

Crèveœur

The Quiet, Meteoric Rise of Yu Nishimura, Artnet News, Kate Brown
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The Quiet, Meteoric Rise of Yu Nishimura

The Japanese artist is making some of the most in-demand paintings of the moment. They are also some of the most demure.



Portrait of Yu Nishimura Courtesy of the artist and Crèveœur, Paris. Photo: Takashi Homma

by **Kate Brown** • January 22, 2026 •

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After years of figuration's dominance in painting, the zeitgeist of the medium has splintered into multiple directions without ever settling into a new current. The discourse lingers in a suspended state between bombastic abstractions, inane surrealist landscapes, and saccharine still lifes, much of which feel strangely hollow. What's missing is a sense of inner searching for meaning, for something that feels experienced rather than declared.

Yu Nishimura is an artist who seems to be engaged in that kind of deep search. His work sits between landscape, still life, and figuration; to try to categorize his paintings would miss their spirit. They appear deceptively simplistic, but upon closer look, dizzying details surface: layered washes of color, the faint suggestion of a flower, a sliver of a line that resolves into a figure embedded within an architecturally precise vista. Everything feels on the verge of either appearing or slipping away. They are tensely melancholic.

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“I often begin from very ordinary scenes and situations around me,” he said over email. “As one element becomes two, and two become three, my attention shifts toward how an individual state—within a set of relationships—behaves inside the painting.” In a moment when painting often feels compelled to announce itself a little too clearly, Nishimura's transitory style of painting speaks in volumes.



Yu Nishimura's "Threshold" at Galerie Crèveœur, Paris.

In the past two years, interest in Nishimura, who is based in Japan, has reached a fever pitch, with his work finding increasing resonance with collectors and institutions alike. After two important gallery shows in 2025, in New York and in Paris, the artist will have his first major European institutional exhibition at the Lafayette Anticipations Foundation in Paris in October 2026.

Yet it is not scale or spectacle that defines Nishimura's rise, which is markedly different from his contemporaries. It is instead quiet poetics, illuminating a turn to painting that evokes a mood rather than tidy narrative.



Exhibition view, Yu Nishimura, "Threshold," 2025–26, Crève-cœur, Paris. Courtesy of the artist and Crève-cœur, Paris. Photo: Martin Argyroglo

An Upward Spiral

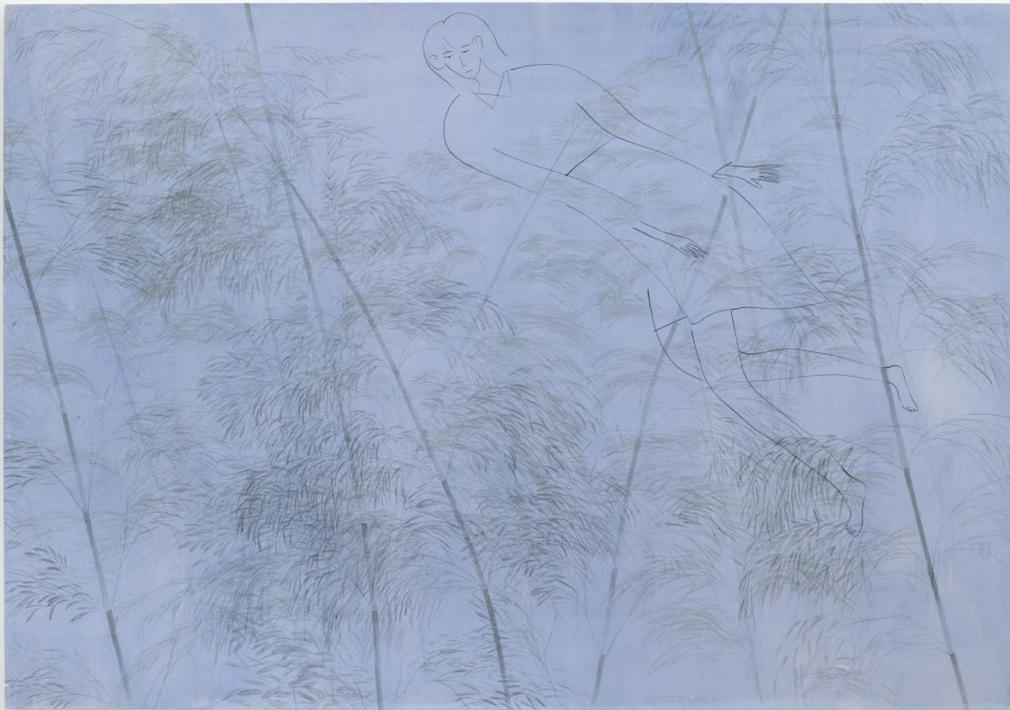
The artist's market has been growing in a steady upward spiral. After graduating from Tama Art University in the 2000s, Nishimura, who was born in 1982, went on a circuit of institutional projects in Japan, including Tokyo Opera City. His international rise began to take shape in the early 2020s, with solo shows at his Paris gallery Crèveœur and a string of group shows. In 2024, his profile rose again as London's venerable Sadie Coles HQ began working with him.

Nishimura's debut at David Zwirner in May 2025 brought him to U.S. audiences. "When my daughter Marlene introduced me to Yu Nishimura's work, I was immediately intrigued," Zwirner said when the gallery announced representation of the artist last year. "His works get under your skin."

An opportunistic collector seems to have seen their moment after the mega gallery took him on, quickly trading across the place (2023), a work that features two overlaid subjects, a recurring motif for Nishimura. It sold for \$406,400 at Sotheby's in New York's May auctions, setting a new record.

By June, Sadie Coles HQ and Crèveœur were working carefully at Art Basel Unlimited to ensure institutional placement for Nishimura's large, three-panel work at the fair, *In Slight Shift (2025)*. Amid a rash of loud presentations at Unlimited, which is dedicated to large-scale works, this contemplative piece ensnared attention. Then, in November, *thicket (2020)*, a masterful canvas showing a figure standing within a bit of spindly forest, sold for \$711,200 at Sotheby's in New York—more than eight and a half times its low estimate. Meanwhile, the Rubell Museum was getting ready to open his show. Such a sequence of wins could hardly have been better coordinated.

Through this, his themes, interests, and sharp painterly skill is consistent, as evidenced by the work at his current solo show at Crèveœur, on view until February 7. As the show's title "Threshold" suggests, much of Nishimura's work captivates with a sense of in-between-ness, where images seem to hover between states of being. Take *A boy waiting*—a work that is understated, color-blocked, with a neutral expression that is as hard to decipher as a Mona Lisa smile.



Yu Nishimura, *lull* (2025). Courtesy of the artist and Crèveœur, Paris. Photo: Martin Argyroglo

Kanagawa Connection

The picturesque prefecture of Kanagawa, Japan, famous for its pensive natural beauty, breathes through Nishimura's work. It is where the artist was born, and where he still lives and works today.

But Kanagawa also lives large in the global imagination in a wider sense. Each year, tourists travel to see the vistas associated with Hokusai's iconic 19th-century print *The Great Wave off Kanagawa*, its ferocious sea tossed skyward now ubiquitous on postcards, posters, and tote bags.

The last element one notices in the Hokusai print is the figures who are on the verge of being subsumed by the weight of the wave. They are ghostly and small. Similarly, Nishimura's paintings carry a population of living specters. Animals and humans appear less as subjects than as essences, hovering at the edge of existence. Hokusai's prints are credited in part with spurring the *nihonga* movement, a Japanese style of art that encompasses an appreciation of natural forces and harmony. It's something Nishimura has nodded to as a subconscious influence in press, though he has modernized it radically with cityscapes and contemporaneity.



Yu Nishimura, *planktos* (2025) (detail). Courtesy of the artist and Crève-cœur, Paris. Photo: Martin Argyroglo

Time Shift

Growing up in 1980s and '90, Nishimura witnessed Japan's so-called economic bubble, the stagnation that followed, and the symbolic social shift marked by a new emperor in 1989.

The delicate overlays in Nishimura's paintings function like a kind of timeworn patina, scoring changed environments. "Looking back," he said, "I think I grew up sensing changes in time not so much through events themselves, but through shifts in the environment around me." The new imperial era came into being as he came of age. "Watching the solemn tone of the live broadcast on television, I experienced for the first time the feeling that even the way time is named can shift." One can also see Western art history references in his work, from Gerhard Richter's swiped paint, to the confident line work of Matisse.

These mixed realities and references, he said, alongside Japanese folk beliefs and stories on T.V. and in school, were always around. "They feel less like 'knowledge' to me than a kind of sensibility I was raised with, almost like a lullaby," he said. "In my work, I think I often deal not so much with meaning or symbolism as with something like a lingering presence that remains in a place. It's less a specific theme than a sense that the practice of making itself proceeds by using that kind of feeling as a guide."

His father was an artist, although Nishimura said he did not get technical tips in painting, but rather lessons in looking. "He often took me on walks nearby to look for motifs for his paintings," Nishimura said. "We would go to vacant lots still under development, or to the fields and farmland along their edges. I remember him bringing back bits of trash and things found in nature, and using them as motifs in his work. The suburban landscapes I walked through with him have remained an original landscape for me, and they still run underneath my work today."



Yu Nishimura, *avocados* (2025). Courtesy of the artist and Crèvecœur. Paris. Photo: Kei Okano

Enigmatic Painting

There is a subtle tension in the way Nishimura's works oscillate between landscape and portraiture. Sometimes, a face becomes a landscape in which another subject is embedded. "I don't really think in terms of categories like landscape or figuration as a starting point for making a painting," said the artist. "That said, in any image where there is a subject and a background, their relationship is always present for me as a kind of distance between me and what I'm looking at. Whether a work ends up reading as a landscape or as a figure painting depends on which side that relationship ultimately leans toward." He searches for the subject while painting, rather than prescribing it at the onset.



Exhibition view, Yu Nishimura, "Threshold," 2025-26, Crèveœur, Paris. Courtesy of the artist and Crèveœur, Paris. Photo: Martin Argyroglo

A recent work, *Offering*, on view at Crève-cœur, brings many of these concerns into focus. Based on a photograph of an interior, it depicts a small Chinese community cemetery in his hometown of Yokohama, a place he had long felt he should paint. It is where his grandmother is buried.

The viewpoint drifts from exterior to interior, having an effect of flattening perspective. The painting seems to exist in several moments at once. A figure (not a family member, but someone on lunch break, Nishimura told me) reclines on a bench. Pictorially, the figure shares equal weight as the fruit left as offerings from a family. What emerges is an ambivalent emotion, on the precipice of multiple feelings, a language that is, ultimately, very open.

In a rapidly moving art world eager for clarity and conclusion, Nishimura's work occupies a space of sustained betweenness and deliberate irresolution. That restraint is not modesty but a conviction: a belief that painting still has the capacity to think quietly. That in and of itself is its power.

Yu Nishimura's "Threshold" is on view through February 7 at Crève-cœur, Paris.



Kate Brown

Senior Editor