

Shimon Minamikawa's cat paintings participate in a rich, if fraught tradition of painting and repetition. One thinks of everything from Morandi's heartbreakingly beautiful depictions of vases and bottles to On Kawara's dry, no frills paintings of dates. The German painter Peter Dreher's commitment to painting the same exact drinking glass for decades comes to mind. So does the young Brazilian painter Lucas Arruda and his portrayals of imaginary seascape horizons. That said, probably the most salient example of painting and repetition would be the American painter Josh Smith. His example is the most conspicuous because, of all these artists, he has as of late received the most air time and because he puts the most pressure on painting, all but repudiating it. Initially painting only his own name, Smith has gone on to include other motifs (fish, grim reapers) in his deliberately limited pictorial repertoire, but the essential impulse remains the same: to bracket "content", or questions of content. By having a motif already selected, the question of what to paint and what it might mean becomes subsumed in a repetition which comes to (acerbically) replace and function as content itself. Anything but precious, his relationship to repetition has nothing to do with perfectionism, of trying "to get it right," but is much more linked to questions of excess and overabundance. This being the case, any one of his paintings is as good as any other. They are basically fungible. Little more than scare-quote *paintings*, which impishly dare you to like them, they are the implacable byproduct of a mordantly self-aware I-can't-go-on, I'll-go-on attitude, an existential anguish so hackneyed and predictable that it actually becomes casual, even blasé. A casual anguish. I write all of this not only because any contemporary painting about repetition has to contend with Smith's legacy, but also because, in terms of filiation, Minamikawa is probably the closest to Josh Smith with regard, at least in this instance, to repetition. And yet, what Minamikawa does here is so different. First of all, it needs to be stated that this is a single body of work in a much more varied practice which is not about repetition. One gets the feeling that with these paintings Minamikawa is picking up a gauntlet which electively haunts the medium: and that is that any painter worth their salt should be able to paint the same thing over and over again, no matter how banal, and make it interesting. In fact the more banal, i.e., still life, floral or otherwise, the better. In this case, cats. Or better, a porcelain sculpture of a cat, which the Japanese artist paints shadowlessly floating on a creme anglaise background. Sometimes he paints them singly, other times in pairs, and still other times in groups, in rotating, anti-gravity positions, on round canvases, so on and so forth. However he may paint them, their creation is always governed by two constants, the cat and the palette. They are painted with an arresting simplicity, which is due in part to their limited palette and in part to Minamikawa's reduced economy of mark making. Both of these elements help account for the artist's preternaturally light touch, which runs throughout all of his work, and which precludes it from ever falling into the painterly morass of anguish in which Smith's work boorishly revels. Indeed, Minamikawa's work is entirely devoid of the pathological, if obstreperous disavowal that characterizes not only Smith's work, but many of his spiritual brethren

(Christopher Wool, Merlin Carpenter, Michael Krebber, etc). It is much closer to, say, Italo Calvino and his definition of lightness, when he writes (at the risk of conjuring up the image of a bird painting), “One should be light like a bird and not like a feather.” Generally speaking, Minamikawa’s radical restraint is not so much a byproduct of the sentiment of there being nothing really left to give, or paint, but rather that of a paring down, of locating the essential and conveying, almost offhandedly, a maximum with a minimum. This is not to say that the work does not evince a healthy contempt for clichés; if it does, it does so with affection and generosity. For all their elegant triteness and sophistication, these paintings are liable to do exactly what any painter of cats would like their paintings of cats to do: brighten up your day. I say, let them.

–Chris Sharp

(This document was automatically generated by Contemporary Art Library.)