

Susumu KAMIJO

Plus Magazine,

Embarking on a journey of providing a new narrative of abstraction.

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INTERVIEWS, STUDIO VISIT

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Photography by Jae Kim

In his boldly colored and harmonious shapes, (born in Japan) New York-based artist Susumu Kamijo creates exuberant paintings that invite a new narrative of abstraction. Unlike his astute brushstrokes, the organic forms are disjointed and assembled, making a beastlike subject. His work can be understood in conversation with those of Abstract Expressionist painters like Francis Bacon and Willem de Kooning. Still, unlike his forebears, Kamijo's playful paintings point toward a new mode of abstraction, confounding the vantage point. The interplay of strongly defined configuration and the subtle background tread a path between abstraction and figuration. What started as a mere interest in poodles became his signature style, but the artist is now embarking on a new journey of transmuting the silhouette and going beyond the depiction of the poodle.

From his sun-drenched studio in Brooklyn, we caught a glimpse of his daily routines and his progression and ambition for his practice.



Susumu Kamijo's Brooklyn Studio

PLUS: Let's start by discussing more about the progression of your style. In 2016, it was primarily small canvases with portraits, and a year later, you began painting the poodle series. Now, you are utilizing organic forms to portray your subject.

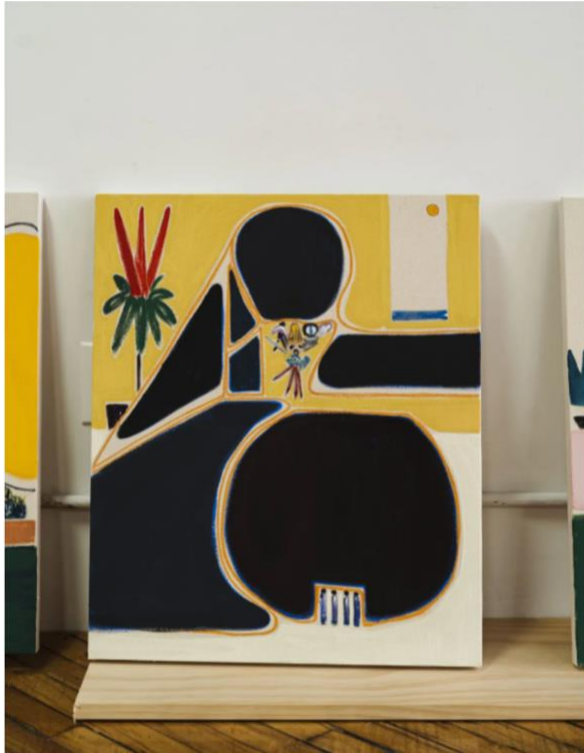
Susumu Kamijo: I was painting abstract portraits, landscapes, and pretty much whatever came to my mind before the poodle series. The poodle series started as small drawings on paper with pastel pencil in 2016. As years passed, I began painting poodles on a larger canvas utilizing pastel pencil, and around late 2019 and early 2020, I started to experiment with Flashe paint on canvas

How did the poodle motif come to you?

My partner is a dog groomer, and one day I was helping her at work, and just looking at the dogs made me drawn to their 'fluffy' form. It was the sudden moment of realization that made me start making the poodle series.

That's interesting! And, in your recent work, the 'poodle' figure is no longer present as you are morphing the face and the body questioning the painted figure.

You are right! Now the poodle series has become a new body of work that has almost nothing to do with a poodle but more to do with whatever the images I'm portraying as a subject, whether it would be beastlike subjects, the plants, and landscapes.



"I usually make pencil sketches in order to figure out how they would look before I paint," says Kamijo.

Tell me about your painting process. I see the pencil sketches on the wall, and do you generally make sketches first before painting on canvas?

I usually make pencil sketches in order to figure out how they would look before I paint. The colors are more of an intuitive process that comes naturally while I paint. Each painting typically takes two to three days [even though they are large], and I don't like to paint multiple works simultaneously but instead focus on one painting and move on to another.

It's interesting how it takes rather a short amount of time to finish work for you, and I think that comes from your childhood influence on calligraphy. The act of calligraphy is reflected in your quick sketches and pencil drawings. It's fascinating to see how all things relate in life as well!

For me, the act of painting quickly is to capture something that is authentic and one that I attribute to learning calligraphy as a child in Japan. The more I look at my works, the more I see the influence of calligraphy.



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And does this (calligraphy) also impact the color of the backgrounds being subtle?

I think colors in my works do not have much to do with calligraphy, but the form and negative space you see in the paintings are heavily influenced by it.

What are you expressing and exploring through your practice?

My aim is to create a psychological impact on the viewers; the way many abstract expressionists like Francis Bacon, Philip Guston, Willem de Kooning, and other artists [not only limiting to painters but also writers and filmmakers] communicated their powerful emotions through their work.

Interestingly, your subjects are most times often placed in a serene landscape. What is it about the open space that is significant to you?

Nature and open space represent freedom in my work, and that's why the subjects in my work are not in an enclosed setting. The idea of freedom is not permanent, and the meaning can be interchangeable in each painting.

Therefore, by placing the subject in nature, I am portraying the fragility of freedom.

Everytime I look at your work, the figure's visage is at the center of the canvas, balancing the voluminous body with the negative space. I am curious to know the idea of balance in your work.

The faces cannot come with the bodies and vice versa. There must be a balance and placement between the face and body. Even though the body, face, and landscape are three different parts, they merge into one meaning.



Gentle Mind, 2022. Courtesy of the artist and Perrotin. Photo by Dan Bradica.

There is a repetition of a small dot (which I perceive as a sun or a moon), contrasting with the canvas's colors.

Depending on the viewer, the circular shape could be interpreted as a sun, moon, or whatever, depending on the viewer. Most of the time, it balances the structure of the paintings, and often it acts as a finish line or period in the process of drawing and painting.

Lastly, congratulations on your upcoming show at Perrotin Seoul! Can you talk more about the show and what visitors can expect?

For the upcoming show, I'll be showing my latest works exploring the new forms, and departing from the poodle figure. I want to bring a new narrative to the viewers and hope they can enjoy this transformation!

Susumu Kamijo will have a solo exhibition, *Alone with Everybody* at Perrotin Seoul until May 26, 2022.