



# White Figure with Blue Miko

Ikemura, Leiko

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## On display

**Title/Description:** White Figure with Blue Miko

**Artist/Maker:** Ikemura, Leiko

**Born:** 1996

**Object Type:** Figure

**Measurements:** h. 690 x w. 360 x d. 370 mm

**Accession Number:** L.223

**Production Place:** Germany

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*White Figure with Blue Miko* (1996) is an enigmatic ceramic work by the Japanese-Swiss artist Leiko Ikemura (b.1951). The sculpture's handbuilt form depicts a headless female body cradling a small animal maternally in its arms. It is possible that the artist, through the absence of the figure's head, is suggesting that intuition and emotion should supplant the rational calculations of the mind. [1] The actual meaning of this work is left to the viewer to interpret and Ikemura has indicated that she wants her audience to trust the feelings they experience from being close to the artwork itself. [2]

Ikemura's 'Girls' are non-specific, ageless, hybrid human-animals, both sensitive and innocent. They convey a child-like vulnerability combined with a non-judgemental openness to experience. When sculpted in clay, their branching torsos, multiple limbs and fragmented bodies go beyond the limitations of the terrestrial world. Headless female figures and disembodied heads in dream-like states are recurrent motifs in Ikemura's work, and symbolise a state of artistic or spiritual transcendence.

*White Figure with Blue Miko* was created during a period when the artist had begun to experiment with unfired clay and glazed terracotta. Around the neck of the figure the clay is pinched, creating an undulating crater-like opening. Ikemura has textured the material with a blunt-edged scraper to produce the angular indentations of the figure's skirt. Pale blue and white glazes have been thinly applied to the body of the work. Ikemura is less interested in perfecting a manufacturing technique than she is in conveying an idea or energy through her exploratory use of clay.

'Sculpture is based on the artist's bodily awareness, meaning that rather than using your hands, it's more like manipulating an object with your whole body. When you use clay, the changes and fluidity of the material can be understood through your body.'

...

I recognise the works of ceramic artists who use various techniques with a thorough knowledge of the material, but I wanted to create sculptures in my own way at a fundamental level, rather than focus on polishing my skills.' [3]

Ikemura discovered that her 'new-born' [4] ceramic figures developed out of the simple idea of a vase: a hollowed vessel with a rim encircling a void. Alluding to the metaphor of the vessel as a container for the soul, Ikemura describes her sculptures as 'vessels of being' [5]. Ikemura's sculptures physically and spiritually manifest the artist's creative impulse to animate the clay.

This sculpture was made before the self-portrait *With Blue Miko in Black* (1997) [6], which shows the artist holding her pet cat named Miko. The use of the Japanese word 'miko', meaning 'spiritual medium' or 'shrine maiden', suggests that the animal in *White Figure with Blue Miko* possesses a supernatural or psychic connection with the headless female figure. Ikemura has compared herself to a miko in that she is 'driven by some unknown force' when making art. [7] Ikemura appreciates how the unconscious mind is revealed through the rapid process of making, capturing 'the essence of the human figure... before the mind intervenes'. [8]

In this work, Ikemura brings together ideas developed in her automatic drawings from the early 1990s, in which the female form becomes fragmented and the theme of the void emerges. The void is integral to the form and structure of Ikemura's sculpture, and imbues her work with a mysterious vitality. The exploration of cavities and hollows (*J. utsuro*) are fundamental to the artist's conceptualisation of existence. *White Figure with Blue Miko* is an iconic example of the artist's exploration of the 'utsuro-form' and reveals her interest in the dialectical relationship between "being" and "nothingness". Ikemura describes the holes in her works as 'permeable "places" that connect the self with the external world.' [9]

Leiko Ikemura is a critically acclaimed contemporary artist whose work has been widely exhibited. Her first UK exhibition, *Leiko Ikemura: Usagi in Wonderland*, took place at the Sainsbury Centre in 2021. This exhibition traced the development of Ikemura's oeuvre and revealed how her artistic language has been influenced through interaction with different cultures in East Asia and Europe. By using cross-cultural references to describe her lived experience, Ikemura's works provide important insights into contemporary society in Japan and Germany.

Born in Tsu, Mie prefecture, Ikemura studied languages at Osaka University. After leaving Japan, she studied painting in Spain before branching into sculpture. Ikemura moved to Switzerland in 1979 and now lives and works in Germany. Internationally celebrated, Ikemura's awards include the 70th Japan Ministry Award for Fine Arts in the 1st year of Reiwa (2020), the Cologne Fine Art Prize (2014) and the Ja-De Prize from the German-Japan Foundation (2013). Her work is represented in the collections of the Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris; the National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo; the National Museum of Art, Osaka; and the Kunstmuseum Basel.

*White Figure with Blue Miko* has been previously displayed in Nordiska Akvarellmuseet, Skärhamn (February 2019 - March 2019) and the Sainsbury Centre (July 2021 - December 2021). It has been reproduced in catalogues published by Nordiska Akvarellmuseet (Skärhamn: 2019), Hetjens (Düsseldorf: 2017), and Sainsbury Institute of Japanese Arts and Culture (Norwich: 2022).

Vanessa Tothill, January 2023

[1] David Elliott interprets the motif of decapitation as representing a separation from rational thought that enabled Ikemura to explore 'different visual equivalents of emotion'. Adele Schlombs,

ed., *Leiko Ikemura: All About Tigers and Girls* (Cologne: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 2015), p. 271.

[2] 'My message is a visual and sensual one, so the viewer could feel that it's very open to interpretation... The exhibition [*Usagi in Wonderland*] is not just about the works but making space so people can breathe and be with art.' Leiko Ikemura

<https://www.sainsburycentre.ac.uk/whats-on/leiko-ikemura-usagi-in-wonderland/> [accessed 9 January 2023]

[3] Leiko Ikemura and Julian Heynen, *Leiko Ikemura: Transfiguration From Figure to Landscape* (Berlin: Distanz Verlag GmbH, 2012), p. 137.

[4] 'I have always set off in new directions - an interview with Leiko Ikemura, *Apollo* magazine, 28 May 2019. <https://www.apollo-magazine.com/leiko-ikemura-kunstmuseum-basel/> [accessed 9 January 2023]

[5] Adele Schlombs, p. 276. From Leiko Ikemura, and Kimio Jinno, *Being*, (Nagoya: Gallery HAM Nagoya, 1995), and Friedmann Malsch, *Leiko Ikemura. Kunst heute Nr. 20*, 'Leiko Ikemura in Conversation with Friedmann Malsch' (Cologne: Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 1998), p. 61.

[6] <https://www.artnet.com/artists/leiko-ikemura/with-blue-miko-in-black-DPbX4coEvX3LFij7IZWexw2> [accessed 9 January 2023]

[7] Leiko Ikemura and Julian Heynen, p. 131.

[8] Leiko Ikemura and Julian Heynen, p. 133.

[9] Leiko Ikemura and Julian Heynen, p. 137.

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## Further Reading

Ikemura, Leiko and Kimio Jinno, *Being*, (Nagoya: Gallery HAM Nagoya, 1995)

Ikemura, Leiko, *Leiko Ikemura: Transfiguration* (Tokyo: National Museum of Modern Art, 2011)

Ikemura, Leiko and Julian Heynen, *Leiko Ikemura: Transfiguration From Figure to Landscape* (Berlin: Distanz Verlag GmbH, 2012)

Friedmann Malsch, *Leiko Ikemura. Kunst heute Nr. 20*, 'Leiko Ikemura in Conversation with Friedmann Malsch' (Cologne: Wilfried Dickhoff, Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 1998)

Ohst, Melanie, Corinna Wolfien and Studio Ikemura, eds, *Leiko Ikemura: Von Ost Nach Ost/From East to East* (Rostock: Hinstorff Verlag GmbH, 2020)

Schlombs, Adele, ed., *Leiko Ikemura: All About Tigers and Girls* (Cologne: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 2015)

'I have always set off in new directions - an interview with Leiko Ikemura, *Apollo* magazine, 28 May 2019. <https://www.apollo-magazine.com/leiko-ikemura-kunstmuseum-basel/> [accessed 9 January

2023]

