

# An Introduction to Kimura Ryōko: *Ikemen* Paintings

MAKI KANEKO

1

俺はヒーロー  
**Ore wa hīrō**  
 君だけの 君を守る  
**Kimi dake no kimi o mamoru**  
 抱きしめる  
**Dakishimeru**

I am a hero  
 I protect only you  
 Holding [you] tight

2

鍛えるよ 毎日  
**Kitaeru yo mainichi**  
 強くて そして カッコいい  
**Tsuyokute soshite kakkōii**  
 君の漢 (おとこ) になるために

I train everyday  
 Strong and cool  
 To become your man's man  
 [or man among men]

**Kimi no otoko ni naru tame ni**

1



2



Fig. 1 Kimura Ryōko, *Heroes-Training Boys 1 and 2*, 2010, Spencer Museum of Art, The University of Kansas, Museum Purchase: Helen Foresman Spencer Art Acquisition Fund, 2013.0156.a.b

The pair of four-panel folding screens in the Spencer Museum's collection titled *Heroes-Training Boys 1 and 2 (Heroes-Danshi tanreizu byōbu 男子鍛錬図屏風)* features a group of young Japanese men unabashedly displaying their bodies (Fig. 1). This is a *leitmotif* of the Japanese artist Kimura Ryōko 木村了子 (b. 1971), who has increasingly gained publicity for her paintings of *ikemen* イケメン in the past decade. As explained further below, *ikemen* is a relatively new slang word coined around the late 1990s and is generally translated as “good-looking guys” or “cool dudes.”<sup>1</sup> As a Japanese female artist so unequivocally celebrating the image of sexually attractive men, Kimura's artistic practice is highly unconventional and may even be called revolutionary, especially considering that many of Kimura's *ikemen* pictures are done in the medium of Nihonga 日本画 (neo-traditionalist Japanese-style painting), arguably the most conservative and male-dominant field of Japanese modern art.<sup>2</sup> Kimura's art as well as the publicity she has received seems to indicate not only her unique vision and talent, but also a significant shift occurring in Japanese society over the politics of gender, sexuality, and representation.

Kimura studied at the Tokyo University of Arts, where she obtained a BFA in oil painting and an MFA in mural painting. After graduating in 1997, the first turning point of her career came in 2001, when Kimura was commissioned to create a prop for the film *Oyō* directed by her father Sekimoto Ikuo (b. 1942). Released in 2002, the film features three famous Japanese artists active in the 1920s, one of which was the Nihonga

Fig. 2 Kimura Ryōko, *The Four Roped-up Women: Sliding Door Panel Paintings*, 2001, Courtesy of the artist



Fig. 3 Front cover of *Rose: How to Sex Visual Book*, 2005, Courtesy of the artist



painter Itō Seiu 伊藤晴雨 (1882–1961), who has a cult following for his sadomasochist *seme-e* 責め絵 pictures of torture and *shibari-e* 縛り絵 pictures of rope bondage. Kimura's task was to create a four-panel sliding door painting based on Itō's legendary, but now lost, bondage pictures of a pregnant woman. According to Kimura, this work, subsequently titled *The Four Roped-up Women: Sliding Door Panel Paintings (Oyō shibari yonren fusumae およう縛り四連襖絵)*, became the starting point of her current career, providing her with the first opportunity to examine closely the human form and experiment with the medium of Nihonga (Fig. 2).<sup>3</sup>

The year 2005 was the second turning point for Kimura's career. As explained in the following interview, up to this point Kimura's central motif had been the erotic female form. While she was gaining popularity for her female figures, Kimura still felt at odds with her own practice, especially the eroticization and objectification of the female body. After questioning what she really wanted to paint when she illustrated *Rose: How to Sex Visual Book* (2005), a sex manual for women, Kimura came to a seemingly simple and yet quite significant realization: she enjoyed illustrating the male figure more than the female figure, and her heterosexual desire was the drive of her art (Fig. 3).<sup>4</sup> This realization has culminated

in Kimura's current practice, which focuses on images of *ikemen*.

Kimura's first major works featuring the beautiful male figure was a series of five paintings titled *Beauty of My Dish (Watashi no nantaimori ryōri 私の男体盛り料理, Figs. 4–5)*. In this series, naked young men are used as dishes for various foods and elaborately presented to female diners as a full-course meal. This motif is an inversion of *nyotaimori* 女体盛り (the female body plate), an “infamous” sexual service said to have originated in eighteenth-century Japan in which *sushi* or *sashimi* was served on the body of a naked woman. In making an inverted version of the female body plate, Kimura jokingly provides

Fig. 4 Kimura Ryōko, *Aperitifs 1—First Appetizer: Man's Body Dish for Sashimi under the Cherry Blossom* from the series *Beauty of My Dish*, 2005, Courtesy of the artist



a pseudo-scientific explanation for her choice, “the temperature of the male body is more stable than women's [because women have a period], and therefore men are more suitable to be a dish.”<sup>5</sup>

While the inclusion of assertive female figures in *Beauty of My Dish* is rather exceptional among Kimura's oeuvre, the artist's signature style and strategy are evident in her earliest *ikemen* paintings. The artist borrows settings, practices, and customs commonplace in male-dominated aspects of Japanese society such as the sex industry and the field of Nihonga as evidenced in the aforementioned “torture pictures” by Itō. She reverses the roles of men and women, a choice for which she often provides humorous or purposefully absurd pretexts. In addition to the erotic display of the male body, Kimura employs various “female-friendly” visual languages and settings inspired by or quoted from girls' comics (*shōjo manga* 少女マンガ), fairy tales, and male idol magazines. For example, *Aperitifs 1—First Appetizer: Man's Body Dish for Sashimi under the Cherry Blossom (Ōka nantai sashimimori 桜花男体刺身盛り)* is abundant with visual motifs commonly used in girls' comics: a young, slim, good-looking man encircled by flowers and petals and floating in an abstract, pinkish space (Fig. 4).<sup>6</sup> The result is a strangely beautiful discord of softness and hardness, vulgarity and decency, and overt femininities and masculinities. Through these visual contrasts, Kimura's work seems not only to challenge conventional gender roles, but also to visualize, celebrate, and possibly scrutinize current discourses of female heterosexuality manifest in Japanese media culture and art.

In the following interview and elsewhere, Kimura claims that *ikemen* is the quintessential motif of her art. Her adherence to this masculine category seems to be a key in contextualizing Kimura's art within the ever-shifting gender roles and politics of female sexuality in contemporary Japan. The slang word *ikemen* is believed to have originated in the teenage girls' magazine *egg* in the late 1990s. It stands for *iketeru* イケてる, which means “cool, attractive, and superior,” and *men*, a reference to both the Japanese word meaning “face,” and the English loan word for “men.” Because of the subsequent overuse of the term by the mainstream media, today *ikemen* is loosely used to refer to all types of desirable men. Yet two factors seem to separate *ikemen* from pre-existing categories of desirable men:

their physical beauty and their willingness to serve primarily, but not exclusively, as an object of heterosexual female desire. For example, Kimura Takuya 木村拓哉, a male idol commonly known as Kimutaku who enjoyed widespread popularity from the mid-1990s to the 2000s, is considered the earliest manifestation of *ikemen*.<sup>7</sup> What set Kimutaku apart from his predecessors was the unabashed display of his physical beauty, a strong fashion and body-conscious attitude, and an emphasis on sexual appeal.<sup>8</sup> Many scholars consider the unmatched popularity of Kimutaku among both men and women to indicate a significant shift in the concept of ideal hetero-masculinity and the changing role of women in the mid to late 1990s. After the corruption of “bubble economy” in the early 1990s and during the prolonged economic recessions throughout the next decade, the grey-suited “salaryman” lost his position as Japan’s representation of hegemonic masculinity, while women were singled out as key consumers and, as Alexandra Hambleton explains, encouraged to “gaze upon [and consume] the male body for their own pleasure.”<sup>9</sup>

Kimura’s art is a product of such media and market-oriented shifts over the concepts of ideal hetero-masculinity and female spectatorship. Most evidently, the aforementioned sex manual *Rose* is one such erotic product that became increasingly available to Japanese women during the past twenty years. As Kimura details in the following interview, being a part of its production team was a catalyst to express her own sexual desires and actively assume the agency of the gaze. It ultimately inspired Kimura to create her own *ikemen* works that celebrate a new type of man who is willing to accept a role as a sex object. This practice not only began Kimura’s successful career as a professional artist, but also reverses the conventional role of women as muses and men as artists.

Although Kimura’s art presents the possibility of women’s empowerment through the emergence

Fig. 5 Kimura Ryōko, *Dessert: A Man’s Body Dish for L’Opera Gateau au Chocolat* from the series *Beauty of My Dish*, 2005, Courtesy of the artist



of erotic products marketed toward heterosexual women, the shift toward objectifying the male body and encouraging female spectatorship of the male body in the context of gender and sexual equality continues to be contested. The philosopher Chiba Masaya claims that the advent of *ikemen* should be welcomed from a feminist viewpoint because it attests to the belated deprivation of men’s privileged position as the solo holder of the gaze in Japanese society.<sup>10</sup> Hambleton, on the other hand, is more cautious about the market-oriented celebration of male beauty and female sexual desire. In her examination of recent “female-friendly” pornography, which features *ikemen* porn actors known as *eromen* エロメン “erotic men,” Hambleton characterizes this type of pornography created for and by women as “post-feminist.”<sup>11</sup> She argues that although these products embrace some subversive elements and the possibility of “spur[ring] a small revolution,” many of them merely reinforce conventional gender roles and encourage heteronormative behavior, as well as the commodification of female sexual desire.<sup>12</sup>

A similar ambivalence is present in Kimura’s art. As is evident in the following interview, Kimura openly denies any political or feminist aspirations, and instead emphasizes her own pleasure and hope that viewers (both men and

women) can find pleasure in the attractive male figures. In terms of her seemingly apolitical pro-pleasure attitude, celebration of female heterosexuality, and unsettled feelings toward so-called second-wave feminism, Kimura’s stance can be characterized as “post-feminist,” and seems to embrace both revolutionary and conservative elements that Hambleton articulates in the aforementioned study.<sup>13</sup> For example, throughout the following interview, Kimura frequently used the term *futuu* 普通 (normal/natural) to describe her heterosexual desire for beautiful men and the motivation behind her *ikemen* painting. Kimura’s claim on the one hand boldly challenges the still-dominant tendency to sensationalize women’s frank expression of their sexual desire as deviant, but on the other hand, it also unwittingly reinforces heteronormativity and possibly depoliticizes women’s desire by characterizing her sexual orientation as normal and natural.

Although it includes many issues that deserve further critical discussion, I believe that Kimura’s art destabilizes, if not challenges, the dominant discourses of gender, sex and sexuality, and their canonical manifestations in Japanese mainstream media and traditional art. As discussed previously, Kimura’s work celebrates male beauty and female sexuality, both of which are usually presented with a sense of humor and irony, which is yet another post-feminist trait and possible tool for countering patriarchal canons.<sup>14</sup> For example, Kimura’s male figures are often engaged in physical exercise for the pleasure of the female gaze (Fig. 1). This motif provides a pretext for the explicit display of the male body without diminishing the male sense of hetero-masculinity. At the same time, it also suggests the constructed nature of their masculinity and physical beauty. The accompanying narratives or texts that Kimura provides are always tongue-in-cheek, such as, “Why do they want to be stronger? ‘To protect girls,’ of course!” The sugar-coated sarcasm prevalent in Kimura’s *ikemen* painting

Fig. 6 Kimura Ryōko, *Let’s Ride a Crocodile: Born to be Wild! Crocodile and Tiger*, 2009, displayed at the Nijō Castle, Kyoto, at the Kan-Hikari Art Expo, 2011, photo by Inoguchi Kōichi



helps address, if not criticize, the tawdry and sometimes ridiculous nature of the so-called girls’ dream or heterosexual women’s fantasies promoted and perpetuated by the mainstream media and market economy.<sup>15</sup>

Moreover, Kimura presents popular media imagery such as *ikemen* in a neo-traditionalist art form of Nihonga. By separating *ikemen* from its conventional spaces of consumption and placing them into galleries, museums, art classes, and even the UNESCO World Heritage Site of the Nijō Castle in Kyoto (Fig. 6), Kimura provides us with a particular viewing experience or site in which the conventional demarcations between subject and object, public and private, and political and personal are largely dismantled.<sup>16</sup> In front of an enlarged image of attractive *ikemen* displayed as a time-honored art of Japan, we are invited not only to consume these images for our pure pleasure or empowerment, but also to contemplate the meaning of male beauty in past and present art and society, as well as our own conceptions of gender, sexuality, and desire.

## About the Author

**Maki Kaneko is associate professor of Japanese art in the Kress Foundation Department of Art History at the University of Kansas. She received her PhD in world art studies and museology from the University of East Anglia and Sainsbury Institute for the Study of Japanese Arts and Cultures (Norwich, UK). Her research concerns the politics of memory, race, and gender in twentieth-century Japanese visual culture and the Asia-Pacific region. Her book *Mirroring the Japanese Empire* published in 2014 examines the representation and signification of the male figure in Japanese oil painting and cinema between 1930 and 1950, the decades when Japan engaged with a series of imperialist wars.**

## Endnotes

**1** In September 2014, *Yuriika (Eureka)*, a well-recognized journal of arts and culture, published a special issue on *ikemen*. Given the significant and prolonged impacts of *ikemen* on Japanese society, the special issue cited the need of critical studies about this new masculine category and advocated for the formation of Ikemen Studies. “Ikemen stadhizu,” *Yuriika rinjizōkangō* no. 648 (September 2014).

**2** Nihonga (lit. Japanese painting) is a product of the rapid modernization and Westernization of Japan that occurred from the mid to late nineteenth century. As a counterpart of *yōga* (lit. Western painting), a practice that was promoted as a part of Japan’s Westernization policy from the 1850s, this new painting category was established through the careful selection and accumulation of certain painting styles, techniques, subjects, and treaties that existed in Japan prior to the age of modernization, and were institutionalized as Japan’s “national style” of art. Because of its origins, this painting school tended to associate with nationalist or conservative forces, but given the diversification of styles and aesthetics throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, today Nihonga is often defined simply by the materials used, such as mineral pigments, ink, silk, and gold. For the birth and development of Nihonga as the “national style,” see: Kitazawa Noriaki, *Me no shinden: “Bijutsu” juyōshi nōto* (Tokyo: Bijutsu shuppansha, 1989); Ellen Conant, Steven D. Owyong, and J. Thomas Rimer, *Nihonga, Transcending the Past: Japanese-style Painting, 1868–1968* (New York: Weatherhill, 1995); Satō Dōshin, *Nihon bijutsu tanjō: Kindai Nihon no “kotoba” to senryaku* (Tokyo: Kōdansha, 1996). For more recent trends in Nihonga, see: Matthew Larking, “Nihonga beside Itself: Contemporary Japanese Art’s Engagement with the Position and Meaning of a Modern Painting Tradition,” *Literature & Aesthetics* 23, no. 2 (December 2013): 24–37; Chelsea Foxwell, “The Painting of Sadness? The Ends of Nihonga, Then and Now,” *ARTMargins* 4, no. 1 (2015): 27–60; John D. Szostak, *Imayō: Japan’s New Traditionists: An Exhibition of Contemporary Japanese Art* (Honolulu: The Art Gallery, The University of Hawai’i at Manoa, 2017).

**3** Kimura Ryōko, “Commissioned works,” accessed May 30, 2017, <http://www.ryokokimura.com/wb03-kimura-ryoko.html>.

**4** Kurada Masumi (text) and Kimura Ryōko (illustration), *Rōzu: Motto fukai ai no katachi (Rose: How to Sex Visual Book)* (Tokyo: Koa magajin, 2005).

**5** Kimura Ryōko, “Nihonga: Japanese Paintings 2005–2003: Beauty of My Dish – Watashi no nantaimori ryōri,” accessed May 30, 2017, <http://ryojokimura.com/wj01-kimura-ryoko.html>.

**6** Mizuki Takahashi examines the historical origin of several visual motifs and techniques specific to *shōjo manga*, such as a full-length portrait, floating panels, and flower motifs. She argues that these *shōjo manga*’s visual components have been disregarded as “meaningless” by male critics and scholars who are not equipped with the skills to read their symbolic meanings. Mizuki Takahashi, “Opening the Closed World of Shōjo Manga,” in *Japanese Visual Culture: Explorations in the World of Manga and Anime*, ed. Mark W. McWilliams (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 2008), 114–136.

**7** Chiba Masaya, Hoshino Futoshi, and Shibata Eri, “Tettei tōgi Ikemenorōji no hādo koa,” “Ikemen stadhizu,” *Yuriika rinjizōkangō*, 12.

**8** The anthropologist Laura Miller examines the ideal hetero-masculinity Kimura Takuya introduced and its impact on young Japanese men in the following study: Laura Miller, “Chapter 5 Male Beauty Work,” in *Beauty Up: Exploring Contemporary Japanese Body Aesthetics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 125–158.

**9** Alexandra Hambleton, “Women and Sexual Desire in the Japanese Popular Media,” in *Women and the Media in Asia: The Precarious Self*, ed. Youna Kim (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 123.

**10** Chiba, 13.

**11** Alexandra Hambleton, “When Women Watch: The Subversive Potential of Female-Friendly Pornography in Japan,” *Porn Studies* 3, issue 4 (2016): 437–438.

**12** Hambleton, “When Women Watch,” 440.

**13** For a much contested definition of “post-feminism,” I refer primarily to the following studies: Angela McRobbie, “Post-feminism and Popular Culture,” *Feminist Media Studies* 3, no. 3 (2004): 255–264; Rosalind Gill, “Postfeminist Media Culture: Elements of a Sensibility,” *European Journal of Culture Studies* 10, no. 2 (2007): 147–166; Fien Adrieans, “Post feminism in Popular Culture: A Potential for Critical Resistance?” *Politics and Culture* 4 (2009), <https://politicsandculture.org/2009/11/09/post-feminism-in-popular-culture-a-potential-for-critical-resistance/>; Stephanie Genz and Benjamin A. Brabon, *Postfeminism: Cultural Texts and Theories* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009); Miura Rei’ichi, “Posuto feminizumu to daisanpa feminizumu no kanōsei: Purikyua, Taitanikku, AKB 48,” in *Jendā to “Jiyū”*: *Riron, Riberarizumu, Kwia*, eds. Miura Rei’ichi and Hayasaka Shizuka (Tokyo: Sairyūsha, 2013), 59–79.

**14** As many scholars have argued, the workings of irony in post-feminist products are multiple and could function in both favor and disfavor of feminism. See Heike Missler, “4 Funny Chicks: Humour and Irony in Chick Lit,” in *The Cultural Politics of Chick Lit: Popular Fiction, Postfeminism, and Representation* (London: Routledge, 2017). In the case of Kimura’s art, a closer visual analysis and examination of the reception of her works, which cannot be included here, are needed to determine if and how Kimura’s male figures resist the hegemonic notions of gender and sexuality.

**15** Kimura Ryōko, “Works Nihonga: 2010–2011,” accessed December 2, 2017, <http://ryokokimura.com/wj43-kimura-ryoko.html>.

**16** Kimura participated in the Kan-Hikari Art Expo in 2011. She displayed *Let’s Ride a Crocodile: Born to be Wild! Crocodile and Tiger* (2009) at the seventeenth-century Nijō Castle, which is known for magnificent wall paintings by the Kanō School, one of the most well-established painting schools since the late fifteenth century, whose styles, aesthetics, and lineage became a foundation of Nihonga.

# Interview with Kimura Ryōko

## Maki Kaneko & Kris Ercums

*This interview took place in person on July 24, 2015, in Tokyo, Japan.*

**Maki Kaneko (MK):** Can you tell us how you came to focus on men in your painting?

**Kimura Ryōko (KR):** I had always painted the figure of women. Inspired by my favorite movies and artists, I painted them erotically. I particularly liked Saeki Toshio, an illustrator active in the 1970s. He provided illustrations for the cover of novels that I liked, but at that time when I was an art student, such art movement as Mono-ha dominated...<sup>1</sup>

**MK:** That means that figurative painting was still out of fashion.

**KR:** Yes. [But] I liked Yamada Fūtarō’s novels like this one [with a cover illustration by Saeki]. His colors and *ukiyo-e*-like illustrations inspired me to paint erotic female figures. I found that eroticism was a venue through which I could illuminate human’s innate nature humorously. However, I didn’t think of painting the male figure at all. I just painted the female figure as many other painters did. Then, many people said that my female figures were not erotic enough.

At that time, I myself ached for an amorous woman. There are women, you know, who somehow attract guys just by standing there. I wanted to be like them and that’s perhaps one of the reasons why I painted erotic female forms. I probably wanted to express a sense of eroticism that I had failed to gain. But I couldn’t paint well and was discussing with a lot of people how I could express a sense of eroticism. I quite like painting women including their tits. They are beautiful. But since I am a woman, my heart races with excitement more when I’m painting men. Especially when I hired a [male] model for the first time, I found myself feeling good, something like “wow, my heart’s thumping.” [Laughing]. I thought that feeling would affect my painting.

**MK:** So, you were working on the female figure, but somehow found yourself at odds with it?

**KR:** Yes. I always felt that something was wrong.

**MK:** What made you paint the male figure in the first place?

**KR:** Perhaps because of my conversation with my clients ... well, it’s actually not possible to identify the cause. A number of different factors were there. But one client commented on my painting. You know, there still are some people called “gallery stokers.” At that time, I was still in my early 30s and one middle-age man said to

me that “your painting isn’t erotic enough” and so on, which pissed me off. He then asked me if I had ever painted my own genitals. This kind of question was actually quite common. Well, of course, it depended on the venue. At that time, I displayed my works in a gallery specialized in erotica. And when only women artists were there in such venue, we were often asked that kind of question. In a little more sophisticated venue, I was asked a bit more intelligent questions, like “Uemura Shōen painted her own vagina. How about you?” [Laughing].<sup>2</sup> I was asked this question so frequently that it was almost like a series of coordinated terrorist attacks. I was wondering if I painted my own sex organ, what would happen. In a sense, it is just a motif, but I couldn’t think that it would help my expression. I really couldn’t think that way. But I happened to have a commission which gave me a chance to do it [paint sex organs].

I was asked to provide illustrations for a how-to sex manual. Now, you know that I did a number of obscure jobs. [Laughing]. In 2005, I illustrated the sex manual book for women [*Rose: How to Sex Visual Book*]. For this book, I painted many vaginas, penises, and so on. Since the book was for women, I must make them somewhat beautiful, not too dirty and not too erotic. Then, as I was painting, they started to appear as mere things to me. I eventually realized that it [painting sex organs] wasn’t really a huge deal. Then, I questioned myself which one of them I wanted to illustrate. Since I’m *futsuu* (normal), my preference is that one [for men]. Having said that, I got tired of [painting penises]. I’d had enough. [Laughing]. This was not what I really wanted to paint. What I wanted to paint was something more like romance and love. I thought it’d be fun if I painted the male figure in such a [romantic] setting. So, I hired a male model and painted this one [*Beauty of My Dish*]. This is the first [male painting]. It was fun to paint. We actually did place *sashimi* on the body of the model. Not only *sashimi*, but everything, all kinds of food [appeared in *Beauty of My Dish*]. It’s a full course of *nantai-mori*. I painted a few pictures like this and presented them as a series...

**MK:** You said that you are often mistaken for a gay artist. Do you have any responses from gay or bisexual people?

**KR:** Yes. A Russian gay magazine contacted me. I said to them that I was actually a heterosexual woman, but they said it wasn’t a problem.

**MK:** I think this is quite rare to find art that can be enjoyed by people with various sexualities.

**KR:** I don’t mean to emphasize a specific gender or sexuality, but it is the strong fact that I am a woman and the most important thing for me in making art is my motivation. To paint men keeps me motivated and interested. It would be even better if I could develop some romantic relation with my models. [Laughing].

**MK:** Well, it [a heterosexual female artist who wants to paint a man] is perhaps a simple thing, but such a simple thing has invited various reactions from a diverse group of people. It would be interesting to think about your practice from the lens of gender politics.

**KR:** I actually studied feminism and feminist art. I thought I should create my works in line with [them]. But I couldn’t get interested.

**MK:** What kind of artworks did you look at?

**KR:** I cannot recall the names of artists, but remember that many works illustrated female sex organs. That turned me off.

**MK:** For example, do you know Silvia Sleight? She just died. How about her works?

**KR:** I wish I could have met her.

**MK:** Clearly, your approach is different from that of other feminist artists.

**KR:** As we see in *Sex and the City*, now it is possible for women to be sexually active like *nikushokukei* (meat eater).<sup>3</sup> But such female sexuality tends to be expressed through their female bodies. I wondered why it couldn’t be done through the male body. Then, when I was thinking that the image of men by women would be interesting, “boys’ love” became very popular.<sup>4</sup> According to “boys’ love” readers, it is easy for them. In a sex scene of a woman and man, they tend to project themselves by relating with the women and [cannot help but] feel exposed. But in the case of a boy-boy erotic scene, they can just enjoy, because they are irrelevant. Having said this, I actually don’t really understand “boys’ love,” as I am a super-heterosexual. I quite like [erotic expressions] by gay artists, but somehow don’t find “boys’ love” attractive. It lacks a sense of realism and all happens in women’s dream

world. In my case, I want to see the relationship between me and the opposite sex, but women are a complete voyeur in “boys’ love.” There is no other woman in an all-male world.

**MK:** Talking about “boys’ love,” are you influenced by *manga*?

**KR:** I love it. I’ve read it since I was little. I was a hard reader. So, I wish my son would be a *manga* artist, although it’d be a big problem if he couldn’t sell his works well. [Laughing].

**Kris Ercums (KE):** What about the idea of passive eroticism?

**MK:** The term appears in Professor Yamashita’s essay. *Sarigenai iroke* in Japanese. Can you explain it?<sup>5</sup>

**KR:** I love passive eroticism. For example, a full nude is not always the most erotic. Well, of course it is erotic, but what I want to express is more like an erotic mode or flavor coming out from people even though they are fully dressed. [She holds up *Seventeen: High School Boy in Spring*].

**MK:** How about “Johnnys”?<sup>6</sup>

**KR:** Johnny & Associates is an amazing agency that completely determined the Japanese girl’s idea about ideal boys. It is actually scary, as they are so strict about the copyright of their idols. The first boys that the majority of Japanese girls get off on are Johnnys. They are not a macho type. Young girls don’t like macho. They prefer someone who looks like them, gentle and sexually ambiguous. The ultimate Japanese girl’s dream is a Johnny male idol. I have a lot of magazines about them.

**MK:** Would you describe your male figures as “Johnnys type”?

**KR:** Yes. But I personally wasn’t interested in Johnnys at all. I had bought many porno magazines as a reference for my erotic pictures. I wasn’t embarrassed at all and loudly asked for a receipt. But when I bought male idol magazines for the first time, I shouted in my mind, “It is so embarrassing. Please do not think that this is my taste.” [Laughing]. Then, once I opened the magazine, there was a completely new world that I had never seen before. They are somehow very erotic. Look at their amorous eyes!

**MK:** A number of great photographers have taken their pictures, such as Leslie Kee.

**KR:** Their gaze, for example, invites us to ask, “Who are you looking at? Me?” [Laughing]. I found them so erotic. Of course, it is clearly staged. But when girls do the same in a sexy swimsuit, we probably don’t feel anything as we have gotten so used to that kind of image. But once men do this, something new is out there. I remember that I got so motivated to paint them.

**KE:** How are Johnnys different from a boy?

**KR:** My keyword is *ikemen*. Good-looking boys or handsome men are somehow different. Good-looking boys are more like the ones painted by Takabatake Kashō.<sup>7</sup>

**KE:** What is *ikemen*?

**KR:** Not just good looks. Perhaps someone more approachable? Not necessarily a perfect man. He could be your neighbor.

**KE:** Everyday good looks?

**KR:** Probably it is just Japanese, but you know how girls are waiting for their prince charming.

**MK:** That is not only just Japanese girls.

**KR:** So, Disney probably inspires it?

**KE:** Definitely. Disney takes the idea on but it comes from fairy tales.

**KR:** I have made paintings that only consist of princes [*Prince Come True*]. It was actually quite hard to accumulate so many princes. [Laughing]. I thought there were many, but there weren’t. Look, this is a prince for Sleeping Beauty, Cinderella, Snow White ... and then I was running out of princes. [Laughing]. In this picture, I constructed the country of princes. It is an embodiment of a girl’s dream. Fairy tales, Disney, and Johnnys are the embodiments of a girl’s ultimate dream.

**MK:** Do you find any particular meaning in painting [*Prince Come True*] in the medium of Nihonga? This work clearly refers to *nanban byōbu* (Southern barbarian screens)<sup>8</sup> I found this is very playful.

**KR:** I quite like my playfulness here, but can’t think of any academic meanings ...

**MK:** Please don’t worry about “academic” something. If needed, we will think about it later [Laughing]. Did you want to paint it in Nihonga?

**KR:** Yes. I wanted to represent the sense of grandeur often seen in Japanese golden screens or southern barbarian screens. Also, I see the technique of Nihonga to be a dying tradition. Today, we have many media technologies and can paint with a computer. To make Nihonga, on the other hand, we have to dissolve *nikawa*

glue, grain mineral pigments, and so on. These techniques will disappear [one day]. Of course, there will always be someone who tries to maintain this tradition and I too think that Nihonga techniques should be passed down to the next generation as an important culture of Japan. I believe that traditional techniques and compositions can develop further, if we create something new [based off tradition]. Such artists as Mr. Yamaguchi [Akira] probably think the same way. It is actually not so uncommon [that artists create their works based on Nihonga]. Mr. Aida [Makoto] or Mr. Yamaguchi have been pioneers in giving new value [to Nihonga] and I've reached the same path from a different direction. I think it was also a trend of the times. Prior to this, abstraction was dominant. [The techniques and motifs of Nihonga] weren't highly regarded when I was a student. It was a group of artists gathered around Mizuma Gallery that broke ground and set a new trend. I am one of them. Of course, I needed to find my own expression and separate myself from other artists at Mizuma Gallery [working on Nihonga]. Then, I happened to find princes and men as painting motifs that motivated me most. Also, since I had worked on oil and stained glass, I quite liked a sense of sublimity, which [is seen in] Nihonga, although I began working on Nihonga by commission [not by my own intent] as I said earlier. But once I started learning Nihonga techniques, I got more and more motivated to paint. It is fun to absorb the techniques in my own way, although I don't know yet if there is any specific meanings there [in my inclination towards Nihonga].

**MK:** It is just my personal opinion, but I often find the nude done in Nihonga is somehow more erotic than that of oil.

**KR:** I believe that oil is suited for the representation of realism and three-dimensionality. It is after all a culture born in Europe. Look at my face and look at Kris's. The form of our faces is so different. Mine is flat and Kris's is more three-dimensional. There must be some meaning that Japanese or Asian created a set of techniques suited for the representation of two dimensionality...Well, come to think of it [the cultural root of something], the other day I talked to my husband about *panchira* (a glimpse of a woman's underwear) and why Japanese men make such a big deal about it. That's something foreigners don't understand. My husband's theory is that it is rooted in Japanese culture!

The famous rock garden in the Ryōanji Temple provokes the image of water, despite the fact that it doesn't use water at all. Only a brief glimpse of panties can stimulate our imagination. If we see a whole, we are fully satisfied. To imagine from a part, that is the Japanese spirit! [Laughing].

**KE:** We should talk about *Heroes-Training Boys* [Fig. 1]. What was the inspiration for this piece?

**KR:** I wanted to create my own Nihonga, not a copy of Itō Seiu's picture, but entirely my own.<sup>9</sup> This is my primary motivation. My picture also features S&M [sodomasochism, or the enjoyment of inflicting or receiving pain] practices. For Itō, torturing women and painting their suffering would have been the biggest motivation. I kind of understand that. The figure enduring pain indeed has some appeal for more or less everyone, I believe. For example, many people are attracted to sweating athletes. For me, S&M isn't just a sexual predilection, but about human relationships, a relation between a sadistic and masochistic person. When I was thinking about such things, I came up with the idea that the physical workout is a sort of S&M. Although they work on their bodies in order to build up strength or beautify them, the process is pain and suffering. The facial expression or those who endure [a hard workout] appealed to me and stimulated my sadistic mind. This is how I came up with this motif. I then found out that there were a number of ways to train the body, but I definitely wanted to include my version of "upside down suspension." First, I was painting him doing a headstand with both of his hands, but found that the sense of sadism wasn't enough. I needed to torture him further. [Laughing]. That was how I designed each pose. This one [the last panel of the second screen] is a hip and hamstring exercise.

**KE:** This is incredible. So hard to paint that. Did you use a model?

**KR:** Yes. I made a sketch in this room using a model.

**MK:** [Referring to the pose of the male figure] This pose is pretty tough to keep.

**KR:** Yes, that's why it was so fun. It is fun to see him suffering [Laughing]. The guy who posed for

me was really kind. I of course paid and treated him to Japanese barbeque. [Laughing].

**MK:** How did you find your models?

**KR:** This model was introduced to me by an acquaintance. Some people approached me via the Internet, but it is a bit scary to have them here, and so I normally ask my friends to find a model. He [a model who posed for *Heroes-Training Boys*] is nearly 10 years younger than me. I'm not interested in young men and so it's easy for me to be relentless [Laughing]. Not for this painting, but a different one, I asked him to keep his legs apart. He didn't like that.

[We start looking at some other paintings and laugh at the embarrassing poses Kimura asked her model to strike.]

**KE:** Unlike your other work, this one [*Heroes-Training Boys*] has no background or anything.

**KR:** It focuses just on the movement of the human body. As you can see, it is a four-panel screen. I wanted to compose all four panels with only the human body. That's why I painted the background only with a thick vegetable pigment. Almost no color in the background. I also didn't know whether I should include calligraphy, but it was difficult to make a nice composition with only the human body. Then, I happened to find a poem written by Itō Seiu. It's actually a stupid poem, something like, "Her long, black hair became even more beautiful in disarray," or "Let's tie up this girl, both her hands and legs." It is just so literal [laughing], but interesting too. This inspired me to include calligraphy in a similar style to Seiu's in my painting. As I never learned calligraphy, I asked my friend who is a calligrapher to help me make a composition together after the painting was complete.

**MK:** So, did you write calligraphy under the guidance of your friend?

**KR:** Yes. Concerning this work [*Four Roped-up Women*], my friend did it since it was a commissioned work. My friend emulated Seiu's style. For the work [*Heroes-Training Boys*], my friend gave me some instruction and I tried out a number of different characters and styles. And

then, we found *kana* syllabary to be the best, which didn't disturb my painting and appeared like *chirakigaki* (scattering writing).

**KE:** This is so thin. The other one is thick, but this one ... [pointing to *Heroes-Training Boys*]

**KR:** We did it very gently. My painting skill was improved [since *Four Roped-up Women*] and I also did study a bit about calligraphy. To match my painting, I thought that *kana* would be the best. Since *kana* is known as "women's hands," it suits my work. Especially *hentai kana* (non-standard style of *kana*) looked good. Even if I wrote something very stupid, not many people can read it and would think that something very important must be written there. [Laughing]. We tried out various variations of *hentai kana* and finally came up with this one.

**KE:** So, did you make a lot of sketches? And then went back to your studio and painted?

**KR:** Yes. First, I made sketches. I sketched each figure individually and then thought about the composition. Sometimes I swapped their placements in order to create a nice flow [among the eight figures].

**KE:** And the background. Is it all painted gold or what is the background?

**KR:** I used Japanese green alder. I believe that this is a type of pine tree. This sometimes is called "ancient color" and is often used for the conservation of old paintings. It creates a yellowy brown color when roasted. In fact, the color will darken as time goes along. It was thinner before. After two years, the color looked really different. I exhibited this work [for the first time] in 2011, but actually planned to include it in my [2009] show in Beijing. The painting was completed, but I couldn't figure out how I should incorporate calligraphy. So, I left it for two years and never opened it. When I opened it again, the color was changed beautifully. I was really surprised. Later, a staff member at an art supply store told me that the color [made out of green alder] would darken.

**MK:** Then, the color [of *Heroes-Training Boys*] will keep changing?

**KR:** [For *Heroes-Training Boys*], I painted [ancient color] again and again. In order to illuminate the human body effectively, I wanted to have a color just slightly darker than that of white paper. But such Japanese mineral pigments of yellowish color as *ōdo* would rather flatten the background. No matter how carefully I mix them with water, some particles are left. So, I didn't want to use

pigments and what I did was rather close to the techniques of natural dye. That gives a sense of transparency to the paper. But it was really time-consuming as the color didn’t stay much and I had to paint it so many times. It was as if I was dyeing paper with thin tea.

**KE:** Is this a technique in Nihonga painting?

Do you see in it used in other paintings?

**KR:** Yes. Other Nihonga artists often use it. For example, Ms. Matsui Fuyuko and I go to the same art supply shop and I saw her buying it.<sup>10</sup>

**MK:** The painting solely focusing on the human body is quite rare among your works, isn’t it?

**KR:** I think so. That’s why I want to try it again.

It was really difficult, but fun. I didn’t need to think about the balance between the figure and background. I could just focus on the body. I want to make [something similar] again.

**MK:** Why did you use the character 漢 (*otoko*, man’s man), instead of 男 (*otoko*, man)? The latter is more commonly used for men. Is there any reason?

**KR:** I’m inspired by yakuza films. [Laughing].<sup>11</sup>

That’s the men’s world. I love it. I quite like yakuza films. But I’m not a man and so cannot step into it. Well, if my husband is a yakuza, that’d be troublesome. It looks fascinating, because I am an onlooker. Anyway, the kanji 漢 attracted me. For me, 男 just refers to a sex, but 漢 means something more spiritual. Something like chivalrous spirit.

**KE:** We talked a little bit about your future project, working on a video game. Do you have any kind of dream projects that you are working on?

**KR:** I am working on the male version of *The Little Mermaid*. I’m making a story too. [She shows us some pictures]. What he [the boy mermaid] is holding is a high-heeled shoe, which makes him yearn for legs, a human girl outside his world. Once he goes to the upper world, he sees a girl singing and develops a crush on her. Then, just like the original *Little Mermaid*, a storm occurs and he saves her life. The boy mermaid then asks the witch to make him human. In the original, the witch asks for the mermaid’s voice, but in my version, she asks for his virginity. I’m planning to make a *shunga* (erotica) of the boy mermaid and ugly witch having sex.

**MK:** Is this going to be part of a series?

**KR:** Yes. It will function as a front cover.

I’m hoping to make a picture book.

**MK:** How are you going to display them?

**KR:** That’s my problem. [Laughing]. I’m thinking of organizing a solo show. I want to display my paintings in a manner so that the visitor can follow the story. And how I deal with *shunga* is another issue.

**MK:** Are you calling your works *shunga*?

**KR:** Well, I’m referring to the picture of the boy mermaid and the witch having sex. [When I started this series] I had a plan to have a solo show in Shanghai, though it didn’t happen. So, the story is set in Shanghai. The girl he loves is a prostitute in an opium den. To be sure, it’s just my own imagination, ok? It isn’t based on any specific period or place. The boy mermaid chases after her and then he comes to work as a male prostitute. [Illustrations of] this part will be very sexually explicit. [Also, unlike my other works] he is by no means a prince, but a boy at the social margin. This is the image of him as a human. But I’m now troubled with how to end this story; whether he kills the girl. With her blood, he can turn back into a mermaid. At first, I was planning to have him kill the girl. He stabs her by thinking, “Why don’t you accept me?” But then I lost my close friend and couldn’t help thinking what she would have done. I’m still thinking and stuck, but probably I won’t let him kill her. Anyway, I want to paint a young man bombarded with his own sexuality. Also, I want to paint an aestheticized form of death. Death never was my theme. I didn’t want to paint it. But now I want to challenge this new theme, although there is no particular reason. I really don’t know where [this series of paintings] will go. Once I seriously thought of *Little Mermaid*, I realized that she is quite disjointed. She is actually a moron. It is about a girl at the mercy of everything. But we have accepted and even admired the story. I wonder why that in our girlhood, we longed for this kind of story and that means we learned pretty distorted values through fairy tales. I didn’t think of this when I started [the series], but once I swapped the gender of the mermaid, I realized how stupid she was. Then my question is, what about boys?

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## Epilogue

After the interview, I (Kaneko) was fortunate to have several additional meetings with Kimura. During our most recent meeting in July 2018, Kimura addressed her deep concern that, like many male Japanese artists and photographers, she treated the model merely as an object, and displayed her anger toward those male artists who remained numb to how violent their expressions were. Overall, her discussion was far more politicized and gender-oriented than during her initial interview in 2015. Kimura herself admitted this change by saying, “at that time [in 2015], I thought my pleasure was the most important thing, but things really changed.” When I asked Kimura what brought about this change she first did not provide a clear answer, but eventually pointed out that in 2015 the male figure was an extremely minor genre in the mainstream art scene, but has since gained far more popularity. As a result, she received substantially more feedback on her work from diverse perspectives, including LGBTQ people. Kimura said she became more conscious about her own position and the violent power of representation.

## About the Artist

**Kimura Ryōko was born in Kyoto, Japan, in 1971. She moved to Tokyo to attend the Tokyo University of Arts where she completed a BFA in oil painting in 1995 and an MFA in mural painting in 1997. Since her inaugural solo exhibition *Beauty of My Dish* (Span Art Gallery, Tokyo, 2005), her Nihonga paintings have been featured in exhibitions that include: *Asian Contemporary Scene: Part I* (Modern Art Museum, Shanghai, China 2017), *Beauté Animale de l’Homme* (Galerie Vanessa Rau, Paris, France 2015), and *Imayō: Japan’s New Traditionalists* (The Art Gallery at the University of Hawai’i at Mānoa; The Honolulu Museum of Art, Honolulu, USA; Shoto Museum of Art Tokyo Japan).**

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Mono-ha (School of Things) refers to a loosely associated group of artists emerging in the Tokyo art scene during the late 1960s and who were extremely active in the first half of 1970s. They used raw materials including stones, woods, irons, and papers and presented them “as it is,” exploring the unmediated property of “things” and thereby challenging the conventional ideas of art-making and representation.

<sup>2</sup> Uemura Shōen (1875–1949) was arguably the most established woman Nihonga artist in twentieth-century Japan. She was known for her technical virtuosity and images of beautiful women, often in time-honored historical settings.

<sup>3</sup> *Nikushokukei* is a recent slang term referring to people who are active and aggressive in love and sex.

<sup>4</sup> “Boys’ love” is a genre of *manga* and literature. Most typically, it features a romantic or homoerotic relationship between young boys, primarily targeting heterosexual female readers.

<sup>5</sup> See further Yamashita Yuji, “Perverted or Perfectly Normal? Ryoko Kimura’s take on ‘danshi [boy]’,” *Kimura Ryoko: Born to Be Wild* 木村了子: 覺醒吧, 野性! (Beijing: Mizuma & One Gallery, 2009).

<sup>6</sup> “Johnnys” is a term that refers to the male idols represented by the talent agency Johnny & Associates. Founded in 1962, the agency has been one of the dominant forces in the Japanese entertainment industry.

<sup>7</sup> Takabatake Kashō (1888–1966) was an illustrator who popularized the genre of *bishōnen* or “beautiful boys” in the twentieth century. See Matsumoto Shinako, *Takabatake Kashō: Taishō Shōwa retoro byūti* (Tokyo: Kawabe shobō shinsha, 2004).

<sup>8</sup> *Nanban byōbu* refers to a style of art that flourished in Japan during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries that was informed by contact with traders and missionaries, primarily from Portugal, who arrived in Japan in 1543. The Japanese of the sixteenth century called Europeans, Southeast Asians, and other foreigners *nanban*, or southern barbarians. The term originated in the highly hierarchical Sinocentric system, but by the sixteenth century, *nanban* came to loosely refer to anything foreign or exotic.

<sup>9</sup> Concerning Itō Seifu, see Kaneko’s essay on pages 29–35.

<sup>10</sup> Matsui Fuyuko (b. 1974) is a female Nihonga painter active since the early 2000s.

<sup>11</sup> Yakuza refers to the Japanese mafia. They are often represented as an icon of Japanese masculinity in popular media. In the yakuza world, 漢 is more commonly used, because, generally speaking, 漢 sounds more macho and, in a sense, more archaic than 男.