**An Introduction to Chinatsu Ikeda’s *Wunderhaus* (2021)—Meryem Özel**

Chinatsu Ikeda (b. 1980 in Osaka, Japan) has turned the rooms of Wolfenbüttel’s *Kunstverein* into a soft space, a realm of domestic warmness. Rooms are dotted with house shoes, vases, bulbous mugs, bits of cleaning sponge, wavy dabs of toothpaste. Outlines of combs and toothbrushes echo across several works. And yet Ikeda’s is a strange domesticity, for among its tokens of homelife spring ropy green vines, rows of leaflets curled like caterpillars, and florals the color of sunshine, leaking tears like falling rain drops. A mossy carpet has overrun the floor of one room; a second room is blanketed in a shade reminiscent of egg yolks, wheatfields, and daffodils; the floor of a third room has been shrouded in a snowy white. Water in various forms gushes and drips across many of the two- and three-dimensional works. A succession of bowed flowerheads painted high across the walls with a blink come to resemble bent elbows and then, with a second blink, upturned wet-from-the-shower feet. Plant forms, upon closer look, appear vaguely finger-like. These rooms are not so much a taming of the wild as a wilding of the domestic. Plant life and human life, home and garden merge into a dazzling oneness—this is Chinatsu Ikeda’s *Wunderhaus.*

Ikeda’s idea to create an immersive space in which inside and outside blur together sprung in part from *Ginkaku-ji,* or the Silver Pavilion,a Zen temple in Kyoto surrounded by a vast Japanese garden. Sliding doors allow the garden to flow into the temple and the temple to spill into the garden. The garden design at Ginkaku-ji created for Ikeda the impression of a weirding of dimensions, of her body shrinking while the garden expanded around her. Ikeda’s series of watercolors convey this sense of wonderment. Meandering lines of pointillistic, laboriously executed markings combine into watery, vegetal, and vaguely anthropomorphic forms. Her watercolor waves draw inspiration from Hokusai’s woodcuts as well as the simplified waves of the Japanese animator Hayao Miyazaki. Other geographic influences are discernible as well: Ikeda’s formal art education took place not in Japan but in the U.S., at the prestigious School of the Art Institute of Chicago, and she uses a Western color palette—a palette whose brightness evokes the innocence and youth of children’s art. Moreover, it is no coincidence that her pointillistic watercolor marks resemble tesserae: Ancient Roman mosaics, which she assimilated into her visual vocabulary in Rome, were an inspiration here, too.

Several formal aspects of Ikeda’s work are in conversation with two of art history’s heavyweights: Picasso and Matisse, who, incidentally, were colleagues and rivals in Paris. Ikeda’s rhythmic cut-paper compositions recall Matisse’s vibrant and often vegetal *papier découpés* (cut outs), which dominated the artist’s output in the late 1940s. Matisse likened this practice of cutting and gluing paper to “draw[ing] in color,” and its emphasis, as in Ikeda’s interpretation of this method, lies on the dynamic interplay of positive and negative space.

This exhibition’s debt to Picasso is crystallized in Ikeda’s series of brightly painted paper-based guitars with organic themes. These were inspired by a cardboard guitar Picasso fashioned in the fall of 1912. Picasso, who often turned to sculpture to solve problems of two-dimensional representation, constructed his cardboard guitar during the transition between what is today referred to as analytic cubism and synthetic cubism. In this transition, the muted tones and fragmentation of analytic cubism gave way to artworks whose more colorful abstract elements did not on their own closely resemble their external referents but rather functioned syntactically and self-referentially within the composition to transmit a graspable image. This switch is realized in Picasso’s *Guitar,* which by making use of simple materials—carboard, string, glue, tape, pushpins, wire—managed to displace the mass of a guitar onto discrete, layered two-dimensional planes. This resulted in the creation of an object that hovered between sculpture, disassembled painting, and bricolage.

The significance of *Guitar* is often discussed in terms of its role in the development of cubism, but for Ikeda, the most striking elements of the work are its simplicity, the humbleness of its materials, and the challenge it presents to the division between high art and low art. This is a work that prioritized the realization of an idea above all else; the ordinariness of its materials is beside the point. The low-cost, readily available materials Picasso used reminded Ikeda of the inventive ethos that characterizes the artmaking of children, whose untrained hands are a strong source of inspiration in her own practice. A scrappy sort of inventiveness has come to characterize Ikeda’s own artmaking for another reason: in her second occupation as a children’s art teacher, she creates easy-to-follow lessons using simple materials, and these designs flow into her own practice**.** This has led to some playful and humorous results: in looking closely at Ikeda’s guitars, you may notice that their protruding sound holes, which in Picasso’s consist of paper rolled into a cylinder, are actually the centers of toilet rolls. With this gesture, Ikeda one-ups Picasso’s eschewal of the dictates of conventional taste—for what is more common, more base, more ignoble and of the everyday than a toilet roll plucked from the bathroom? And yet, given that Marcel Duchamp’s upturned urinal has entered the hallowed halls of art history, Ikeda knows, as we do, that we are in no position to deny her toilet-paper-roll guitars the status of art. (And anyway, the toilet paper rolls really do set off the rest of the guitars rather nicely.)

One of Ikeda’s guitars, the so-called *Oppai* or *Boob Guitar,* consists of a twin pair of round-bodied, flesh-colored instruments with fire-engine-red toilet-paper-roll sound holes that double as nipples. Tufts of matching red fiber over the fretboards are teasingly evocative of pubic hair. The *Boob Guitar,* a focal point of the exhibition, reminds us that alongside this exhibition’s formal associations with the practices of the outsized figures of Matisse and Picasso, the conception of this exhibition has also emerged from a fertile canon of art by women. It is because women artists like Paula Modersohn-Becker, Frida Kahlo, and Ana Mendieta widened the representational possibilities for the female nude body beyond its over-definition by the hypersexualizing gaze of the likes of Picasso that Ikeda’s *Oppai Guitar* does not sound as a dissonant note within the exhibition but can be appreciated as an organic, playful, and sensual addition to the *Wunderhaus.* Moreover, the fact that this exhibition can hinge on the creation of a domestic space—a lush, fantastical domestic space, but a domestic space nonetheless—is part of the legacy of feminist artists who from the 1960s on carved out room within the artworld for art centered on the domestic.

Winter will be long and dreary and gray. In preparation for it, I advise this: Let your feet sink into the soft felt of Chinatsu Ikeda’s *Wunderhaus*. Soak in its warmth, absorb its summer colors, and allow yourself to be put under its otherworldly spell.