



Yoichi Umetsu, *Double Filters*, 2020-2021, Ceramic, H29.8×W23×D13 cm/ H11.7×W9×D5.1 inches

# Yoichi Umetsu

## “Heisei Mood”

Friday, March 5 - Saturday, March 27, 2021

### Sokyo Gallery

381-2 Motomachi, Higashiyama-ku, Kyoto 605-0089 Japan  
Open: Tuesday - Saturday 10:00am - 6:00pm

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## PRESS RELEASE

Sokyo Gallery is pleased to announce a solo exhibition of Yoichi Umetsu, “Heisei Mood,” from Friday, March 5 to Saturday, March 27, 2021. Following his group exhibition Kazuhito Kawai/ Yoichi Umetsu: “SHOW ME” [TUCHIKURE] with “LOOP FEELING”, which was held at Sokyo last year and was the first opportunity for the artist to present his ceramic works, this time he brings a total of sixty-four new works, including thirty-eight ceramic pieces, seven oil paintings and nineteen drawings for display.

Yoichi Umetsu is an artist dedicated to exploring the world of modern art in Japan and ultimately his own relationship to it. His debut work was “Floréal (Me) (2004–2007),” in which he appropriates the painting “Floréal” (1886) by Louis-Joseph-Raphaël Collin (1850–1916), replacing the naked female figure with his own naked body. “Chi-Kan-Jo A,” released in 2014, inspired by the work “Chi-Kan-Jo” from Seiki Kuroda that heralded the advent of the modern Western painting movement in Japan, once again sees Umetsu replacing the original naked figure with his own. Umetsu has always had an interest in the origins of and inspirations for art and painting. Umetsu uses a variety of approaches including painting, drawing, film and writing, and boasts experience in a range of fields including being the head of a private arts school, running an art gallery and curating exhibitions, all of which has contributed to his powers of imagination and reflection. And he continues to push the boundaries: last December he was supervising editor for the “Interpreting Art” feature in Bijutsu Techo magazine.

The exhibition “Heisei Mood” is a natural progression from the work “Kafun no Okoku” that now appears in “Bubbles/ Debris: Art of the Heisei Period 1989 – 2019” at the Kyoto City Kyocera Museum of Art (Annex). “Kafun no Okoku” was created by the Parplume collective led by Umetsu himself. For Umetsu, the word kafun (Japanese for pollen) signifies the medium via which artists influence one another with respect to artistic form and sensibility. The vision of pollen wafting gently in the breeze, unconstrained by conventional boundaries and time restrictions, contributing to the process of creation in new and unexpected ways, is also highly symbolic. “Heisei Mood” features a number of drawings and other works created over a period of several years, including the all-new “Pollen Strainer” series that was part of the “Art of the Heisei Period” exhibition.

### *Artist Notes on “Heisei Mood”*

*I was born in 1982 in Yamagata prefecture, and 1989 was the first year of the Heisei era in Japan, which means I’ve spent the bulk of my life to date in the Heisei era. The title of this exhibition, “Heisei Mood”, is derived from the “Bubbles/ Debris: Art of the Heisei Period 1989 – 2019” exhibition that’s currently running at the Kyoto City Kyocera Museum of Art. Curiously, both Sokyo Gallery and the Kyoto City Kyocera Museum of Art are within walking distance.*

*So there is the physical proximity and also, by sheer coincidence, the overlapping timing. These coincidences made the connection with Art of the Heisei Period somewhat inevitable.*

*The Parplume work “Kafun no Okoku” at “Art of the Heisei Period” represents a snippet of what we’ve been doing for the past eight years at Parplume, dropped into an exhibition space. I’m also exhibiting the seven-part series “Full Frontal” (2018-), which is based on Seiki Kuroda’s 1899 work “Chi-Kan-Jo”. By adding my own poses to those depicted in “Chi-Kan-Jo”, I’m trying to water down the supposed importance of historical context of a work and make it quantifiably larger in volume. It’s going to have eleven-parts in total when I’m finished. It’s as if my body has spawned multiple forms that have come together as a collective whole. The dark pink horseshoe structure on which “Full Frontal” sits was inspired by the idea of a naval blockade, whereby a huge battleship is deliberately scuttled at the narrow opening to a harbor thereby trapping all the ships inside.*



*“STARS: Six Contemporary Artists from Japan to the World,” which opened at the Mori Art Museum at the end of last year, brought together six artists who have been widely acclaimed both at home and abroad. “Art of the Heisei Period” however does not trade on famous names in the manner of STARS. Instead, it’s an attempt to create a new grouping by bringing together a number of little-known collectives with ever-shifting alignments that have yet to be recognized as art. Which is why I was hesitant to put a powerful and confronting work like “Full Frontal” in the Heisei exhibition. It introduces perhaps an element of fluidity, an intangible something without a defined center, much like the gel that binds us together at Parplume. We struggled with the idea of which works to put in the “Art of the Heisei Period” frame; and this is what we came up with in the end.*

*Noi Sawaragi’s work “Heisei Years in the Art of the Heisei Period” exhibition notes that the Japanese eras are defined by the lifespan of an individual (the Emperor) with no relation to the Western calendar. He also points out that the Heisei years were a time of great pain associated with the unprecedented damage and destruction of the March 2011 earthquake and tsunami. I interpret the terms “Art of the Heisei Period” and a time of great pain to be a logical extension of the notion of “bad places” that were geologically reinforced by the earthquake into the dimension of time. Koki Yamamoto refers to it in his review of “Art of the Heisei Period” on the online version of Bijutsu Techo:*

*“Both Takashi Murakami’s GEISAI and Yoichi Umetsu’s Parplume can be seen as projects that on the one hand are inherently opposed to the existing structures of the art scene, particularly with respect to academia, yet at the same time cleverly exploit its vulnerabilities in order to forge their own unique identities.”*

*I think Yamamoto is spot on. But if we flip it around the other way, what makes a bad place “bad” is fundamental to what we do. Perhaps Yamamoto interprets Umetsu (and Murakami) as being trapped in a bad place by dint of their own actions. I believe that it is important to embrace these sorts and judgments and observations, because they’re precisely the kind of thing that prompted us at Parplume to be involved with “Art of the Heisei Period” in the first place.*

*The idea of kafun (pollen) is central to any discussion of Parplume. Kafun suggests a carrier of personality, habits and creative acts that can propagate and cross-pollinate others. Kafun drifts through the air and where it ends up nobody knows. The longer it stays airborne, the more it loses its potency; and yet, it is essentially unbound by the constraints of land and time. Thus, Parplume is inspired by the endless possibilities of kafun as it drifts, with no real sense of purpose, leaving the bad places and painful times behind.*

*Let’s return to the Umetsu exhibition. Given that it exists independently of “Art of the Heisei Period,” “Heisei Mood” does not necessarily reflect all of what we have seen thus far. The ceramic art project that began about a year ago cannot be dismissed merely as a form of expression; for me, it holds much greater significance than that. Painting is very familiar to me, because I’ve been doing it for so long. But there have been times in the last few years when painting has made me feel somewhat constrained by art history and its systems and structures. Now, this is not necessarily a bad thing; and yet for some reason I don’t feel as constrained by history and context when I’m working with ceramics. I feel a sense of release, as if a weight has been lifted from my shoulders, as if something that has lain dormant within me for so long has finally been reawakened. I’ve never been the type to place myself within the space for critiquing art. If I were to associate my past self with some sort of lineage, then I suppose I would say that I am from the “lost youth” family of artists. Maybe you could trace a line from Kaita Murayama in the Taisho era (1920s) through Kamachi Yamada in the Showa era (mid to late 20<sup>th</sup> century) to Yoichi Umetsu in the Heisei era.*

*On a different note, my great-uncle Nobuo Umetsu was killed during the pre-dawn Pearl Harbor attack on December 8, 1941. There was a portrait of him in my grandfather’s home. Not unexpectedly, we shared similar facial features, but there was more than that—in a strange way I never thought of him as a different person. In a diary that he kept on board the aircraft carrier Kaga as it headed towards Pearl Harbor, he wrote that he’d had a recurring dream about a mystery woman, so much so that he wondered if he were perhaps going crazy.*



*The ceramic artwork Palm Tree in this exhibition is an extension of myself, and of my great-uncle Nobuo. I suppose the silhouette might seem farcical even. My other ceramic work, Pollen Strainer, is a device for capturing pollen—though it may not seem that way at first glance. The asymmetrical ellipsis shape was inspired by several visions: the strings of a tennis racquet, a piece of hemp cloth without undercoat used as a blank canvas for painting, the circular shape where your bottom comes into contact with the seat of a cane chair. Although the ceramic pieces in this exhibition are all new, I like to think they share some of the raw drive of one of my earliest works Floréal (Me) (2004 – 2007).*

*Without doubt the greatest influence on me over the last 30 years has been the visual movement in the Japanese music scene, similar in many respects to glam rock in the West. While there are many different theories about the origins of the visual movement, I've always been fascinated by the whole thing, not least the endless ups and downs of the visual arts scene, the complexity of the ecosystem, the ever-changing modus operandi.*

*There's a line in the 2005 song Ongaku wo Kudaranu from the band Ayabie: "Maybe you should rethink what makes visual visual (referring to the need for the visual movement in Japan to differentiate itself from the West.)" The visual arts scene is constantly on the move; nothing is fixed. Ongaku wo Kudaranu challenges the notion that we should try to find an "optimal" version of visual art and then preserve it for ever more. The visual movement is not a music genre. Which is why, for me, visual art is effectively the same as artistic expression itself.*

*As I try to articulate this idea, I realize that the logic may appear flawed. And yet, the exercise of mixing up all these acts and these ideas together is precisely the thing I am seeking to express in Heisei Mood: to be toyed with, like pollen or sound vibrations that are not confined to any particular time or place.*

Yoichi Umetsu  
February 20, 2021  
Nishitetsu Inn, Nihombashi

## BIOGRAPHY

Yoichi Umetsu was born 1982 in Yamagata prefecture, Japan. He is a contemporary artist, and the head of the Parplume collective. He has a strong interest in the origins of modern art painting in Japan, and is sharply critical of the education provided at art college preparatory schools and the Tokyo National University of Fine Arts and Music. Umetsu is active in a range of fields including creating video works that record paintings such as self-portraits and performance art; planning and curating exhibitions; writing opinion pieces and essays; and heading up the Parplume School that champions production and semi-collaborative living arrangements. Major exhibitions include: Misui no Kafun (Aichi Prefectural Museum of Art, 2017); Parplume University And Yoichi Umetsu (The Watari Museum of Contemporary Art [WATARI-UM], 2017); Weavers of Worlds—A Century of Flux in Japanese Modern/ Contemporary Art (Museum of Contemporary Art Tokyo, 2019); and Bubbles/ Debris: Art of the Heisei Period 1989 – 2019 (Kyoto Kyocera Museum of Art, 2021). He has published From Lamb to Mutton (Art Diver) and was the supervising editor for the Interpreting Art feature in the December 2020 edition of Bijutsu Techo magazine.

We would be very grateful if you could kindly consider this new innovative exhibition in your publication. If you have any questions, please contact the following:

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