

Unless a Dog Is More than a Dog: Yu Nishimura Cristiano Raimondi

“In the end, my image is nothing but a motivation to do something on the picture plane. It is an entrance; I cannot move forward unless a dog is more than a dog, or a cat is more than a cat. Even if the shapes with undifferentiated elements, which are made along a meandering path, once again become dogs and cats, they appear as dogs and cats who have passed through the scenery. The distance between the subjects and landscapes is removed, creating a single way of viewing the painting.”
—Yu Nishimura

Very little links my late-premillennial culture to that of the Kanagawa-born artist Yu Nishimura, except the fantastic and archetypal imagery of a Japanese culture that has accompanied my generation through disturbing and surreal visions. I first encountered Nishimura’s work in a melancholic November 2020, and it has never since ceased to amaze me. By looking at his paintings, I immerse myself in memories and reminiscences related to my adolescence, a kind of regressive hypnosis that recalls the moment before my youthful sleep: undefined and blurred flashbacks that helped me to dive into a world of dreams and incubi. Nishimura turns the themes of classical painting upside down; he deconstructs them and mistreats them gently. I still don’t know if I am happy or tormented when I look at his paintings. I prefer not to know.

Depicting universal mental landscapes with personal language, Nishimura infuses his work with animism that echoes both Japanese anime and street photography. There are no defined themes of gender, race, or politics, but the work decants a poetry and passion for the world that ultimately becomes a political act of resistance, a rereading of the universe around us, recounting the aura of everyday life by placing it in an emotional and dreamlike pictorial space.

In the beginning is the image. Nishimura’s paintings provoke in the viewer a sudden, forced immobility, and they persist in the retina. They manifest a subtle blur created by superimposing several layers of oil but with a slight shift, a minor misalignment, and his choices of subject—a face, a street scene, a landscape, an animal—owe nothing to chance. This attitude of humility also applies to his working process. He labors in the studio six hours a day, and he respects his subjects, by which I mean he lives with them in the studio, and then in the space where they will be exhibited, trying to reproduce through a cinematographic script the uncertainty that surrounds him. After all, painting has no answers to give; at best, it considers sensible questions. Each painting by Nishimura is an attempt to find something that has gone missing thanks to lack of time or attention. When you have a word on the tip of your tongue, you close your eyes to find it. Here, it is by opening them that we remember.

The artist uses traditional techniques of painting in oil or tempera, which he prepares himself. His father was a painter who studied with some of the greatest Japanese masters, Hiroshi Sugito foremost. But the son’s inspirations are quite different; for instance he cites as strong influences the photographers Daido Moriyama and Takuma Nakahira. Now considered masters of Japanese photography,

these agitators used the medium as a weapon of defiance against social norms. Their black-and-white images are fleeting and blurred, reflecting the violence of modern life and the contradictions faced by the youth of the time. These raging shots gave birth to a new contemporary imagery, a revolutionary way of seeing the world. If Nishimura follows the tradition of the Japanese masters of painting through technique and virtuosity, his imagination refutes the traditional pictorial heritage and is inscribed in life, in the passing of time. And yet, unlike a photographed image, a painting reflects the time spent on it and integrates successive states of change, retouching, variations in trajectory.

From the train that takes him every day from the suburbs of Tokyo to the coastal town of Yokosuka, where his studio is located, Nishimura watches the terrain pass by. Tokyo, a city seemingly without limits, inspires the material of his landscapes. He sees not Nature with a capital N, but an interstitial nature—abandoned woods, roadsides, wastelands. A routine and informal nature, one of immediate memory and the subconscious. Cars that seem like toys drive by on roads of faded palms.

Nishimura’s portraits sometimes evolve into a strange autumnal mode and sometimes move away from it, emancipate themselves, alone on the canvas. They depict people close to the artist with well-defined identities, as in *Unit* (2020), where the artist has represented his friends but strangely “blued” the characters in the background.

The identities of his protagonists also sometimes disappear completely, like the faces in manga, or oscillate between the two states. If his portraits, so emblematic of his work, inevitably recall Japanese comics, they use the mystery that surrounds this imagery—so fixed and uniform—to transmit a strange and persistent charm.

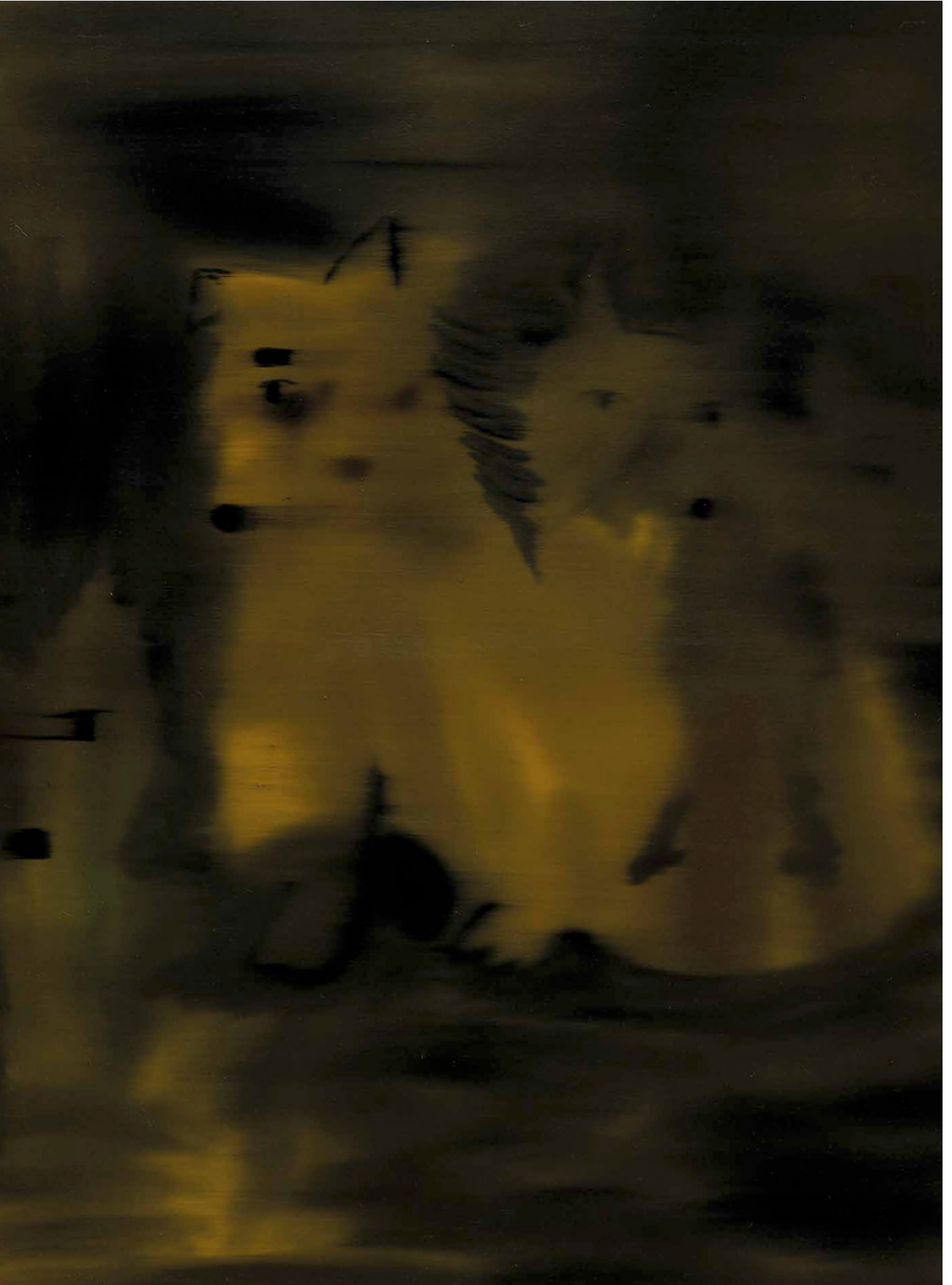
They look at you sympathetically but do not let go. Their presence is reserved, their memory is haunting. Blur and mystery are what enable Nishimura to transcend simple figurative painting. His exhibitions are precisely composed, and his seemingly effortless ability to shift from the smallest to the largest format further disrupts the landmarks we thought we could hold close. A sunset reflected on the ocean provides the abstract image that agitates the apparent tranquility of a large portrait. Nishimura’s subjects are classic, but his compositions have that subtle hint of the unknown that obscures legibility. Cats, ubiquitous in his work, occasionally start out as dogs—so much so that he sometimes reunites the enemy brothers in an unusual family portrait, as in *just one* (2021). A thin cable of headphones encircles a yellowed face, as if the artist had painted an old photograph. Superimposed transparencies disturb representation and blur identities. The dark circles that underline the giant portrait *smile* (2021) are other eyes that we discover under the diaphanous skin of this serious face.

225 Yu Nishimura, *Nocturnal*, 2020. © Aurélien Mole. Courtesy: the artist and Crèvecoeur, Paris
226 227 (From left to right) Yu Nishimura, *trees*, 2018; *looking for*, 2018. *Aperto 09 Nishimura Yu paragraph* installation view at 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art, Kanazawa Long-Term Project Room, Kanazawa, 2018–19. © Yu Nishimura. Courtesy: 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art, Kanazawa and KAYOKOYUKI, Tokyo. Photo: Keizo Kioku

228 Yu Nishimura, *Unit*, 2020. © Aurélien Mole. Courtesy: the artist and Crèvecoeur, Paris
229 Yu Nishimura, *smile*, 2021. © Aurélien Mole. Courtesy: the artist and Crèvecoeur, Paris

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Cristiano Raimondi, *Unless a Dog Is More than a Dog: Y*
Nishimura, Mousse Magazine 77, October 2021



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