



Mika Horibuchi

Mika Horibuchi, *Curtain Drawn*, 2014. Oil on canvas; 60 x 38 x 2 in.
Courtesy of the artist and PATRON Gallery. Photo: Aron Gent.

The paintings of Mika Horibuchi (American, b. 1991) are near-duplicates of the objects they depict. Fooling the eye and testing the limits of viewers' perception, her trompe l'oeil-style works capture the materials and three-dimensionality of domestic objects such as screen doors and window blinds. Though conspicuously common, Horibuchi's subjects are frequently drawn from paintings, psychological studies, and artifacts from the artist's life, including a detail from a seventeenth-century Dutch still life, the duck-rabbit optical illusion, and photographs of watercolors made by the artist's grandmother. Her works reward close examination, often evolving over time.

Horibuchi's works also imitate objects and environments, as shown in the installation of her Chicago Works exhibition: the inner gallery resembles a period room—a room from another era that is preserved in or restored to its original condition—yet, the table and rugs that occupy the space are actually painted objects. The outer gallery, in which a floor-to-ceiling curtain partly obscures a large landscape painting, imitates the illusory space of *Trompe-l'Oeil Still Life with a Flower Garland and a Curtain* (1658), pictured on the opposite page. Horibuchi's lifelike paintings and installation techniques provide moments to contemplate the realities of what we see, and in turn, the world we inhabit.



Mika Horibuchi, *RD FB*, 2017. Oil on linen; 30 x 24 in. Courtesy of the artist and PATRON Gallery. Photo: Mika Horibuchi.

Nothing is as it seems—or so proposes Mika Horibuchi in paintings and installations that slip into the fissures of visual perception. The curtains, window blinds, and optical illusions she depicts often conceal as much as they reveal. Drawing equally from art history and psychology, she uses techniques such as trompe l'oeil—painting in detail so true to life that the picture appears to be three-dimensional—to walk the line between truth and deception.

Though our image-saturated culture is uniquely attuned to the dubious truth-value of pictures, the curtain illusion stretches far back into antiquity. In 77 AD, Pliny the Elder told of a competition between two artists, Zeuxis and Parrhasius, to create the most realistic painting. Zeuxis painted grapes that fooled birds into trying to get a taste, but Parrhasius tricked even his fellow painter:

Parrhasius, on the other hand, exhibited a curtain, drawn with such singular truthfulness, that Zeuxis, elated with the judgment which had been passed upon his work by the birds, haughtily demanded that the curtain should be drawn aside to let the picture be seen. Upon finding his mistake, with a great degree of ingenuous candour he admitted that he had been surpassed, for that whereas he himself had only deceived the birds, Parrhasius had deceived him, an artist.¹

To win is to deceive an artist, as the story goes, and, in a bid to flip perception, the human mind is the ultimate test case. A rational interpretation of perception might presume that everything is exactly as it seems, and that a picture can only represent one thing at a time. We purport to value such rationality highly, though its role in human experience is exposed best when it is broken down. A great artist recognizes the congruities of reality and representation; a greater artist, however, recognizes the incongruities.

Horibuchi's practice revels in the idea that images can simultaneously separate us from a direct experience of reality and bring us closer to the world. A graduate of the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, she studied centuries-old paintings, especially the Dutch Masters, in the collection of the Art Institute, where her focus turned to one beguiling work in particular: Adriaen van der Spelt and Frans van Mieris's 1658



Adriaen van der Spelt and Frans van Mieris, *Trompe-l'Oeil Still Life with a Flower Garland and a Curtain*, 1658. Oil on panel; 18 ¼ x 25 ¼ in. Collection Art Institute of Chicago, Wirt D. Walker Fund, 1949.585. Photo: The Art Institute of Chicago / Art Resource, NY.

1 Pliny the Elder, *The Natural History*, eds. John Bostock et al. (London: Taylor and Francis, 1855), perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus:abo:phi,0978,001:35:36.

work *Trompe-l'Oeil Still Life with a Flower Garland and a Curtain*. A rippling blue curtain partly obscures a colorful bouquet, precisely rendered. But don't try to pull it back: like Parrhasius's, the fabric is just as flat as the rest of the picture, a painted image refusing the viewer a clear view of itself. The work dangles an object of desire and then denies us access to it twice over: the painted curtain obscures the bouquet, sure, but the trick stings because it also snaps us back from the dream-world of representation to reveal that what we long for is, in the end, just so much paint.

There are no enticing bouquets in Horibuchi's homages to *Trompe-l'Oeil Still Life*. Instead, her *Curtain Drawn* paintings isolate and enlarge van der Spelt and van Mieris's curtain so that they relate architecturally to the "real" space of the gallery. If fifteenth-century art theorist Leon Battista Alberti's theorized picture plane functions like a window to a viewer's dominion—offering the sense that one is a monarch surveying royal land—Horibuchi's serialized curtains create a wall of windows with airtight seams, trading sovereign rule for yearning and denial.² The result removes the treat but leaves the trick, stirring curiosity about a hidden space that doesn't really exist. On one hand, the artist homes in on the mischievous occlusion, a creamy blue closed loop, reminding us of the limits of vision. On the other, she cracks a highbrow pun: *Curtain Drawn* is a curtain, drawn. Readjusting attention to the original painted curtain as a double agent of frustration and fantasy, her subject is not really the fabric, nor even a specific Dutch painting, but that split second when both jokes land.

Painting in particular is a medium that requires a split consciousness. Twentieth-century art historian E. H. Gombrich understood this, explaining, "We file it not in terms of reality, but as an existing type of representation."³ When we look at a painting, we willingly suspend disbelief—essentially tricking ourselves on purpose. The *trompe* in *trompe l'oeil* tricks the eye into seeing a faithful replica of real life. Horibuchi's *trompe* creates a replica of that replica, faith or no faith. Her period room at the MCA, in which every piece of furniture is a painting, operates in the same way. This is a living room, it tells its viewer, but one that is not to be used for living. It is spatialized *trompe l'oeil*, a room-shaped curtain that can't be drawn. Two millennia after Pliny's parable, Horibuchi leaves the earnest plane of playing rationality for a fool and veers toward unapologetic ambivalence.



Giorgio de Chirico, *The Song of Love*, 1914. Oil on canvas; 28 3/4 x 23 3/4 in. Collection Museum of Modern Art, Nelson A. Rockefeller Bequest. Photo: The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA / Art Resource, NY.

The experience of seeing a non-curtain, or entering a non-room, puts one in a rather paranoid position: instead of pining after the bouquet, we want to get to the bottom of things. Each component points to a network of obscured associations. Horibuchi's paintings, which are highly figurative yet devoid of figures, operate almost like those of twentieth-century Italian painter Giorgio de Chirico, who understood that classical materials such as marble and fabric could be psychologically evocative—his shadowy village squares are not so much desolate as recently deserted, as though the last person to leave had just a moment before slipped into the darkness behind a colonnade. Horibuchi's paintings are hardly scenes, especially those like *Black Marble* (2014) that imitate artistic mediums in dissimilar materials such as folded paper or textiles; instead, eeriness lives in the implied material itself, imbuing motionless substance with the quality of the just-fleeted.



Mika Horibuchi, *Black Marble*, 2014. Oil on linen; 33 x 64 in. Courtesy of the artist and PATRON Gallery. Photo: Mika Horibuchi.

These material studies are particularly illustrative. Art historian Georges Didi-Huberman describes the decorative registers of a fifteenth-century Fra Angelico fresco meant to imitate swirling marble. Essentially throw-away panels, the reproductions were cheaper to create than the real thing, and were entirely supplementary to the figurative, devotional paintings displayed above. Writing in the 1990s, with centuries of art historical hindsight, Didi-Huberman saw in the marbled veins an anachronistic evocation—even a premonition—of Jackson Pollock's splatters. That is, with historical distance, the faux marble is retroactively appreciable as abstraction, not just attempted mimesis.⁴ In Horibuchi's case, we can now "read" the original Dutch painting in the inverse manner: not as the abstraction that it is, several levels removed from reality, but as something that comments on our now-thoroughly mediated world of vision. Fra Angelico hoped viewers might overlook his faux marble; Horibuchi dares us to look right at its illusory veins.

To break open these illusions, Horibuchi depicts the very image that led to Gombrich's conclusion about painting and reality: a classic optical trick resembling a duck as well as a rabbit. Ludwig Wittgenstein, an Austrian-British philosopher of language, was also bemused by this drawing. He devoted a detailed discussion to the way it complicates an easy definition of visual perception, taking care to distinguish between "the 'continuous seeing' of an aspect and an aspect's 'lighting up.'"⁵ The former is the total tangle of lines that he knows quite well to be a visual pun, and the latter is the flashes of recognition when one character emerges from that tangle to become the dominant image, if only briefly. Addressing the viewer's alienation from the visible object, he wrote: "Someone suddenly sees something which he does not recognize (it may be a familiar object, but in an unusual position or lighting); the lack of recognition perhaps lasts only a few seconds. Is it correct to say that he has a different visual experience from someone who recognized the object straightaway?"⁶ Perception is phenomenologically dependent on context, language, and image associations: all degrees of familiarity. It should come as a delightful surprise but not a shock that *RD FB* (2017), Horibuchi's oil painting of the duck-rabbit—ever a projection screen for psychological familiarity and a cipher for our dashed expectations—is actually a rendering of an ink stamp she had produced of the drawing. It is a wily study in over-determination.

A devoted student of painting, Horibuchi often scrambles our perceptions and preconceptions of the mediums she uses. After sending a watercolor set to her grandmother in Japan, she started to receive snapshots of her grandmother's delicate still lifes and landscapes in the mail. Horibuchi recreated these images in oil paint, stretching the usual opacity of the medium to retain the fluid, brushy appearance of the watercolors. A closer look reveals, however, that the paintings are not reproductions of her grandmother's watercolors, but of the *photographs* of the water-colors: at the corner of each canvas, carefully rendered in oil, is the telltale date stamp of a point-and-shoot camera. The result is a painting of a photograph of a painting from life, with several degrees of

2 Leon Battista Alberti, *On Painting and On Sculpture: The Latin texts of De Pictura and De Statua*, trans. Cecil Grayson (London: Phaidon, 1972).
3 E. H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation*, A. W. Mellon Lectures in the Fine Arts, 1956, Bollingen Series xxxv, 5 (London: Pantheon Books, 1960).

4 Georges Didi-Huberman, *Fra Angelico: Dissemblance and Figuration*, trans. Jane Marie Todd (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1995).
5 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2001), 204.
6 Ibid.

separation between the work and its real-world referent, buried in layers of representation. Paradoxically, these layers become ways to close the distance between the artist and her family across the world.

In the constellation of her practice, these “watercolors” are both sentimental objects and structural provocations. Their titles—*Watercolor of Persimmons*, for instance—ask linguistic questions as much as painterly ones: what do we call a work when we know full well it is a photograph, a watercolor, an oil painting, and a love letter all at once? What happens when the work crosses not just mediums but also continents, generations, and languages? These titles are not meant to fool but to invite us into these tender conundrums. Like water in a pigment set, Horibuchi’s project liquidates fixed categories, thinning out points of origin and of reference so that they may blend into each other.



Mika Horibuchi,
Watercolor of Persimmons,
2017. Oil on linen;
8 ½ x 11 in. Courtesy
of the artist and PATRON
Gallery. Photo: Aron Gent.

As we relearn daily in the stream of digital media, our trust in rendered images diminishes with each subsequent leap in technological innovation. What is an artist to do? Competing strategies emerge: one might be to do away with pictorial representation altogether, bringing original documents directly into the gallery to live a second life as their own strange monuments. The other, at which Horibuchi excels, is to dig even further into mediation, to layer representations on representations, and to abstract vision to the point that we can see the edges of our perception—a shared language, constructed and imperfect. In doing so, she reveals the surprising twist in the story of the supposedly rational subject. As she explains knowingly: “A slight betrayal of expectations is at play.”



Mika Horibuchi, *Screen Door*, 2015. Oil on linen; 80 x 32 x 2 in.
Courtesy of the artist and PATRON Gallery. Photo: Brittany Nelson

Mika Horibuchi (American, b. 1991) is a San Francisco-born, Chicago-based artist. She received her BFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in 2013. In 2014, she cofounded 4th Ward Project Space in Chicago. Recent exhibitions of her work have taken place at PATRON Gallery, Chicago; Salón ACME, Mexico City; LVL3, Chicago; Shane Campbell Gallery, Chicago; and Anat Ebgi Gallery, Los Angeles. Horibuchi is represented by PATRON Gallery, Chicago. This is her first solo presentation in a major US museum.

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