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Yu Nishimura **December Light**

Yu Nishimura's paintings depict an everyday environment, which is close by, all around us. They speak of the diversity that we see during the day, but also about taking the time to observe our surroundings. For Nishimura, this is located around his studio in Yokosuka, at about two hours by train to the south of Tokyo. Many of his motifs come from there, whether it's familiar objects like fruit placed on a piece of furniture, just before disappearing, or the animals he encounters – dogs, cats or birds – or else the landscapes around him, be they forests, cityscapes or seascapes. The simplicity of the subjects and the way they are depicted might seem banal. Yet, amid this apparent lightness, Nishimura manages to create in his painting a kind of presence to the moment. Thanks to pictorial techniques that produce a certain transparency, such as the sweep of his brush across the canvas, the use of highly diluted colours and the artist's ability to bring out the light that emanates from surfaces, the motifs fixed on the canvas appear in a filmic vibration, as when a camera stops on a subject and continues filming. Through this freeze-framing on the simple things of everyday life, Yu Nishimura's work seems to resist the principles of acceleration and consumption. The exhibition *December Light* is a clear testimony to this: the choice of common motifs associated with a style clearly orientated towards simplicity and with a particular attention paid to the treatment of light, compose an ode to calmness, in which even the most skittish sentiments find a space to exist.

What is calm? The dictionary definition runs as follows: state of a place without rough motion, still or nearly still; free from disturbance, the quality of being peaceful, quiet and without worry. The paintings brought together in the exhibition *December Light*, whether from the Silvia Fiorucci collection, Monaco or conceived specially for this occasion, bear witness precisely to a silent calm, to a moment with little or no movement, calling for a slowing-down and, ultimately, contemplation. Like Monaco, the town of Yokosuka, where Nishimura works, is surrounded by the sea on one side, and by many hills on the other. Even though Yokosuka has around 400,000 inhabitants and boasts one of Japan's largest ports, its geographical setting provides a great variety of nature-related motifs. In the seascapes *Sea and Bicycle* (2022) or *Ocean Park* (2023), the water's calm surface extends as far as the horizon. A bicycle at the centre of the first canvas, three figures seen from behind in the second, the human is always present, yet remains indefinite and distant. Such elements in these compositions allow the spectator's gaze to be guided towards an empty and peaceful space, situated beyond the foreground. The same applies to the painting *Lake* (2023) which depicts a solitary character on a boat, placed in the middle of the canvas. Surrounded by trees with autumnal colours, this little craft is reflected on the glimmering water, while no breeze disturbs its surface. Time seems almost to have been suspended or, put differently, the moment seems to stretch out in time. This very same sensation emerges from the paintings *Beach Side* (2023) and *Building in the Sunset* (2023), urban landscapes devoid of any direct human presence. Both perfectly convey the image of time passing and being drawn out into contemplation. These scenes, in particular, are reminiscent of certain photographs by the Italian artist Luigi Ghirri (1943-1992) in their choice of framing, which makes emptiness perceptible, the rather simple architectural and geometric forms as well as the reduced palette of soft colours. Marked by a poetic approach to ordinary

everyday life, Ghirri's practice above all focused on the motif of an inhabited void. In this respect, the expression "inhabited void" applies particularly well to Nishimura's paintings, in which the buildings that can be seen come over as manifestations of an invisible human presence. However, unlike photography, the medium of painting provides Nishimura with the possibility of tracing out less precise contours and disregard details. Less committed to a social view of the world than Ghirri, paintings such as *Beach Side* and *Building in the Sunset*, almost timeless and blurred, allow us to project between emptiness and the indefinite, as an invitation to inner meditation.

As for the pictures of animals and the still lifes, such as *Arts and Crafts* (2020), *Fruits Lined Up* (2022) or else *Fall Vegetables* (2023), they particularly appeal to the notion of intimacy. On looking at these canvases, it is difficult not to think of one of the 20th century's masters of the still life, the Italian painter Giorgio Morandi (1890-1964). Nishimura is in fact a great admirer of his work and it should not be forgotten that Luigi Ghirri was also inspired by this painter of "the interior". Just like with Morandi, Nishimura's still lifes possess dense zones of colour and depict forms with a minimal amount of details. The objects – fruits, vegetables or else crockery – appear in the same intimate bareness. On the other hand, Nishimura's oeuvre does not feature the obsessive repetition of motifs of vases or crockery, associated with a reduced palette of colours, as was the case with Morandi, but it remains imbued with great simplicity. Simplicity is in fact a leitmotif to Nishimura: it seems to be expressed as a life philosophy, whether this be the choice of a frontal view, compositions in which the main motif is placed in the middle of the picture, or lines stripped of forms, sometimes close to the graphic schematisation dear to popular Japanese designs. In a world submitted to the rule of complexity, nothing seems harder than simplicity. Sometimes, simplicity can be confused with naivety. From a philosophical viewpoint, "simplicity as a virtue, in the words of Bergson, is that of a 'soul which opens out', a soul that does not cling onto its injuries, its possessions, its reputation, because it no longer feels obliged to solve everything or support itself and so consents to defer to another"¹. This approach is taken to its climax in the close-up view of a sandy ground in *Sea Stuff* (2018) and the enlarged view of a starry sky in *Stars* (2022). In both these paintings, representation tends so much towards simplicity that it becomes abstract. Here, too, and even more than elsewhere, they are an invitation to enter a meditative state, as when, sitting on the sand, we get lost in our thoughts while looking for some particular seashells, or when, lying down with our heads turned towards the stars, we forget the passing of time while contemplating the Milky Way.

Finally, the last key element to which Nishimura pays particular attention, and which backs up the idea of calmness as a state in which emotions can circulate more freely, is light. It is no coincidence that the artist has chosen *December Light* as the title of this exhibition. Unlike the dazzling, contrasted light of summer, winter sunlight allows for subtle nuances and offers softer contours. The opposition between the warmth of the sun and the freshness of December air generates a peaceful, but cold, atmosphere that incites inwardness. In his landscapes, observed in this end-of-year light, as in *A Man in the Scenery* (2023) or again in *Beach Side* and *Building in the Sunset*, Nishimura captures moods that evoke this sensation of interiority. Each of these paintings, according to their tonality and the colour contrasts they offer, such as green and brown in *A Man in the Scenery* which produces a slight sensation of cold, suggest a feeling that sways between melancholy and serenity, as if December were a month during which we could take the time to look back or quite simply to settle down. The effect of light on the emotions was rigorously studied by the German writer Johann Wolfgang von Goethe in his *Theory of Colours* (*Zur Farbenlehre*, 1810). Responding to Newton, who had an extremely analytic and scientific explanation of light, Goethe put forward the idea that different kinds of emotion correspond to different tonalities of colour and light. Painting, with its capacity to play on such tonalities as an artistic language, provides this possibility of conveying emotions that

¹ *La simplicité*, in *Études* 2010/9 (Tome 413), pages 235 to 243, <https://www.cairn.info/revue-etudes-2010-9-page-235.htm> (our translation).

can be so complex that words fail to express them. By choosing to explore the way in which the clear light of winter affects the landscape and perception, Nishimura thus introduces a broader reflexion about painting as a non-verbal communication tool, in which the exploration of color allows to express an emotional spectrum embracing sadness, isolation and melancholy as well as joy, serenity or even a happy state of contemplation.

Taking the time and the care to look at our environment, while feeling the light that runs through it, is an almost philosophical way to rethink the use of time in our contemporary lives and our relationship with our familiar environments. A simple, yet effective, act of resistance.

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