Mika Horibuchi

Curtain Drawn, 2014. Oil on canvas; 60 × 38 × 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.

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 Parnassus’s labrusca it lies 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 seems 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 domination—offering the sense of action not just a static representation of 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 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 crafts a higher sense of a monarch surveying royal land—Horibuchi’s painted 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 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 crafts a higher sense of a monarch surveying royal land—Horibuchi’s painted 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 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 crafts a higher sense of a monarch surveying royal land—Horibuchi’s painted 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 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 crafts a higher sense of a monarch surveying royal land—Horibuchi’s painted 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 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 crafts a higher sense of a monarch surveying royal land—Horibuchi’s painted 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 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 crafts a higher sense of a monarch surveying royal land—Horibuchi’s painted 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 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 crafts a higher sense of a monarch surveying royal land—Horibuchi’s painted 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 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 crafts a higher sense of a monarch surveying royal land—Horibuchi’s painted 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 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 crafts a higher sense of a monarch surveying royal land—Horibuchi’s painted 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 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 crafts a higher sense of a monarch surveying royal land—Horibuchi’s painted 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 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 crafts a higher sense of a monarch surveying royal land—Horibuchi’s painted 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 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 crafts a higher sense of a monarch surveying royal land—Horibuchi’s painted 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...
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.

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 (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.