

# 飛鳥

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*Asuka* is the name given by Leiko Ikemura to a series of mainly small-format paintings which contain allusions to objects such as ships and aeroplanes.

The name has a long tradition which goes back to the origins of Japanese culture. Rendered in the most common Japanese script as 飛鳥, *Asuka* means 'flying bird'. Yet the name has a number of different meanings, not merely because the *kanji* script only conveys the pronunciation. On the one hand, before the Japanese syllabic scripts *katakana* und *hiragana* had been developed *kanji* were used for the three sounds *a*, *su* and *ka*, such as 阿須賀, 阿須可, 安須可, but on the other hand there are homophone *kanji* with emphatically pleasant meanings, such as 明日香 (*asu-ka*, literally 'the scent of tomorrow') or 安宿 (*a-suka*, literally 'peaceful retreat'). The written form 飛鳥 is taken from various poems in *Manyōshū* (Collection of Ten Thousand Leaves), the first major collection of Japanese poetry (4.500 poems in 20 volumes) mainly compiled by the poet Otomo no Yakamochi in 759. In that work, *Asuka* is given as 飛鳥明日香 (the modern notation is 飛ぶ鳥の明日香, *tobu tori no Asuka*, or in English 'Asuka of the soaring birds') as a sobriquet for the form written as 明日香. Later the sobriquet itself was pronounced as *Asuka* instead of *tobu tori*. According to one etymological theory, *Asuka* is derived from *isuka*, the Japanese name for the common crossbill, and thus refers directly to its nickname. Another theory claims that *Asuka* describes a type of landscape, such as *suka* (洲処) for 'place with sandbank' or *ka* (処) for 'place' and *asu* (崩地) for 'collapsed earth'. The *Asuka period* (in Japanese 飛鳥時代, *Asuka jidai*) was an important time in Japanese history, named after the location of the imperial palaces and the residence of the Yamato polity *Asuka-kyō*. It began in 552 with the official adoption of Buddhism. During the 150 years of its existence the first written constitution was produced, containing 17 sections on ethics and politics.

Serfdom was abolished and as part of a review of the administrative system, taxation and land, the state bought up arable land to be distributed fairly among the peasants. The first centralised Japanese bureaucracy was created under the command of the emperor. The Asuka period also saw the first mention of the name *Nihon* for Japan, composed of the signs 日 (pronounced *ni*, meaning 'day' or 'sun') and 本 (pronounced *hon*, meaning 'origin', 'roots' or 'beginning').

By naming her series of paintings thus, Leiko Ikemura places the works on a semantic horizon which juxtaposes initial and concluding phases of the historical formation of Japanese cultural and political identity. An oscillation develops between text and image, between the verbal transmission of how national identity originated and the visual intimation of a war which signalled a provisional end to this cultural history. It is not necessary to know the titles of individual works – *Marine*, *Pacific Ocean*, *Warship*, *Hikari (Light)* – to realise that they concern battles between the USA and Japan in World War II; this becomes clear from the figurative references to ships, aeroplanes and the lights given off by missiles at night. Ikemura neither judges nor represents; we can experience both the grievance about the horrors of war and grief for the loss of a blooming culture, but only to the degree that the act of painting itself conveys these emotions. This process takes place up against a subject which itself cannot be represented: war, which, as Jean-Luc Nancy comments, 'exemplifies [...] the grandiloquence of heroism'. The disasters of war are nowadays so completely disguised by the terror of the information media that they cannot even be adequately conveyed by a person shown dying on film.

Can painting confront war? Leika Ikemura explores this dubiety – while avoiding illustrative and other principally inappropriate attempts at representation – by allowing the theme to be an abstract motif. This motif provides her art with a necessary level of conflict, with the intention of parrying her impossible subject. The subject matter remains unresolved due to the non-identical nature of painting, but by using painterly means it is touched, encircled, addressed and passed on – as an invitation to reflect. The name *Asuka* exponentially increases the diversity of allusions, affording us time to ponder, time which the complexity of the subject demands, which would do justice to the complexity that is conveyed of the subject. This intensified openness is inscribed in the *Asuka* paintings. Mostly veiled in the dusk, the fighter planes and bombers and the destroyers are figurative abstractions of a painting of the horizon, the horizon of abstraction, inspired by the highest requirement of Japanese art: everything that is to be said should be said in a single line. The areas of colour and the intertwining lines resembling calligraphy that add to the figuration (although they are never fully illustrated and do not contribute to representational illusion) emerge from the horizon lines only to lose themselves in them once more. They are at the dividing line between emerging and submerging, in this fleeting moment caught in a precarious non-figurative figuration – questionable spectres which the painting permits to invoke war.



Marine 63, 2006, Oil on canvas, 25 x 35 cm



Marine 87, 2007, Oil on canvas, 25 x 35 cm

In the 'sunken' atmosphere which the *Asuka* paintings breathe, the material presence of the painting converges with the symbolism of ships and aeroplanes sunk at sea. It is a moment of commemorating the atrocities and destruction, the victims and consequences of this and all wars which were (and still are) fought with these machines, serving nationalistic megalomania and economic interests. And herein lies the beauty of the *Asuka* paintings, for true beauty is the opposite of beautification and can be experienced solely in a moment of unexpected horror.

The *Asuka* paintings keep their motif at a distance, between appropriate discretion and constitutive risk. This occurs in a painting style which does not signify anything, but which flows over signs (of war), showing evidence of painting's responsibility. The paintings present a responsibility of form, small appeals against suppressed memory, moments of resistance, for instance against constructions of history that claim to have understood and correctly evaluated everything, although they only reproduce the canon of an era which is still essentially and structurally based on capital. Capital is the museum of the world as the memory of all that is possible: there is no outside. Interesting painting questions the absolute nature of this world in the middle of this museum of all possibilities, in other words, in the middle of capital, with all its adequate and inadequate means. This can only happen when painting is overtaxed, it only is when something is painted which cannot be painted. It is about creating an image of something which cannot be depicted. Painting such as this is the impossible and yet necessary action of an image which is nevertheless resistant, a process that is doomed to failure. Yet any truly interesting painting demands this of itself, according to its responsible desire for the impossible. Only serious humour can enable this action, in relationship to the matter and to itself. The level of the pictures is determined by the level of this humour. In the history of painting there are apparitions which seem to parry the disasters of war. There are historical examples of this – ranging from Caravaggio's paintings on torture and martyrdom, Goya's *Desastres de la Guerra*, Manet's *The Execution of Maximilian* and Picasso's sketches of *Guernica*, through to Fautrier's *Otages* – as well as those from the present day, such as Martin Kippenberger's *Krieg Böse*, Cindy Sherman's *Disasters* and *Fairy Tales* or Axel Kasseböhmer's *Stilleben mit Fischköpfen*. What they all let us see are responsibilities, responses preceding every question, unexpected answers to insoluble problems. Leiko Ikemura's *Asuka* paintings are part of this tradition of felicitous responsibilities of an impossible yet necessary art of parrying.



Orange Yellow Horizon, 2007, Oil on canvas, 60 x 70 cm