

Koho Yamamoto

Under a Dark Moon

The Noguchi Museum
Long Island City, NY
March 10–May 23, 2021



Untitled, n.d.
Ink on paper
17 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 22 $\frac{7}{8}$ in.
Collection of the artist



Untitled
n.d.
Ink on paper
16 x 20 in.
Collection of the artist



Untitled, n.d.
Ink on paper
10 $\frac{1}{4}$ x 7 $\frac{3}{4}$ in.
Collection of the artist



Untitled, n.d.
Ink on paper
37 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 73 $\frac{3}{8}$ in.
Collection of the artist



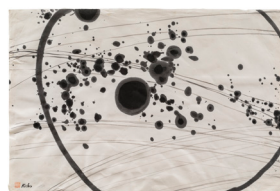
Untitled, n.d.
Ink on paper
2 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 5 $\frac{5}{16}$ in.
Collection of the artist



Untitled, c. 1987
Ink on paper
34 $\frac{1}{8}$ x 44 $\frac{1}{4}$ in.
Collection of the artist



Untitled, n.d.
Ink on paper
18 $\frac{1}{8}$ x 12 $\frac{1}{8}$ in.
Collection of the artist



Untitled, c. 1978
Ink on paper
23 $\frac{7}{8}$ x 35 $\frac{3}{4}$ in.
Collection of the artist



Untitled, n.d.
Ink on paper
7 $\frac{5}{8}$ x 5 $\frac{3}{4}$ in.
Collection of the artist



Untitled, n.d.
Ink on paper
24 x 37 in.
Collection of the artist

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Masako “Koho” Yamamoto (b. 1922) came of age as an artist with a generation of *nisei* (the American-born children of Japanese immigrants) who admired Isamu Noguchi (1904–1988) because he made his complex heritage and life experience the basis of a uniquely American success story. Over the last half century, the name “Koho” has become synonymous with *sumi-e* (“black ink painting”) in New York City, where she has personally instructed hundreds of students seeking a way to be in the discipline of painting. Despite, but more truly because of, her close association with that tradition, she is almost entirely unrecognized, even among her greatest admirers, for what she is: a great postwar, abstract painter.

Yamamoto was born in Alviso, California, spent her early years in Japan, and returned permanently to live in the United States at age nine in 1931. Her father was a poet and calligrapher; her mother died when she was just four. During the Second World War, Yamamoto was forcibly incarcerated with her father and siblings in two of the prison camps established by the American government for residents of Japanese ancestry living on the west coast of the United States. First at Tanforan Assembly Center (San Bruno, California) and then in Topaz Relocation Center (Millard County, Utah) she studied with the celebrated Japanese American painter Chiura Obata (1885–1975). He gave her the name “Koho” (“red harbor”) derived from his own name (“thousand harbors”), in recognition of her skill. In the camp, she also received attention for her poetry. At nineteen she wrote this *tanka* (“short poem”) in Japanese: *Sometimes I wish I could jump into the turmoil of humanity and live life seriously*. Seventy-four years later that steely resolve had matured but was still finding its way into verse: *Don’t say I’m old / Don’t say I’m weak / I will kick you in the ass / I am a grand old soul of lioness*.

After her release from Tule Lake Segregation Center (Newell, California), Yamamoto moved to New York City, where she attended the Art Students League, painted, married, divorced, worked various jobs to make ends meet, and keenly followed the rise of Abstract Expressionism. In 1973, she opened a school to teach *sumi-e* on MacDougal Street on the border between Soho and Greenwich Village. While the school closed in 2010, Yamamoto has continued to teach privately. She will be ninety-nine in April.¹

Yamamoto’s impact as a *sensei* (teacher) and cross-cultural ambassador has been immense and widespread. It was her students, friends, and followers who brought her to The Noguchi Museum’s attention and their devotion that made this exhibition happen. But her gifts as a teacher should not overshadow her

formidable body of work. She is as driven to paint today as she was when she first recognized in art a means to freedom and freedom of expression. Her work combines a mastery of the techniques and traditions of *sumi-e* with an atomic era sensibility, the brash bravura of postwar abstraction, and a disdain for the conventions of restraint her own teaching represents.

Yamamoto’s whole body of work is a deceptively harrowing embrace of the void—in the form of irresolvable darknesses—and the relentless passage of time—in the form of decay and disintegration. Her paintings cover a broad representational spectrum spanning calligraphy, landscape, still life, historical portraiture, and pure abstraction and reflecting the hybridity of her background and interests. She is particularly adept at painting microcosms that generate an indelible sense of place without providing comfortable points of purchase. In his own expanded field of sculpture, Noguchi called his own ambiguous floating environments mindscapes or imaginary landscapes. A favorite statement of Erich Fromm, copied in Yamamoto’s own hand and taped to the wall of the small room at home where she paints, reads “Creativity requires the courage to let go of certainties.” By turns lushly luring, stark, and explosively fragmentary, Yamamoto’s black paintings in particular, like the ones on view here, are steady visions from the psychic vacuum of the unknown: intimate and cosmic, specific, universal, and direct. “My painting comes from nothingness,” she likes to say, “but it has life to it.”

To celebrate Yamamoto as a *sumi-e* master is only right. It is an honor she welcomes after a lifetime of practice. But we also acknowledge the extent to which specificity of acclamation can itself be a form of prejudice, as in the epithet “great woman artist.” “*Sumi-e* master” is a gilded cage Yamamoto has worked outside of for decades. Her work stands atop the tradition, but is not contained by it. Long hidden in plain sight, her dauntlessness and perseverance are an unambiguous rebuke to the expectations and limitations to which she has been subject as a Japanese American woman.

This year of the pandemic has been such a bewildering period for humanity. Not since the bubonic plague halved the population of Europe in the late middle ages or the splitting of the atom gave us the ability to threaten the existence of the planet itself, have we confronted oblivion as a species. What better time to recognize the creativity, fearlessness, and survival of an artist who has never been afraid of the dark.

Dakin Hart
Senior Curator

¹ For a complete compact biography, as well as a list of other sources, see Ben Kobashigawa, “Margie Masako ‘Koho’ Yamamoto,” *Densho Encyclopedia*, encyclopedia.densho.org