

Heat and Shadow

Paintings, like all creative efforts, begin somewhere, stirred by a certain light, a color, a shape, perhaps by a sound, a scent, a taste, or by a word, a phrase, something seen and felt that captivates the painter enough to translate it, to take possession of it.

These paintings began in Sicily.

Abstract as they are, the imagery of these works is specific, born from the light and landscape of Sicily by the New York-based artist Kim Uchiyama. The seven works on view in this exhibition, with others like them, were inspired by several trips Uchiyama has made to the storied Mediterranean island, her first visit in 2015, her latest this past July. They are distillations of her profound connection to Sicily, focusing on its magnificent temple sites, in particular those of Selinunte and Agrigento, two of the most important colonies of Magna Graecia, established in the era when the Greeks ruled much of the known world.

Like so many others before her, Uchiyama succumbed to the region's incomparable light as well as to its history and myths, to the romance of ruins and their place in the present. She was also dazzled by Sicily's natural beauty, heightening the contrast between the wildness of its landscape and the lucidity of Hellenic construction and its canons. The opposition of nature and culture was not only aesthetic but also religious and political, the imposing presence of the colonizers' monuments (a perennial tactic) forcibly reminding all who saw them who wielded the power. Despite that, these sacred precincts are architectural high points that have become part of the heritage of the Sicilians and the world, a gift from the Greeks that they no longer need to beware of.

Uchiyama said that what she felt seemed to emanate from the land itself, steeped in violence and disruption as well as in the heady exuberance of its diverse demographics (occupied by Phoenicians, Greeks, Romans, Germanic tribes, Arabs, Normans, the Spanish, becoming part of Italy in 1860 and an autonomous region of the latter in 1946), all of which added to its glamour and the richness of its culture.

So, how is that translated into a painting and what would it look like? For Uchiyama, it looks characteristically like bands of glowing color—"color," she says, "also acts as light"—the dimensions of the support and images scaled to the human body. The paintings might seem understated at first, but they are far from spare, centered as they are on their materiality and the infinite variations of the artist's lexicon. In this selection, her formats are vertical and the bands horizontal. She increased their size somewhat in deference to the regal sweep of the temple sites although the modules of both are nonetheless keyed to the human body: man, the measure of all things, as the Greek sophist Protagoras famously noted. Rhythm is an integral part of the composition and Uchiyama alters the widths of the bands carefully, to establish an ascendant movement, while the color—she is an innately gifted colorist—was calibrated with

equal intuitive sensitivity, its hue and tonality determined by what preceded it and what came after, without a predetermined plan.

Two of the paintings, *Akragas* (2018) and *Concordia* (2018) are warmed by earth tones as if sunbaked, gilded, the light playing across their surfaces adding a subtly animating sheen, the luster enhanced by bands of clear gessoed linen ground that also stretch from side to side, in often much narrower bands, separating the color sections from each other. Two others, *Nocturne 2* (2016) and *Nocturne 3* (2015), are more somber, the lush reds, greens, and blues stacked on top of each other, without the interjection of the ground except at the bottom of *Nocturne 3*. The remaining three, *Odyssey* (2020), *Meridian* (2021), and *Selinus 1* (2018) combine darker and lighter colors, shades of earth, sky, sea, and old stones, also incorporating the ground in intervals that result in an even more rhythmic, buoyant composition.

All the paintings refer to time and place, indicated by their titles. The coloration, among other associations, suggests the time of day and its passage. The horizontal bands might also conjure the cross-section of an archeological rendering or the schematic structuring of the temples themselves—foundation, soaring columns, pediments—and their sequencing of solids and voids. Uchiyama's palette also reminds us that Greek temples were originally boldly painted in reds, blues, greens, and yellows.

We can, of course, view them in countless ways in a loop of the subjective and objective, including simply reveling in the pleasure of their colors and forms. For Uchiyama, though, they were reflections on the architecture in the context of their sites and on the weight of history and its reality, but also on myth, she has stated. On that note, these paintings might make us think of an imagined time when gods and goddesses still inhabited the earth, where, in the hush of a summer day or the still of a velvety night, we might glimpse such a being in a light that comes and goes.

Lilly Wei