

Almost Home: How Yayoi Asoma Paints From Memory

by Sophie Landres

Scientists have for the first time recorded individual brain cells in the act of summoning a spontaneous memory, revealing not only where a remembered experience is registered but also, in part, how the brain is able to recreate it.¹

Shaped like a seahorse and nestled deep in the forebrain, the hippocampus possesses the neurons that memory and visualization share. Neurologically speaking, seeing is no different from remembering, just that “as time passes, memories are consolidated, submerged, perhaps retooled and often entirely reshaped when retrieved later.”² In an age reverent of technology, human memory (so prone to error) increasingly refers to photographic documentation and the computerized memory banks it created. Efficient as they may be, these memory crutches are incapable of replicating the personal experience of memory, which scientific discoveries describe as a more painterly optical experience. This is an argument as much for rethinking our dependency on technology as it is for the layered acrylic paintings of Yayoi Asoma, which open in drifting sheets of half-remembered domestic scenes. With well-fed, almost salivating brushstrokes, her large (up to 9 feet tall and 18 feet wide), unpeopled houses are comprised of multiple, colliding perspectives, as if the objects were made of vapor and the architecture was mapped by a wondering child.

Starting with snapshots, Asoma, like David Hockney before her, meticulously pieces together photographic collages of the suburban houses where she has lived. By adjusting perspective, fogging what her mind does not remember, obscuring details, and photoshopping until the compositions click, the homes are given depth beyond what the camera had recorded. These assemblages serve as sketches for the paintings—blueprints to support bold releases of paint. The largeness of scale provides the artist with room for expressionistic gestures and allows the viewers to enter without dwarfing their own sense of physical self. Thus, though working from flat photographs, her surfaces become utterly yielding and ductile. Like memory, her process is mysteriously subjective, visually delirious and deeply intimate. It enables her to conjure images of her former homes, not as they are or once were, but as she remembers experiencing them.

Asoma’s palette is committed to what she calls “the light or colors of memory.” Sun-bleached white, pond green and stone dominate along with dustier shades of pink, blue and black. Light reflects off some surfaces and renders others transparent. In the exterior shots of *2 Pondfield (View from the Breitches)* (2007), late-summer sun drenches side paneling and

¹ Benedict Carey, “For the Brain, Remembering Is Like Reliving,” *The New York Times* September 4, 2008, p A1.

² Ibid.

patches of yard beside shadowed pines and murky windows. Despite the impossibly tight and fractured angles of the house and the blurring of its many junctures, the painting remains surprisingly lucid and full of realistic details. The same can be said of *2 Pondfield (Interior)* (2007) which is a long panel depicting the interiors of several rooms combined. It is abundant with minutiae folded upon themselves, relics from different times experienced simultaneously in the mind. Among all the confusion, a sofa cushion is slumped from the weight of someone who just left the living room. Focusing on such particularities catches the memory in the act of resurging but before it comes into perfect focus.

The interior paintings are more frenetic and suggestive of an unobtainable pursuit. The compositions are choppy and the spaces are somewhat suffocated with activity. This is in part due to the patterning of multiple snapshots that Asoma uses to recreate the experience of *being there*. *2 Pondfield (Interior)* (2007) is a long panel in which fractals of furniture, drawers, walls, and windows reoccur at a frantic pace. Taking it all in is like searching for something in a dreamscape or sifting one's memory for evidence that time's entropic principles have removed. Many objects take on characteristics of the things around them. A varnished coffee table, for example, is smothered in colors that create a more vivid sense of transparency than the window it reflects. Still, the anxiety level is remarkably low. Calm colors and soft edges allow for the detachment one feels towards mundane surroundings.

The possibility of inhabitation further helps the viewer navigate these unstable environments with tranquility. Inside the unreasonable architecture, the eye collects evidence of a lived-in, homey environment. Though the ceiling of *97 Bayard* (2006) sits on a quaking slant, one does not feel at risk of head injury. Instead, the painting emulates the upward glance of a body in motion. That effect is the hook in Asoma's work. As the phenomenologist Gaston Bachelard noted in *The Poetics of Space*, "inhabited space transcends geometrical space."³ By allowing our gaze to be interrupted by thoughts of what is around the corner, Asoma's illogical compositions trigger the real sensation of experiencing a fading memory.

Similar to how Neo Rauch houses nostalgia in deeply shadowed and paradoxical environments, Asoma deals with nostalgia less for the comfort of suburbia than for a return to spaces that can accommodate an oneiric existence. Solid walls often become meta-canvas for playfully non-representational brushstrokes. In this context, abstraction is used to reconstitute sensory experience. It functions as a visual simile for memories that have neither words nor shape. We feel the effect of time moving through these still environments. It is not with the pummeling rush of overlapping activity as the Futurists envisioned it, but with a gradual recession of the past and an emergence of the present.

By dealing with the acceleration of time, Asoma's paintings inadvertently allude the inevitable moment when we are no longer a part of it. Art often makes the comparison between the erosion of buildings and that of the human mind or body. When Ed Ruscha was asked why he annually re-photographs *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* (1966), he spoke of it as a desire for immortality. Equating Los Angeles' changing urban landscape with a body in

³ Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), 47.

decline he said, "...it's cancerous and ultimately fatal. I wish time would stand still."⁴ Gordon Matta-Clark similarly used forgotten architecture as a metaphor for the departed. Like Matta-Clark's *Splitting* (1974), Asoma's house paintings are like portraits of the psyche. Rooms are cut to hit nerve-endings that might spark a sunken memory. In this manner, forgotten memories and structures are salvaged or shattered in tandem.

Asoma believes that home is where bodies cohabitate with consciousness; that houses are inherently wired with a circuitry for summoning memories. Her paintings serve as illustrations for the way we spatially navigate these mental and physical terrains. They are to be experienced as if looking through the smoke of neurons fired in the distant past. Though content to be in her houses, we don't quite know what we are doing there. It is familiar yet reinvented, just like the idea of home.

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The writer, **Sophie Landres**, is an independent curator, arts writer and the director of Mireille Mosler Ltd., New York, NY. She was the 2007 guest curator for the Catskill Art Society, Livingston Manor, NY and currently serves on Art in General's Advisory Panel. Landres holds a Master's Degree in Art Criticism and Writing from the School of Visual Arts, New York, NY. Prior to enrollment, she was the director of Naked Duck Gallery in Brooklyn, NY and facilitated various art projects throughout her tenure such as designing the set for *Dance and Process* at The Kitchen, New York, NY and founding an after-school gallery guide program for third grade students. She has curated exhibitions at 3rd Ward and Supreme Trading, Brooklyn, NY; Art in General, New York, NY; and Catskill Art Society Gallery, Livingston Manor, NY. Her writing has been published in *Modern Painters*, *HE magazine*, *Degree Critical*, the *Performa07 Biennial* catalogue, *MAKE* and the New York Foundation for the Arts *NYFA Current* magazine. The mentor was **Lilly Wei**, a New York-based independent curator and critic who contributes to many publications in the United States and abroad. She has written regularly for *Art in America* since 1982 and is a contributing editor at *ARTnews* and *Art Asia Pacific*. Wei has also written for *Asian Art News*, *Art Papers*, *Sculpture Magazine*, *Tema Celeste*, *Flash Art*, *Art Press* and *Art and Auction*, among others, and has frequently reported on international biennials such as those of Sydney, Cairo, Athens and Reykjavik. She has been the essayist for many exhibition catalogues and brochures on contemporary art, including publications for the Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, NY; the Neuberger Museum of Art, Purchase, NY; the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Marlborough and Pace Wildenstein, New York, NY. She has served on numerous advisory panels and review committees, including the Pew Fellowship awards and is a member of several boards, including the International Association of Art

⁴ Richard Prince, "Ed Ruscha: the Original Master of California Cool has Never Been Hotter," *Interview*. July, 2005, FindArticles.com. 20 Sep. 2008.
http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1285/is_6_35/ai_n14693958

Critics (AICA/USA), Art in General, New York, NY; and Art Omi, an international artist residency program. She has been a guest lecturer, panelist and visiting critic at art institutions nationally and internationally. Wei has curated numerous shows in the United States and abroad. Most recently, she has curated the exhibition, *Mei Guo (The Beau Monde)* for Contrasts Gallery in Shanghai and Beijing and *Into the Trees* for The Fields Sculpture Park in Ghent, NY. Some current writing projects include articles and essays on Sonsbeek 2008, the international sculpture exhibition in The Netherlands, Folkert de Jong, the young Dutch artist, several contemporary Israeli artists and Chuck Close. She will also be the moderator for a panel on re-cycling and repurposing of materials for the Noguchi Museum, Long Islan City, NY, in mid-October. Wei has an M.A. in art history from Columbia University, New York, NY.