

TOMOO GOKITA

If the face is the mirror of the mind and the eyes the window to the soul, what happens when visages are obscured? Displayed at Blum & Poe in Los Angeles, Tokyo-based artist Tomoo Gokita's latest body of work comprises single, double and group portraits. However, the information central to a typical portrait—the subject's likeness—is made to be bizarre, jarring or missing completely. As such, meanings in the black-and-white paintings are diffuse and dependent on the viewer—the blobs and smears covering the faces appear like Rorschach inkblots. *Replicant J.B.* (all works 2018), for example, takes a jovial image of deceased African-American musical icon James Brown and turns it into something ghastly. Where his face should be is a cavity, as if someone ripped off his skin, revealing his nasal skeleton and teeth. Is the death mask in *Replicant J.B.* perhaps a comment on the flamboyant performer's brushes with the law, including charges for drugs, domestic violence and two police chases? Pop-culture references are also found in *Minor Apprehension*, a painting of Marilyn Monroe and Muhammad Ali in an embrace. Instead of the bombshell's beauty, however, we see a caricatured, exaggerated expression as she glances sideways at her male companion, who has tiny close-set cartoon eyes. It is pertinent to consider not only the meanings of these images to the individual psyche, but also their cultural significance depending on the country in which they are viewed. Considering current racial tensions in the United States, these images were layered with contention in the Los Angeles gallery.

Music has always been a big influence on Gokita, and several of the pieces are named after song titles, though the phrases do less to explicate than to confuse. *Wrap Your Troubles in Dreams*, the title of a whimsically melancholic Bing Crosby tune, shows a group of men and women drinking and socializing. The central woman is the only person whose face is fully visible, and yet her expression is inscrutable. A couple of the images appear to stem from Gokita's fondness for 1960s and '70s soft-core pornography magazines (his father did advertising for *Playboy* and as a young boy Gokita frequently flipped through the magazine's pages in the family's living room). Among them is a painting of a seated woman draped in a towel, named *Bongo Nyah*, Jamaican Creole slang for "gangster Rastafarian" and the title of a song covered by several reggae artists. Her face and part of the backdrop are melting away, as if burned or waterlogged. *Bemsha Swing*, also a jazz standard by Thelonious Monk and Denzil Best, shows a fleshy woman reclining seductively. Where her right hand should be is a fluid swath of white paint, contrasting with the deep black of the background. This

is the astute sensibility of Gokita—though the visual information is incomplete, off-kilter or discomfiting, the viewing experience is deeply satisfying due to the richness and fluidity of his painted surface.

Often, Gokita's compositions appear as if they are family snapshots that have been burned in a fire or otherwise compromised. *House of Terror* features a standing man and a seated couple in formal wear against a backdrop that suggests a domestic space. Their stoic stance and the interior details of the floor and chairs are reminiscent of David Hockney's double portraits of the late 1960s and early '70s, except that no faces are depicted and one of the woman's hands is monstrously disfigured. *Living Together* pictures a possibly vacationing couple posing for a photo in their swimwear. We see the woman's smile but the rest of her face is smeared away. In place of the man's face is an outline of a horseshoe, the center of which looks as if it leads to a deep black hole of nothingness.

Gokita has been quoted as saying that he doesn't intend for his paintings to mean anything. However, it was apparent in this exhibition that, purposefully or not, his canvases require us to interrogate the images and stories we surround ourselves with, from photographs to paintings, magazines and social-media posts. Without faces, we are forced to attempt to look beyond the surface.

JENNIFER S. LI

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Replicant J.B.

2018

Acrylic gouache on canvas, 130.2 x 130.2 x 2.5 cm.

Courtesy the artist and Blum & Poe, Los Angeles/New York/Tokyo.

