



# Izumi Kato

PHOTOGRAPHS AND TEXT BY CHLOE CHU

**In the artist's Hong Kong studio, wide-eyed extraterrestrial beings and primordial deities stare back**



Izumi Kato in his Hong Kong studio. On the right is an untitled painting, which he had just completed on the day of ArtAsiaPacific's visit.

To find Japanese multimedia artist Izumi Kato's Hong Kong studio, I had to walk along a circuitous white corridor past a seemingly endless stretch of identical metal doors. This disorienting passageway, coiled inside an industrial building on the isolated southern tip of Hong Kong Island, could have easily been the movie set for a psychological thriller, and, admittedly, I began to feel the onset of panic as I attempted to locate the number two, supposedly marked above one of these otherwise indistinguishable entries. Thankfully, I found the correct door and rang the bell. Kato greeted me, dressed casually in a T-shirt and loose shorts—his standard attire that he wears even to his exhibition openings and on stage with his rock band Tetorapotz. His wife Tomoko Aratani, who is much more put together, appeared behind him and presented a pair

of house slippers—as is Japanese custom—which I stepped into before proceeding farther beyond the threshold.

At first I was baffled that an artist such as Kato, who often asserts the importance of one's individuality—whether in reference to the way he creates his art, or how he hopes audiences will interpret his images in their own way—chose to situate himself in what appeared to me an eerie visual metaphor for the endless simulacra that we navigate in our lives. But the studio's arresting view immediately dispelled that thought. The only windows are directly opposite the entrance—beyond Kato's modest, white-cube-like work area and the couple's living room—and a soft light poured in. Outside were the glimmering waters of Luk Chau Bay, ruffled occasionally by the wake of crisscrossing boats. The green,

undulating hills of Lamma Island lay where the sky and sea met. It was a scene that could lend itself well to introspection, and to feeling at peace with oneself.

I imagined that the landscape also offered a sense of familiarity to Kato, who was born and grew up in the quiet prefecture of Shimane on the western coast of Japan, surrounded similarly by vast waters and hills. Though, upon graduating from Tokyo's Musashino Art University in 1992, Kato decided to settle down permanently in the Japanese capital, where he still spends roughly three quarters of the year. Through an interpreter, the artist confirmed that the view was largely what convinced him to choose this particular industrial building in Ap Lei Chau—yet I was curious as to what made him want to work from Hong Kong in the first place. He explained that three years ago, after more than two decades of creating both two- and three-dimensional works of enigmatic figures who have been likened to extraterrestrial beings, primordial gods and goddesses, and totems, he started to realize that he had grown too comfortable in his home country, and that his creative drive had become stagnant. Hong Kong, by contrast, spoke of boundless energy and dynamism to him; and so, with the help of friends and his gallery, Perrotin, he made the leap, renting his current quarters in 2015.

Just as Kato had suspected, Hong Kong rekindled his playful experimentations with materials. Downstairs from his studio is a seawall and rocky beach, where Kato, a keen fisherman, likes to spend his downtime. There, in 2016, he noticed stones of various shapes and sizes, which sparked a new series of works. Kato arranged a group of the rocks, roughly the size of newborn babies, in an





over-one-meter line on his studio floor, such that the overall contour evoked a body curled in a fetal position. He then detailed this character—with widespread, gaping eyes and a nose that bleeds into the mouth—by painting over parts of the rocks with acrylic.

The untitled sculpture demonstrates Kato's relationship to Shinto animist beliefs, according to which spirits live in mountains, lakes, waterfalls and rocks. Working intuitively and without prior sketches, Kato channels and unearths the deities in the stones. He has since been adding spontaneously to the series in different cities, each time using local materials, taking care to keep the unique qualities of the rocks apparent, as they reflect their places of origin. In 2018, for instance, he was commissioned to create two of these pieces for Hong Kong's Tai Kwun contemporary art center, where he used old stone bricks from the former prison. At his debut solo show in China, which opened in August at Beijing's Red Brick Art Museum, he made his first vertical iteration, stacking an egg-shaped boulder, the size of a medicine ball, on a granite block for what became the head and body of a multicolored humanoid creature that stands at almost three meters

tall. When I visited his studio, one of the walls was lined with pebbles, which Kato had just gathered from the seawall, in preparation for another composition.

Besides his collection of geological samples, his work space was nearly empty. Kato explained that most of his projects had been transported to Beijing for his Red Brick retrospective. The exhibition, featuring a host of his strangely endearing figures rendered in vibrant acrylics, camphor wood, vinyl, stitched pieces of fabric, prints and sketches, made tangible the evolution of the artist's practice over the past decade as he zigzagged between various materials.

When I asked if seeing his works gathered in such an extensive showcase impacted his artistic goals for the future, Kato answered without hesitation: no. He clarified that his aim is simple and steadfast. Painting has always been the most captivating medium for him, as it involves a two-dimensional surface that is artificial in our three-dimensional world. What he wants is to push the possibilities of this interface, and in the process, leave his own distinctive mark in the history of painting. All of the other components of his practice feed back into his innovations with painting. In his three-dimensional



(Opposite page, top)

The only windows in the studio are directly opposite the door, past Kato's pristine, white work area and the living space that he shares with his wife. Outside is Luk Chau Bay and Lamma Island.

(Opposite page, bottom)

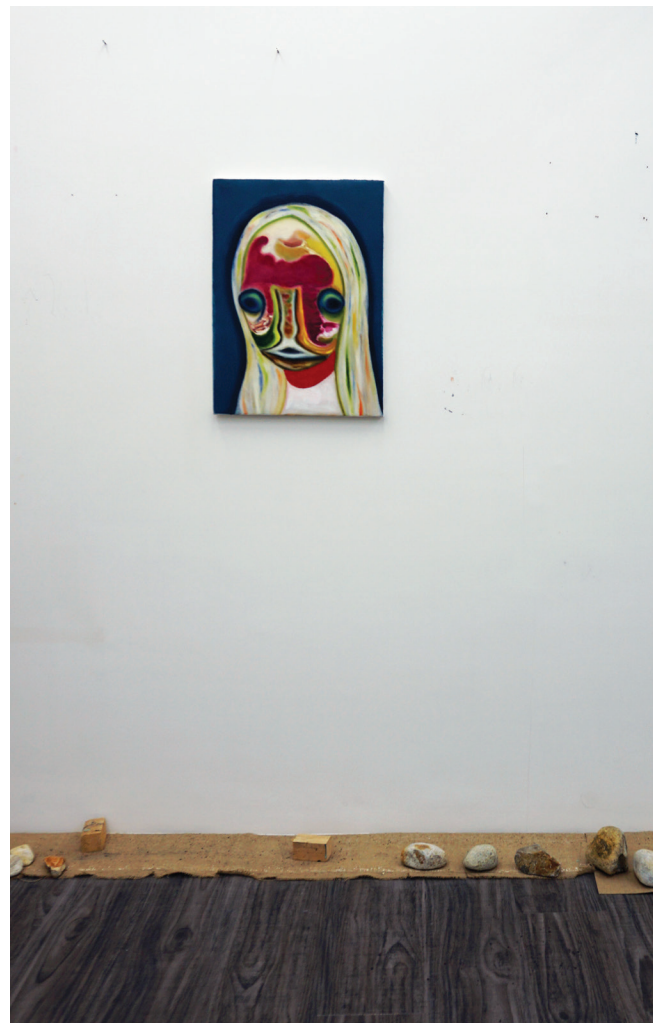
Kato likes to fish near the seawall downstairs from his studio. This was also where he came up with the idea for his rock sculptures in 2016.

(This page, top)

Hanging on the studio wall was another recently completed painting by Kato. He will use the rocks lined up on the floor for a sculpture.

(This page, bottom)

A 2016 drawing by Kato, picked out by his wife, hangs in their living space. Leaving no doubt for where the studio is, the key tag on the left reads: Ap Lei Chau.





works, for example, he takes note of details that make the forms more intricate and aesthetically intriguing, such as the miniature figurines in his latest series of sculptures, which he attached to the ears of, or placed on top of, a larger, central statue. This imagery is then transposed to his canvases, which depict similar creatures with heads sprouting from various parts of their bodies. In the same way, while creating his 2017 vinyl sculptures, which saw him joining together disparate components to form a final Frankenstein-esque figure, Kato took inspiration from the clearly visible seams of the mutant, and incorporated this into his paintings, depicting a single body across multiple panels, with contrasting background colors.

When it comes to who the subjects are, exactly, and the meanings of their actions or expressions, Kato is deliberately elusive. His characters typically assume poses such as lying on the floor, sitting, or with their arms

spread out, precisely because these actions are meaningless without context, which Kato also omits, always filling in flat fields of colors as backdrops. Kato emphasized that there is no correct or incorrect way to understand his images—viewers should relate to them however they want.

In an age where we prize logic over intuition, and predictability over spontaneity, there is an obvious sense of rebellion behind Kato's refusal to affix meaning to his images. So much about the artist is rule-breaking. His iconic, surreal painting style grew out of his disdain for the lessons taught at art school, which prioritized students learning to accurately depict a subject. Freeing himself from that pressure, Kato turned to the raw styles of untrained or "outsider" artists, unencumbered by logic or narrative. Kato showed me one of his early canvases from 2004 that he had in the Hong Kong studio,

of four flat and oddly staggered alien-looking babies against a gradient background. His affinity for childlike paintings with no immediately detectable storylines was apparent.

He has also developed his own painting techniques. Below the 2004 work were two packed trolleys with, among more traditional painting tools, plastic gloves—crucial for Kato, who prefers to apply pigments with his fingers—and rubber spatulas, which create contrasting textures. On the day of our meeting, he had just completed two portraits, one for his solo exhibition opening at Perrotin Seoul in October, and one that will be presented at the Shanghai art fair Arto21 in November. Kato had also hung a 2014 work that he was touching up. Looking back at the painting, he said, he felt that it needed something more. It happens, he added nonchalantly. For Kato, it's all an ongoing process toward making his own rules.

(Bottom)  
Kato had brought out a 2014 work to touch up, as well as a canvas from 2004 to show me the evolution of his style. The two trolleys are where he keeps his tools.

