

## KAZ OSHIRO

### STILL LIFE

Kaz Oshiro has a “painting problem.” This is what the Okinawa-born, Los Angeles-based artist said in an interview with the Walker Art Center on the occasion of its 2012 exhibition “Lifelike.” That group show featured labor-intensive artworks disguised as mundane, everyday objects: a blue, nylon sleeping bag by Gavin Turk, which was cast and painted bronze (*Nomad*, 2001); miniature, functioning elevators by Maurizio Cattelan (*Untitled*, 2001); and Oshiro’s own trompe-l’oeil contribution, *Dumpster (Flesh with Turquoise Swoosh)* (2011), among others. *Dumpster* appears to be a veritable trash receptacle, complete with dents, stains and spray-painted graffiti; it lacks no detail but the smell. However, the back of the piece reveals that it is actually several hand-painted, acrylic-on-canvas panels atop casters. Oshiro began creating these types of unique objects—stereo speakers, filing cabinets, car fenders and bumpers complete with a Toyota logo missing some of its letters for added fidelity—as a solution for his fraught relationship with painting.

While studying art at California State University in Los Angeles, Oshiro felt deeply that painting had peaked with the works of Willem de Kooning and Jackson Pollock. For him, the medium had thus reached an end point—where the format of a canvas, in and of itself, already signifies a painting’s existence as a work of art—and he was struggling to find a way to continue creating work that was not an emulation of his forebears. He started experimenting with paintings that sat on the floor to circumvent the typical display of two-dimensional works on walls. Then, having dabbled with canvases on the floor, Oshiro felt compelled to make them mimic discrete, functional objects. For his latest solo exhibition, “Still Life,” at Honor Fraser Gallery in Los Angeles, Oshiro returned to paintings that look like paintings, to explore, and perhaps resolve, his vexing relationship with the medium.

On entering the gallery space, the viewer was greeted with brightly colored paintings that reference contemporary art history, from Ellsworth Kelly’s color fields to John McCracken’s minimalist planks. The paintings did not lie flat against the wall, but wrapped around corners, dipped into crevices and protruded onto the floor, embodying a hybrid form between painting and sculpture. It was hard not to assign anthropomorphic qualities to the paintings as they hung askew and awry on the gallery walls and beyond: *Untitled Still Life* (2013), a bright yellow, rectangular painting, was hunched vertically against the wall, with its bent edges touching the adjacent ceiling and gallery floor.

Crammed into their respective positions, each of Oshiro’s paintings conveyed a discomfort or reluctance, drawing comparisons to the uneasiness

that the artist feels on being labeled a sculptor. And it’s no wonder: also in the show were three-dimensional “paintings” that were actually canvases constructed to look exactly like pristine, white filing cabinets, down to the metallic finish, silver keyhole and slightly ajar drawers. Once a viewer encounters the back of the work—and sees that it is actually acrylic on canvas and stretcher bars—there is a moment when he or she questions the nature of every object just seen, and begins seeing things with a new perspective. This moment of realization feels organic, but in fact it is a carefully planned part of Oshiro’s work.

The paintings that seemed so uncomfortably squashed into the crooks of the gallery in reality had been gracefully engineered to fit into their assigned spaces. Prior to the exhibition, Oshiro obtained a gallery floor plan, with which he planned the dimensions and installation of each artwork. The result was an elegantly modulated viewing of neon-colored paintings alongside more muted black and gray works, interspersed with the visual palate cleanser of thought-provoking, white filing cabinets.

“Still Life” proved that, in fact, it is not painting that is Oshiro’s “problem,” but his stance as an artist, as well as society’s obsession with categorization and its discomfort toward the un-categorizable. With this latest exhibition, Oshiro created his own category—situated in the liminal space between painting and sculpture—which he nimbly inhabits and which, for the viewer, is very comfortable to look at and enjoy.

JENNIFER S. LI

#### KAZ OSHIRO

*Untitled Still Life*

2013

Acrylic on canvas, 122 x 180 x 48 cm.

Photo by Joshua White.

Courtesy Honor Fraser Gallery, Los Angeles.

