Ulala Imai
CLOSE
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Press Release

In her second exhibition at the gallery, *CLOSE*, Japanese artist Ulala Imai presents a new body of work that traverses scale and subject with a distinct sensibility. Imai engages the world through a heightened visual and tactile awareness—an embodied attentiveness shaped in part by her experience of deafness since birth. Her paintings are rooted in close observation and lived experience. "Most of the motifs in my works are from daily life in a limited community within a 1.5 km radius," she notes. Within this domestic milieu, she brings toys, household objects, and foods into unexpected spatial and emotional proximity, constructing quietly resonant scenes that hover between the familiar and the uncanny, intimacy and distance. Through Imai's luminous palette and nuanced brushwork, the textures of the everyday become charged with psychological depth and narrative ambiguity.

The exhibition's title, *CLOSE*, speaks to layered registers of nearness—physical, emotional, and psychological. "Sometimes I have trouble communicating," she reflects, "and my mind tends to close off. This title also includes a desire not to give up on relationships with others." For Imai, painting becomes a means of connection: a way of expressing what remains unspoken, of making perceptible the tensions and tenderness that structure daily life. Through subtle shifts in scale, surface, and atmosphere, she creates images that resonate with silence—where presence, memory, and feeling are held in delicate suspension.

Imai's process is rooted in direct observation and typically begins with the arrangement of real-life objects—both indoors and outdoors—into carefully staged tableaux. These composed scenes form the basis of her visual world, drifting between reality and the otherworldly, and echoing Freud's notion of the uncanny (das Unheimliche). Imai's process as such is poignantly exemplified in *LOVERS* (2025), a monumental painting depicting Charlie Brown and Lucy toys nestled in a tree outside her window. Here, the unusual arrangement of the figures becomes imbued with an uncanny atmosphere, heightened by the work's spatial dissonance and sense of arrested motion. The scale becomes a conduit for emotion: the over-enlarged toys elicit both tactile intimacy and an unsettling distance, as if the viewer is drawn into a private world while simultaneously held at its threshold.

This subtle disorientation also permeates *CONEY ISLAND* (2025), in which two teddy bears in bathrobes sit quietly on a deserted winter beach, a shuttered amusement park looming in the distance. Inspired by Imai's visit to New York, the painting evokes a melancholic stillness—a sense of narrative suspended. Though absent of human figures, the bears appear inwardly animated, their postures suggesting introspection or silent dialogue. As Imai notes, "An amusement park only functions when there are children playing—it is a symbol of peace. An amusement park without human presence therefore creates a dangerous atmosphere." Her compositions often juxtapose starkly contrasting registers, which coexist within the same frame.

Recurring figures such as teddy bears in bathrobes or oversized toys serve not merely as props, but as vessels of interior life. These works resonate on psychological and spiritual planes, drawing subtly from Japanese traditions of Shinto and animism. In Shinto belief, all things—animate and inanimate—are understood to possess spiritual essence, or kami. Within this worldview, the boundary between person and object is fluid, and projecting emotion onto non-human forms is culturally intuitive. Imai considers *VINCENT VAN DOG* (2025), a toy dog with one ear missing, to be both an alter ego and a symbol of unconditional love—watchful, empathetic, and quietly enduring.

This sensitivity extends to her smaller food still lifes—*Boiled Potatoes*, *Cherries*, *White Asparagus* (all 2025)—which reference 19th-century French painting while offering intimate reflections on nourishment, daily ritual, and cultural memory. At once modest and sensuous, these works gesture towards Imai's personal connection to France, where her mother resides, and her admiration for painters such as Van Gogh, Manet, and Cézanne. A contrasting note is struck with *HOT DOG* (2025), a vivid depiction of American popular culture.

Alongside domestic objects, family occupies a subtle yet significant presence throughout the exhibition. Imai shares her home and studio with her husband, who is also a painter. *Wooden Couples* (2024–25), a portrait of her father-in-law's sculptures, speaks to the interwoven nature of her artistic and familial life. Other works, such as the *Graduation* on the *Rock* paintings, reflect her son's transition from middle school—a life passage transformed into a mythic narrative. The small corsage he wore becomes a symbolic motif, while the bear figure reappears as a surrogate, embodying maternal memory, transformation, and care.

While grounded in figuration, Imai's paintings navigate the porous boundary between reality and reverie. They hold presence and absence, clarity and ambiguity, within the same visual field. "Painting is an important communication tool that connects me to society," she writes. In *CLOSE*, Imai invites viewers into a world shaped by tenderness and muteness, by memory's elusive grasp and the enduring desire for connection.

Ulala Imai (b. 1982, Kanagawa, Japan) lives and works in Kanagawa, Japan. She studied at the Faculty of Art and Design at Tama Art University and graduated from the Doctoral Programme in 2009. Recent exhibitions include Le Musée des Arts Décoratifs, Paris, France (2024); Ueshima Museum, Tokyo, Japan (2024); Palazzo Tiepolo Passi, Venice, Italy (2024); Aspen Art Museum, Aspen, CO, USA (2023); Pond Society, Shanghai, China (2023); Museum of Contemporary Art Busan, Korea (2023); Parco Museum, Tokyo (2021); and Tokyo Opera City Gallery, Tokyo, Japan (2020). Public collections are held at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco, CA; Dallas Museum of Art, Dallas, TX; The High Museum, Atlanta, GA, USA; He Art Museum, Guangdong Province, China and Space K/ Kolon Museum, Seoul, Korea.

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