

Crèvecœur

## Yu Nishimura

### *Threshold*

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9 rue des Cascades, 5 & 7 rue de Beaune

Yu Nishimura has once more expanded his spectrum. It seems the visual temperature and depth of each of his paintings, drawings, and watercolours have become more granular, and with this, the freedom in their making has grown. While it remains possible to distinguish what is depicted in the works—a portrait, a landscape, an abstraction—all of them hover in a state that not only nullifies these categories but even more radically flattens them: A portrait becomes a landscape, a landscape becomes a still life; abstraction and representation amalgamate into a form of temporal coexistence that Nishimura reconciles in a most sensual, occasionally deadpan humorous way. As far as the specific motifs vary, *seashore* (2025) and *pommes de terre* (2025) share something akin to *undersea* (2025) and *avocado* (2025)—a certain tone, a humming, a sound, or perhaps something tangible, considering the artist's repeated references to air and wind.

For his most recent painterly endeavour, shown for the first time in this exhibition, aspects of photography served as a point of departure, which in itself is not new. The artist regularly cites Japanese photographers such as Shinzo Fukuhara and Takuma Nakahira—figures from both pre- and postwar generations—who embraced the proto-Modernist medium for its counterintuitive potential: to care for and embrace the blurred and the overlooked, perhaps even to articulate the unseen rather than celebrate photography's promises of clarity and transparency. Indeed, what if a take on memory lies at the core of photography? One could easily claim that many of Nishimura's paintings strike like a stitch (maybe a Barthes-punctum) to the viewer's heart—more precisely, a moment of touch that opens a foggy zone between memory and the present, between you and I—or perhaps between life and death, the ultimate distinction between an image and reality.

For various works in this new exhibition, Nishimura initially attempted to paint directly from photographs in his archive in order to accomplish something new for him. But through the very process of making, this endeavour shifted direction: each time he started from a framed image, he impulsively extended its borders. He sought to make this effect fertile. Instead of using the depth of a photograph as a source for producing a painting, Nishimura observed how the sharp edges of a photographic image gradually transform when literally opened by the act of painting. This becomes evident in *plank*, a large diptych partly inspired by a small Chinese cemetery in Yokohama where the artist's grandmother rests. This

dear and familiar place, where Nishimura spent a great deal of time, also offers a panoramic view of the city.

While the work began as a scene painted from a photograph of an interior, the right-hand part was added at a later stage. The photograph acted as a threshold: its interior space traced a fixed memory of a place, while the nested, layered spaces along with the window on the right extend toward the memorized landscape. Indeed, memory continues to feed the stream of Nishimura's works—not in a way that describes a singular, concrete moment but, as seen here, quite the opposite: His paintings harness the necessary incompleteness with which memory adapts itself to the shifting moods of the present. It is therefore a sleepy, passive resource that can be activated in the act of painting—an act the artist compares to “waiting,” which might recall the way a theatre slowly unfolds before the static, eye-level camera of Japanese film director Ozu. By granting agency to chance and time, his brushstrokes stimulate and develop images further—like a diamond hidden in a state of utmost material condensation that begins to shine only when held in the right light.

But perhaps the diamond is a misleading metaphor here. Nishimura's recent works instead seem to circle around the sea and, with it, the meeting point of water and earth—the shoreline—which is, quite literally, depicted in *planktos* (2025), one of the few paintings in this exhibition that explicitly points to the sea. Deriving from the Greek term meaning “that which drifts or floats,” the work plays with the viewer's proximity: up close, small stones, gravel, and tiny fragments of drifting matter scattered across sand emerge from the surface. Like the drifting matter that gives the work its name, the painting's significance floats in these small accumulated details—marking a coastline as yet another border between states, a threshold between what is liquid and what is fixed. (Or, recalling Jeff Wall's writing on the “liquid intelligence” of photography versus painting, it marks the very area in which this artist's practice is situated.) At the same time, coastlines also delineate the outer boundary of Japan.

Nishimura's work draws upon both exceptional technical skill and deep historical knowledge. His influences span Western painting traditions and Japanese artists who worked at another critical juncture—one shaped by the intersection of two distinct artistic histories. While incorporating formal elements from Western painting, many of these Japanese predecessors preserved traditional practices: the subtle fabrication of colour gradations, the integration of drawing into painting, and countless other stylistic and technical decisions in brushwork and pigment. When viewing Nishimura's work, we often default to Western critical frameworks, but it may be equally valuable to trace his lineage closer to home—to an art history characterized by continuous, gradual opening rather than abrupt rupture. This perspective emphasizes qualities of illusion over the meticulous analysis of documentary modes that has preoccupied many Western artists but not their Japanese counterparts.

Nishimura grew up in a moment of rupture himself—in 1980s and 1990s Japan as the son of a painter, in a country struggling with economic collapse after decades of unprecedented postwar growth. This context amplified existing isolationist tendencies, given Japan's enduring tension between inside and outside, reinforced geologically by its island character and historically by a trajectory that thrust the nation's psyche, within less than a century of its opening and the catastrophe of the atomic bomb, into a structurally unresolved psychological vacuum between perpetrator and victim. Growing up in Yokohama, south of the glass and steel facades of Tokyo, Nishimura repeatedly returned to a small city called Yokosuka, a place that would serve as an internal anchor point for his work. His childhood memories of family holidays across the bay in Chiba evoke thick grass and insects leaping about.

The farther one moves from the centre, the more the specifics of Japanese life become apparent—such as the Shinto-inflected idea that the world is animated through living things. Indeed, Nishimura's distinctive tone may have its roots in these suburban places where he grew up, in the continually expanding memory fragments that each work realizes, extends, and overwrites simultaneously. All the horizons and seascapes are both endings and beginnings of a vision the artist evokes with the breath of a long-distance runner. To do so, his work constantly shifts perspectives, revealing countless openings and thresholds that give shape to the multipolar contingencies of memory informing his practice, as well as his idea of identity as something “ever-flowing.” This brings some of his works into a formal proximity with Francis Picabia's *Transparencies*, which also operate with layered, overlapping, ghostly, superimposed compositions—a technique that allowed him to explore themes of memory, time, and the simultaneous presence of multiple realities on a single canvas.

Last but certainly not least, this applies also to other strands of his modus operandi: Nishimura frequently collaborates with others, sometimes less visibly, sometimes more. The works he produced with his friend Kazuyuki Takezaki, who passed away suddenly in 2024, are marked by shared authorship. While both artists had their own standards and ideas of painting, they occasionally met—also as part of a group called *twin boat song*—to collaborate. Nishimura says: “As we painted a single work together, I gradually realized that I was moving closer to his way of thinking about when a painting is complete. In a sense, it meant painting as if becoming the other person. Within his field, I felt as if I could move freely anywhere.” The forms of freedom Yu Nishimura finds in his art do always exist in relation, which, eventually, provides a deep political dimension to his work.

However, all relationality apart, in the making itself the artist is eventually alone. A large part of this new exhibition is devoted to drawings. Apart from their different character in terms of appearance, this goes also for pace and execution. For Nishimura, drawing represents a function of highest proximity in physical terms: «For me, drawing is the form of making that is closest to my body and to my instinct, before a work becomes a painting.» While he regularly integrates aspects of drawing into painting, drawing serves for him as a source code whose wholeness and immediacy can bridge concept and gesture into a primal, bodily form of creation. It is in this solitary act—where hand meets surface, where breath translates into mark—that the artist's practice finds a most intimate foundation, the threshold from which all other openings emerge.

Martin Germann