

When Animals Become Art. Leiko Ikemura at The Feuerle Collection

Curated by Désiré Feuerle
7 July 2023 – 7 January 2024

The Feuerle Collection is pleased to announce the opening of *When Animals Become Art. Leiko Ikemura at The Feuerle Collection*. Curated by Désiré Feuerle, this represents the second exhibition to be shown in the **Silk Room** and will be on view from 7 July 2023 until 7 January 2024.

The show presents a selection of works realized between 1990 and 2022 by artist **Leiko Ikemura**. The works are juxtaposed with personal plush toys collected by the artist and immersed in a refined, dreamlike scenography, designed by Désiré Feuerle especially for the installation.

When Animals Become Art. Leiko Ikemura at The Feuerle Collection symbolically brings into being an intimate and colorful nest, where precious animal sculptures, made of cast glass, glazed terracotta, patinated bronze, and papier-mâché, will interact with small plush creatures from a domestic environment.

As one of the recurring themes chosen by Ikemura throughout her practice, the representation of animals and animal-hybrids will transport visitors into a secret world, leaving the door open for fantasy to interpret possible symbols, metaphors, and enigmatic references to Japanese legends and to the vibrant, pulsating creations of the artist.

For Ikemura, the animals could be interpreted as embodiments, as a substantiality that goes beyond representation. While she doesn't disregard the narrative of legends, this element is considered immanent, so narrational aspects can be intuitively perceived by the imagination of the viewer, instead of being revealed by the artist, allowing for sudden and unexpected leaps in the process of storytelling.

While, on the one hand, the presence of animal aspects in humans is an easily understandable phenomenon, the artist is also interested in showing the presence of human behavior in animals: actions, feelings and attitudes can be mirrored either way. A strict separation between human and animal beings is only an assumption, and one that doesn't correspond with Ikemura's perspective: There are differences between humans and animals, but they are fundamentally much more connected.

An example of this is *Kitsune* (Japanese for "fox"). While our common notion of a fox is typically quite straightforward and simple, the *Kitsune* is able to transform itself from an animal being into another shape, its metamorphosis often taking a feminine form. The tale of the manifestation of the *Kitsune* and its mysteries come from the mythological and

mystical dimensions of Ikemura's roots in Japan, and have always been a source of inspiration for the artist. Sculpture in Ikemura's practice represents "the metamorphic", adopting transformation as part of its own nature. As a being, able to transform itself, it could represent a metaphor for art, which also has this ability.

Usagi (Japanese for "Hare") is another example of an animal with a subtle meaning. Ikemura loves the phonetic sound of the word "Usagi", and its beauty is also reflected in the shaping of her sculpture. Its large ears are like antennas connecting the sky with the earth; they look for the direction, in order to be capable of change. The life-saving zig-zag movement of this animal running in the field – the skill of unpredictability as an elaborate form of self-defense represents the quintessence of the ability to change direction – an aspect among the animal's various characteristics that Ikemura personally admires, as not only straightforwardness is important to her. This might be common to many other people, but it is not her intent to represent all of humanity.

While other works in the exhibition *When Animals Become Art* clearly show a connection to the natural world of animals and trees, *Bride* stands out as a description of a typical role and gender-specific position inherent in human society. Just like the animalistic works in the exhibition serve a ritualistic transformative role, *Bride* also has this particular connotation. Ikemura's sculpture also shows a transformation through ritual. The work brings together female power and animal strength, innocence and sovereignty, with a visible, special aura.

The plush animal toys in the exhibition, which belong to the artist, have been chosen by Désiré Feuerle as a juxtaposition to the sculptures, paintings, and drawings. For Ikemura, these objects are companions; a part of her life for many years, they reflect more than the joy of collecting.

In fact, her encounters with these animals have been entirely by chance. She has received them as gifts, discovered them at flea markets and in shop windows, choosing to take them with her. The vintage animals made by the German plush toy company Steiff often have a special materiality, handmade with skill and dedication, with specific features, like a button on the ear, or something that the artist didn't notice in other toys, which moved her to gather them together.

Artist Leiko Ikemura notes: *"It's Noah's Ark: They start to be vivid, gain a life. They are innocent and they convey a certain melancholy because they have been touched and beloved, yet abandoned. These animals have all come to me"*.

Born in Tsu, in the Mie Prefecture in Japan, Ikemura is currently based in Berlin and Cologne in Germany. After studying in Japan and Spain, she moved to Switzerland to pursue a career as a full-time artist, and then to Germany, where she had her first institutional solo show in Bonn and Nuremberg in 1983.

When asked about her relationship to the various countries that have been present in her life, such as Germany, Spain, and Switzerland, as well as her country of birth Japan, the artist notes that although she has a great respect for her personal roots, she would like to relativize the identification with only one country. To a greater degree, she holds very dear the particular cultural climate which has influenced her in each individual situation, allowing

her to bloom in those respective life circumstances. In each country, she has witnessed something unique, which she has observed from a universalistic viewpoint.

A Japanese-Swiss citizen, she is a significant artist in both the Swiss and German art scenes, actively contributing to the cultural discourse. From 1990 to 2016, she has been teaching as a professor at the Universität der Künste in Berlin, Germany, and, since 2014, at the Joshibi University of Art and Design in Tokyo, Japan.

To date, Ikemura has had more than 700 solo and group exhibitions in over 29 countries worldwide, and her work forms part of more than 80 public and private collections, including the Centre Pompidou, Paris, France; State Museum Collections in Berlin, Germany; and MOMAT, the National Museum of Modern Art in Tokyo, Japan.

In her vision, all the smaller cosmoses must stay in connection with universal cosmological aspects—and she believes this approach nurtures understanding and creates more personal freedom.

Founder of The Feuerle Collection and curator of the exhibition, Désiré Feuerle, observes: *“During a dinner with Leiko at her house, I realized how much the Steiff animals she has collected her whole life have the same childlike, playful soul that you can find in her work. The difference with her creations is that figures often might visually twist, becoming slightly erotic, sensual. Sensing this, I was inspired to curate an exhibition at The Feuerle Collection. On one side, the animals, and on the other, the significance of joy and unfiltered animalic pleasures made visible with clear references to feminine sensuality. Looking at the animals and feeling their souls, while at the same time giving importance to eros, to finding a connection to our own animal dimension. Leiko plays with this and her work is open to interpretation and fantasy; it offers a beautiful and different way of expressing feelings. Subtle, but strong”.*

When Animals Become Art. Leiko Ikemura at The Feuerle Collection will be presented in the Silk Room, a new exhibition space in the upper ground floor of The Feuerle Collection. Dedicated to temporary art shows and interdisciplinary cultural projects, including performances, artist talks, screenings and concerts, the Silk Room was inaugurated in September 2022 with the exhibition ***Edmund de Waal and Unseen Pieces from The Feuerle Collection***, which closed 1 May 2023.

When Animals Become Art. Leiko Ikemura at The Feuerle Collection is open to the public from 7 July 2023 until 7 January 2024. The permanent exhibition remains open at the same time. Tickets are available for purchase online.

To coincide with Berlin Art Week, an **artist talk** between Leiko Ikemura and Désiré Feuerle will take place on **Friday 15 September at 4 pm** at The Feuerle Collection.

Founded in 2016 by Désiré Feuerle and Sara Puig to permanently host The Feuerle Collection, the art space is located in a former telecommunications bunker from WWII, renovated by John Pawson.

For further information, please visit The Feuerle Collection website, www.thefeuerlecollection.org, and follow its [Instagram](#), [Facebook](#), and [TikTok](#).

The Feuerle Collection would like to take this opportunity to warmly thank Leiko Ikemura and Philipp von Matt for their kind cooperation.