who reside in all things.

We should also remember that children in many cultures are convinced that their stuffed animals, dolls, and action figures are alive.

This belief in the living nature of all things, from stones to toys, is one of the underlying forces running through Kato's work.

I would add that his diverse practice seems to be inspired by the concepts associated with *mingei*, or “folk craft,” which was first developed by the philosopher and art critic Yanagi Sōetsu (1889–1961), after seeing pottery made by anonymous artists in Korea. According to Sōetsu, one of *mingei*'s main tenets is that it consists of everyday objects (textiles, pottery, and lacquerware) made by “nameless craftsmen.”



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This background establishes some of the complex cultural ground from which Kato's imaginative art emerges. He is a painter who uses his finger to apply paint to a surface. In 2005, he began making sculpture, initially working with stone and camphor wood, which is used in Buddhist

sculpture. He added soft vinyl in 2012, which can be molded, and is commonly used to make children's toys.

He has an animating touch. In his paintings on canvas, the controlled streaks and smears of color evoke an aloof, unknowable figure whose body is moving and changing.

I mention these bits of information because I recently met the artist at his current exhibition, *Izumi Kato*, at Perrotin (March 4–April 17, 2021), where we were able to have a conversation with the help of his wife, Tomoko Aratani, who translated.

Although Kato seemed shy and my questions were awkwardly stated, I did learn about his passion for fishing, which was one of the ways his family supported themselves when he was young, and that the coastal landscapes seen in Hayao Miyazaki's animated films, such as *Ponyo* (2008), were inspired by the area where Kato grew up. The artist and filmmaker share an ecologically committed imagination.



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When I got home, I began tracking down different intuitions I had about the work and its possible influences. A few days later I returned to the exhibition. Spread out across two floors, three gallery spaces, and the stairwell, it offers the viewer a plenitude of visual and tactile delights, as it dispatches us to long-forgotten realms of childhood, when the world was full of benign, sinister, weird, and mysterious beings.

By the time I left, I knew I would return once more, particularly mindful that this was Kato's first show in New York in five years and that he is not one of those art stars who produces an easy-to-get brand.

Kato is committed to a direct engagement with his materials, all of which are carefully chosen — from the paper he selects to the stones he finds to the fabrics he buys locally. In addition to painting with his fingers, he sews and ties knots, which he learned from fishing.

In the works on paper, he stitches two separate pieces together as well as “draws” lines in the face and body with colored thread and string. By having the sewing work both functionally and as drawing, he dissolves the hierarchy separating fine art from domestic craft.

Kato's primary subject is an imaginary figure, or animated spirit, more than 60 of which populate the three gallery spaces. The figures can be monumental or small in scale and toy-like. They can have two legs or four legs, and some have a tail. One figure's body reminded me of a snail shell, while others evoked mythical creatures, such as mermaids. A series of figures suspended from the ceiling have fronts and backs.

His paintings and works on paper are on two joined supports. The dual canvases, whose grounds are different colors, conjure two distinct worlds. The body exists in one physical realm, while the head is located in the other — or the head might be divided vertically. Each work is always a creature made up of separate but joined parts, like a plastic model that needs to be assembled.

From freestanding to framed and wall-mounted to suspended by chains from the ceiling — there are so many different kinds of artwork to experience. The exhibition includes, among other things, a crowd of small statues gathered in a corner, a figure made of two partially painted stones, one atop the other, sitting in a glass case, and an animal that serves as a landscape for other animals.



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Despite their ethereal nature, the suspended figures are not asexual: the outlines of a phallus in the front and anus in the back are visible, along with a line extending down from the base of the head, indicating the spine.

Some works are shaped like the triangular pennants you might see on a fishing boat or promoting a sports team, with painted rocks suspended from them by a net-like gathering of strings. These works are wall-mounted, while others are attached, along with additional artworks, to a chain suspended in the stairwell.



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Kato's animating, imaginative use of the gallery space can enhance our recognition that the world is alive with spiritual essences. His use of two joined supports underscores the duality of the world, and that spirit and matter are distinct but inseparable, unless we tear them apart.

The exhibition transforms the gallery spaces into a domain inhabited by otherworldly figures. Everywhere we look, one or more spirits looks back and sees through us.

Kato is also interested in the world of models and plastic kits. I wonder if this is because these kits, which require assembly, are things he played with as a child.

Whatever the source of his fascination, I was struck by his reversal of the process. "ITC" (2020) is Kato's version of the model kit's box. ITC, which was the model manufacturing branch of International Toy Company, produced plastic model kits for a short period, from the late 1950s to the early '60s.

Kato's box cover is made of canvas, divided into two sections, stacked one atop the other. He has stitched a lithograph of the upper and lower half of a black and white figure to the two canvases and painted in the red, white, and black ITC logo in the upper left-hand corner, below which he has added his signature. A transparent vinyl figure full of colored thread is attached to the lower left-hand corner of the bottom canvas, while a view of the figure's back is collaged to the lower right-hand side.



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By showing the figures' backs, as well as their genitalia, Kato underscores that these are living essences, not sanitized, toy-like beings. This is one of the crucial distinctions between his work and that of an older generation of artists, such as Yoshitomo Nara and others associated with the Japanese Pop Art movement of the 1990s. In contrast to the hygienic, often cute figures depicted by members of that generation, Kato offers a grittier, non-antiseptic vision of reality.

ITC never produced anything remotely like Kato's figure, of course. By transforming the disposable box cover into a canvas, and adding his name beneath the label, the artist alters history as well as preserves it in a wooden frame with a Plexiglas cover.

Kato's intervention — I don't know what else to call it — is very much in keeping with his other works, be they paintings, hanging painting-sculpture hybrids, sculptures, or works on paper. I have described in detail one piece in this wonderful exhibition of more than 60 works done in different mediums. It should be clear to any viewer that Kato's work not only challenges and critiques that of many Japanese artists of the previous generation, who have received greater acclaim in the United States, but also surpasses theirs in its breadth and depth of feeling.

Izumi Kato continues at Perrotin (130 Orchard Street, Manhattan) through April 17.