

HYPERALLERGIC

Jessica Silverman: "The Goddess Element in Eco-Feminist Art"

By Will Higginbotham

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Kei Imazu, "Curves of Time" (2023), oil on linen, 23 5/8 x 31 1/2 x 3/4 inches (photo by Phillip Maisel, all images courtesy the artist and ROH Projects, Jakarta)

Painter Kei Imazu approaches the contemporary realities of colonialism and climate destruction through ancient Indonesian myth.

SAN FRANCISCO — *Sowed Them to the Earth* at Jessica Silverman is the Japanese artist Kei Imazu's first solo show in the United States. The exhibition of 11 paintings and two sculptures is whimsical but poignant. The collection is inspired mainly by the artist's home in Indonesia and the country's local folklore about the sacred birth goddess Hainuwele. The exhibition brings two Asian mythologies into a discussion of the Earth's generative nature, colonialism, and human impact on the environment. As a whole, this nuanced exhibition transcends its local context, addressing eco-feminism on a global scale.

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A crash course in Indonesian mythology is helpful to appreciate this show. Ancient Indonesian myth has it that root vegetables, bulbs, and other plants in the region resulted from the murder of the goddess Hainuwele. Her remains were buried in a pit, but parts of her body were later re-buried around various villages. From these sites sprung life-giving plants, including the Indonesian staple, tuber crops.

This narrative of the goddess's life-giving but deceased body unfolds in the exhibition's centerpiece, the towering painting titled "Blossoming Organs" (all works from 2023). In the piece, Imazu depicts a skeleton and a mass of hyper-realistic organs from which foliage, tubers, birds, human limbs, and animals emerge in sweeping brush strokes. The goddess's death, the viewer discerns, allows all types of life to flourish. The colorful and detailed paintings are all rendered and digitally collaged in 3D before being transferred onto canvas. This process gives the works a highly realistic impression, almost deceiving the eye into believing they are more than oil paintings. Meanwhile, in "Curves of Time," a parallel is drawn between the Hainuwele legend and an ancient Japanese figure, the Jōmon Venus, who was similarly revered for her ability to yield crops. The toppled figure rests between orange and purple yams.



Kei Imazu, "Green Veins / Falling Goddess" (2023), oil on linen, 59 x 59 x 1 5/8 inches (photo by Shaun Roberts)

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In this exhibition, ancient lore also serves as a gateway to examine history and its role in seeding concerns of the current moment. For instance, in "Green Veins / Falling Goddess," Imazu launches a critique of colonialism and climate destruction. The six-by-six-foot painting is a swirling fusion of rich vegetation and mammary glands. One can make out a slightly sinister vein-like outline of a human body (representing colonialism) and thick, viscous-looking black lines (representing petroleum extraction).



Kei Imazu, "Shadows in the Footsteps of Ancestors" (2023), oil on linen, 39 3/8 x 47 1/4 x 1 inches (photo by Shaun Roberts)

In works such as "Shadows in the Footsteps of Ancestors" and "Aroma Map," Imazu delves further into themes of eco-colonialism. The latter depicts a sky-blue book that echoes a colonial European voyaging journal noting the discoveries and virtues of Seram Island in Indonesia — including shells, birds, plants, seeds, and organs — all of which spring (once again) from the life-giving goddess. The Dutch colonized this island in the 17th century, primarily for its spices,

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heralding a Golden Age in the Netherlands. The richness of the land repeatedly made it a target of invasion.

In this intimate exhibition, Imazu explores themes such as ancient myths, colonialism, climate destruction, and the human impact on the Earth. While rooted in the local context of Indonesia and Japan, her messages easily transcend the Pacific, inviting her audience to engage in these critical conversations.



Installation view (photo by Phillip Maisel, courtesy the artist and ROH Projects, Jakarta)

Sowed Them to the Earth continues at Jessica Silverman (621 Grant Avenue, San Francisco, California) through September 16. The exhibition was organized by the gallery.

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