

A Time Traveling Kennel Club: Hiromi Stringer at grayDUCK Gallery, Austin

by Lauren Moya Ford | January 1, 2024



Installation view of “Hiromi Stringer: The Dog Show: Time Traveler Umeyama’s Drawings from the 21st Century,” on view at grayDUCK Gallery, Austin.

During the Edo period (1603 — 1868), Japan was effectively closed to the outside world. But in the mid-19th century, a Japanese scholar named Shoei Umeyama teleported through time and space to the United States and Germany, where he conducted fieldwork and created drawings of the curiosities that he found abroad. Umeyama was especially fascinated by 21st-century dogs, which differed greatly from the four types of canines known in his native Japan, and which often sported peculiar garments and accessories. Upon his return to Edo-era Japan, the scholar’s reports were collected and displayed at the Umeyama Time Teleportation Museum (UTTM), an institution that still operates today.

This is the whimsical premise behind The Dog Show: Time Traveler Umeyama’s Drawings from the 21st Century. Hiromi Stringer’s solo exhibition converts grayDUCK Gallery into a branch of the UTTM, combining 100 of Umeyama’s (AKA Stringer’s) sketches of dogs with the artist’s exquisitely-detailed graphite drawings of museum elements like wall texts, fire alarms, and humidity-detecting hygrometers.



Hiromi Stringer, “Dog 4,” 2022, gouache and sumi ink on oriental paper, 9 1/2 x 13 inches

In a statement about this body of work, Stringer — who moved to San Antonio from her native Japan in 2008 — insists that Umeyama isn’t an alter ego. Instead, the character is an inventive device who nudges us to reexamine the oddities and pleasures of modern life. As an artist, Stringer treads lightly, and there’s undeniable delight in her depictions of playful pooches and museum trappings. But she — as Umeyama — also gracefully points to heavier themes, like the irreversible and ever-growing footprint of globalization.

True to the time period in which Umeyama would have worked, Stringer’s dog drawings are executed in sumi ink on Japanese rice paper. Each piece features one or more dogs along with observations written in Japanese script. A quirky sense of humor pervades these annotations. In one piece, a mottled Dachshund in an orange and blue harness is described as a “very short haired little dragon dog with blizzard spots.” A nearby sketch of a caterpillar is joined by a caption saying that the dog reminds Umeyama of this insect. The text gives us a sense of how a 19th-century Japanese person would perceive such unfamiliar entities.



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The notes also highlight dog-human and dog-dog behaviors. Umeyama hones in on distinctive doggie details like rhinestone-studded collars, and a rambunctious dog park scene is titled, Little puppy sumo wrestling. Though they are undoubtedly charming, the drawings also make us think about the extreme ways that humans have intervened with nature in recent history. Over the past 200 years or so, we’ve molded dogs’ physiques and personalities in drastic ways — Stringer includes the example of the pug — and we’ve even started dressing them in silly outfits. But this tendency to meddle with and dominate nature has also brought darker consequences, like dwindling natural resources and climate change.



Hiromi Stringer, “Dog 80,” 2022, gouache and sumi ink on oriental paper, 9 1/2 x 13 inches

Stringer’s lively dog studies are starkly contrasted by her drawings of museum plaques and equipment. Quieter and more technical than the dog drawings, these realistically-rendered pieces meticulously reproduce explanatory wall texts that discuss Umeyama’s historical moment, and are sometimes overlaid with a drawing of the viewer’s shadow. These pieces are a sort of trompe-l’œil that reinforces Umeyama-cum-Stringer’s fantastical story. They also, in the artist’s gentle way, unsettle our own sense of reality. At The Dog Show, we can lose ourselves in Umeyama’s wondrous time travel while also wondering about how, where, and why we look.

The Dog Show: Time Traveler Umeyama’s Drawings from the 21st Century is on view at grayDUCK Gallery through January 7, 2024.

Writer’s note: special thanks to the artist Hiromi Stringer for her translations of the text in her drawings.