

Matthew Brown

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Fantasy in Japan

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1145 Seward St.

Fantasy in Japan aims to blur the boundary between what is perceived as real versus what is imagined. It offers a unique experience within the gallery context for contemplation and reflection in relationship to my trip to Japan. It gives a glimpse into how I construct my own reality around my memory. It unites many distinct voices around a specific place, creating dialogues between specific artists and their artworks.

After America's occupation in Japan post WWII, there was this cultural shift that happened. There was a deep integration of American culture, values, music into Japanese daily life. Baseball, fast food, and Hollywood cinema became widely popular and heavily influenced subsequent generations. The fashion shifted from traditional kimonos to Western style clothing because of the U.S. military occupation and intense cravings for modernization. America was the pipeline for all of this and also Black culture. Fast forward to today, if you go to Japan you will see Black cultural influences that have integrated and defined some Japanese peoples' lives. There are reggae and hip-hop clubs frequented by mega fans, Jamaican styled restaurants, Japanese people with locks or black styled hair. Bars littered with posters of Marvin Gaye, Jimi Hendrix, Miles Davis or any black musician you could think of. Sneaker stores with posters of Michael Jordan, Kobe Bryant. Young people walking around with Jordan sneakers listening to black music, wearing black hairstyles and using black slang. Whether it's music, fashion, food, hair, any aspect of Black culture, it can be seen and experienced there. I was tickled by this type of cross cultural exchange and it inspired my belief that one doesn't have to be Japanese to paint Japanese people.

I feel like there are so many great Black artists representing Black people in their work so I don't always need to be doing that. Maybe now figurative painters should try to paint people that don't look like them. Henry Taylor, Rose Wylie — they do it and they are two of the best living figurative painters. Alice Neel's painting of Benjamin (1976) is easily one of her best. Maybe we need more fresh perspectives of what different types of people can look like. If we only get depictions of white people from white people, there's only so much that you can learn from that. So more white people should paint Black people and more Black people should paint Asian people and more Asian people should paint Black people and so on and so forth. Maybe we'll notice how similar we are and maybe we can appreciate each other more. It's really important to broaden our understanding of humanity and if you leave the show with anything, it's that you shouldn't limit yourself to only representing people that look like you.

I became interested in observing and representing Japanese people because I liked people's outfits, style, hair, and the way each individual person moved through the different cities I visited. Getting on the train seeing a bunch of people getting off work with their suits and business attire reminded me of New York City, my hometown. People occupied space in a beautiful way to me. I became fixated on the idea that beauty is most successfully rendered when observing something closely and then filtering it through the imagination. We relate to paintings with figures in them because on some level we understand that we are looking at versions of our own bodies, and if we think about our bodies existing in different places, our look can be captured within our silhouettes. So I use silhouettes to ground people's bodies. I wanted to make paintings inspired by real people, in their natural habitat, which I chose to unravel and abstract from. I constructed a sort of realm where I could imagine energetic fields through mark making. My desire was to remove people from their routinely rigid lives and put them in a place where they could vacation amongst marks, patches of color, drops, splotches, smears, pours, attempting to capture a more vivid version of their beauty.

Red, black, blue, brown, and white are the colors I kept seeing during my trip last year. In the architecture, department stores, restaurants, museums, people's outfits, nature and more. Before I left, I began making work using these specific colors but the trip intensified my interest in this palette. Maybe as the red car theory goes, when you start focusing on something specific you suddenly start seeing it everywhere and my focus on these colors started to shape my reality. This combination became a signifier of moments to pay attention to and later became the colors I primarily focused on while making the works for this show.

My smaller works usually reflect real people, walking or standing and interacting with abstracted spaces. My larger works explore a more fantastical space, where characters are transformed or made up, fueling

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mysterious fragmented scenes. After visiting the remarkable Joan Miró show at the Tokyo Metropolitan Art Museum, I was inspired to start making works on paper for the first time. Thus Japan became the catalyst for me merging these different bodies of work into one show. As the home of anime where depictions of real cities become occupied with distinct characters, usually drawn with big eyes, dynamic hair, monsters, entities, I engaged with this language, creating a story.

The story that this show reflects is my experience of going to a place for the first time and being exposed to a culture widely known to be homogenous due to centuries of geographical isolation and strict immigration policies. Although Japan is now changing, most people follow the same unspoken moral code of social harmony, respect and order. Many people there are polite, courteous, have personal dignity and take pride in their reputations. Many have an unwavering devotion to their duties and families. Generally people seem to avoid conflicts and never inconveniencing others. Business etiquette and public spaces really reflect people not just thinking about themselves but everybody. What's funny is that much of what I experienced there did not feel foreign to me. In fact, I saw a lot of myself in the practices of the culture. Maybe it's just how I was raised, or my value system, but it made me want to examine the people a bit closer and ask myself, "Are they so different?" The average Japanese person looks very different from me, but they didn't feel that different to me. Things like politeness, punctuality, being quiet on the train, gift giving, staying to one side of the stairs or escalator, not littering and taking my trash with me — the etiquette of the people had already been present with me for a long time. I aimed to reflect that in my work.

As much as this text is informative, I think art should not have to be explained. You should see it and it should hit you and you should immediately feel something. Whether it's awe, beauty or disgust, it should conjure up some kind of reaction. I'm interested in that because that is what Japan did for me. It brought up a feeling of beauty. When I went back to the United States I appreciated everything more. The trees, genuine people, the privilege of being an artist and seeing the beauty in everything. In the spirit of thinking of others I decided to create a show within my show, extending my platform to other artists that could share their perspectives on this place. Some using a similar palette, others having been to Japan or those exploring similar themes in their work. This synchronicity felt like a powerful way to create an unforgettable show. So without further ado, welcome to a Fantasy in Japan.

Omari Douglin (b. 1992, Brooklyn, NY) lives and works in Los Angeles. In 2019, Douglin received an MFA from the Milton Avery Graduate School of the Arts, Bard College. He received his BFA from The Cooper Union in 2015. In 2026, Douglin was commissioned by the Brooklyn Academy of Music (BAM) as part of its Robert W. Wilson Public Art Initiative to create Junction, a large-scale mural inspired by the institution's Hamm Archives, installed across from BAM's Peter Jay Sharp Building in Brooklyn and on view through April 2027.

Solo and two-person exhibitions include No Pigs, Ramiken, New York (2025); Art Basel Miami Beach, Matthew Brown and Ramiken, Miami, FL (2024); boutique O, Matthew Brown, Los Angeles (2024); Four Paintings, Sebastian Gladstone, Los Angeles (2023); Scam Likely, with Lukas Quietzsch, Ramiken Crucible, New York (2023); Wave Gods 2, Ramiken Crucible, New York (2023); The People of New York City, Micki Meng, San Francisco (2022); Montage Ontology Domain, Theta, New York (2022).

Recent group exhibitions include Once Within a Time: 12th SITE Santa Fe International, SITE, Santa Fe (2025); The Reminiscence Bump, Braunsfelder, Cologne (2025); Recent Acquisitions, Rubell Museum, Miami, FL (2024); PROGRAM, Matthew Brown, New York (2024); Averard, Ramiken Crucible, London (2022); Apple in the Dark, Harkawik, New York (2022); Their private worlds contained the memory of a painting that had shapes as reassuring gas the uncanny footage of a sonogram, curated by Sedrick Chisom, Matthew Brown, Los Angeles (2022); Stanley and Marta's Holiday Fête, Stanley's, Los Angeles (2021); Mother and Child, Friends Indeed, San Francisco (2021); and Deathbound and Sexed, Theta, New York, NY (2021).