

Article

The Death of Painting and Its Afterlife in Morimura Yasumasa's *Portrait (Futago)*

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Abstract: This essay performs a close reading of Morimura's *Portrait (Futago)* to establish how the artist's multi-media approach echoes 1980s declarations about the end of painting while also proposing alternatives for its historical and material afterlife. In many ways, the artist's performances make the crises brought on by the emerging global economy visual, and as such pointed to a number of slow deaths: of painting, of capitalism, of Japanese tradition. But the images do not merely document the demise. Instead, they present a scenario in which multiplicities define contemporary being. By considering how the work engages with photography, performance, and painting, I argue that Morimura's approach to modality pointed out inherently Western assumptions about painting as well as its incompatibility with a holistic global identity in the 1980s and 90s. Exploiting the stereotypes of his media, Morimura makes tangible painting's complicity with Western hegemony and destabilizes it in ways that propose a new global subject.

Keywords: Morimura Yasumasa; death of painting; photography; globalization

1. Introduction

A heated debate has unfolded over the status of painting since Paul Delaroche called it dead in 1840.¹ Sideline by the reproductive capacities of the newly-invented photographic medium, it seemed that there was nothing left for painting to do. Formalist experiments in the century that followed ultimately proved Delaroche wrong, but by the 1980s, artists and theorists once again rallied around the claim that painting had exhausted itself. Scholars pulled back from such rhetoric in subsequent decades, and in hindsight, the declaration proved premature. Nevertheless, the pervasive insistence on the "death of painting" at the dawn of the contemporary period points to a clear cultural belief in, if not an outright anxiety about, its dissolution, even if the central claim did not bear out.

Indeed, whether or not painting was actually dead, there are real reasons it felt that way. Emerging photographic practices engaged in richer theoretical entanglements, and once again photography seemed to overtake painting in its explorations of reproduction, representation, and the function of art. This is certainly the case in the photography of Morimura Yasumasa, whose self-portraits as Western masterpieces suggested that our definitions, our histories, and even our memories of art were no longer safe. Transforming himself into the subjects of famous paintings, Morimura literally inserts his Asian, male body into the canon, forcing it to accommodate him. The artist's appropriations emerged at a time of political and cultural ascendancy for Japan, and his literal disruptions of Western culture flagged alternative notions of genius and artistic mastery. The performances make the crises brought on by this emerging global economy make visual, and as such, the work points to a number of slow deaths: of painting, of capitalism, of tradition.

However, Morimura's images do not merely document the demise. Instead, they present a scenario in which multiplicities define contemporary being and suggest new pathways for identity and self. As such, this essay performs a close reading of Morimura's *Portrait (Futago)* (Figure 1) to establish how the artist's multi-media approach echoes 1980s declarations about the end of painting while also proposing alternatives for its historical



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and material afterlife. By considering how the work operates between modalities as it reimagines Edouard Manet's *Olympia* (1863), I argue that *Portrait (Futago)* pointed out inherently Western assumptions about painting and its incompatibility with the emerging global identity of the 80s and 90s. I frame the oeuvre within the historiographic contours of the Death of Painting debate and use Jeff Wall's writing on Manet to consider how Morimura, like Manet before him, leverages form, medium, and subject to expose the inner workings of modern painting. Morimura invokes not only Manet's composition, but also his method of critique. As such, it enables the Japanese artist to make tangible painting's complicity with Western hegemony. Exploiting the stereotypes of various media, Morimura destabilizes painting in ways that indicate the emergence of a new global subject, linking the Death of Painting to the birth of new ways of thinking and being.



Figure 1. Morimura Yasumasa, *Portrait (Futago)*, 1988. Color photograph, 82 3/4 × 118 inches (210.19 × 299.72 cm). Edition of 5. © Yasumasa Morimura; Courtesy of the artist and Luhring Augustine, New York.

2. Olympias in Dialogue

In the *Daughter of Art History* series, Morimura Yasumasa poses as famous Western paintings in order to explore and critique the ways Western culture shapes his identity as a Japanese man. Emulating works by Rembrandt, Goya, Velazquez, and Rosetti, among others, Morimura becomes not only men and women of various ages and ethnicities but also vegetables and animals, creating absurd and surreal pictures of a person caught in-between. *Portrait (Futago)* is perhaps the best known of the works, a reimagining of Edouard Manet's 1863 *Olympia*, which itself serves such an important role in modernism that many art historians can describe it from memory. Morimura perfectly rhymes his composition to the original: stretched horizontally on her chaise, a nude woman stares at her patron with her ankles tightly crossed, closing off her body and covering her genitals with a stiff left hand pressed flatly into her thigh. A black cat hisses at her feet while a maidservant proffers a bouquet of flowers from behind the settee.

However, there are subtle, meaningful departures. In Morimura's version, the artist appears in drag as both the naked Olympia and her maidservant. He lounges on a kimono in the foreground wearing pink kitten heels and a blond wig while a *maneki-neko*, known

as the beckoning cat or money cat, sits at his feet. He appears a second time in blackface, taking the place of the maidservant in a feat only possible through a kind of visual trickery that signals the artifice behind the picture.²

The subtitle, *Futago*, meaning twins, seems to refer to the relationship the artist creates between the two women in the image when he occupies both roles, but it can also refer to the relationship between the photograph and the painting. In each case, the doubling emphasizes the importance of replication and dichotomy and their potential to undermine privileged Western categories. The picture's inherent binaries—man/woman, East/West, photography/painting, and original/copy—come to the fore as blended states of being to produce, in Morimura's words, "psychological portrait[s] of myself having been strongly influenced by Western culture, despite having been born and raised as a Japanese man" (Morimura 2003, p. 113). Born at the end of the American occupation of Japan and trained in the contents and methods of the Western art canon, he believes his experiences engendered unnatural and unhealthy sensibilities that distorted his sense of self. Western culture inflects his Japanese identity in a way that pulls him between two poles of cultural signifiers, producing an anxiety and alienation that he makes visual in his images (Morimura 2003, pp. 113–14; Fritsch 2011, p. 35).

The state of being in-between manifests across the other works in the *Daughter of Art History* series, whose title continues to emphasize the artist's secondary, feminized status in relation to the work of the Western masters he chooses. The resulting images do not resolve the tension between cultural signifiers, but instead visualize the realm of ambiguity created between their juxtaposition. He acknowledges that identities are permeable and fluid while also being policed by social norms. Likewise, the paradoxical coexistence of identities in his pictures serve to both reify and subvert the social and visual codes that define each category. Occupying multiple states of being, he explores the seams created between binaries, "an utterly undefined grey area" that the artist likens to a beachhead where the shoreline continually shifts between land and sea (Morimura 2003, p. 120). Here, much like in his images, categories are at once both and neither and their status as discrete entities becomes mutable and questionable.

Arguably one of the most important nudes of all time, *Olympia* presented contemporary bourgeois society with an image of its own social underbelly, forcing the audience of the French Salon to contemplate the realities of class and legal sex work as key elements of Parisian modernity (Clark 1986).³ *Portrait (Futago)* likewise offers up new social dynamics for our consideration, closely mirroring Manet's composition while suffusing it with Japanese details for the age of international exchange.

By recreating such an iconic image, Morimura's work can be read not just as an homage but a colonization that commandeers visual space for a new non-Western subject. It inverts *Olympia*'s key principles, spotlighting and undermining Western pictorial assumptions as painting becomes photography, the historical becomes the contemporary, and, most notably, black and white women become Asian men. These changes force the viewer to acknowledge their expectations of the picture and their relationship to the subjects, both of which situate the viewer as Western and male by default. When he places himself in the position of the sex worker, Morimura implicates the colonial power structures that subjugated and feminized non-Western cultures; he upends the gendered expectations of the nude in art history and foregrounds the role of race by becoming the object of the gaze (Bryson 1995, p. 75).⁴ In doing so, he conjures contemporary racial dynamics and stereotypes while also identifying the role images play in perpetuating these ideas in the first place.

3. Photography and the Death of Painting

Portrait (Futago) visually and conceptually works to identify the categories that uphold implicit assumptions about the Western canon and literally adulterates them. This gesture is already clear in his approach to subject matter, which becomes blended and multifaceted, but it is also true of his approach to medium. The artist brings together painting, sculpture,

performance, and photography, constructing three-dimensional sets as he takes on the roles of the figures in the work. It is, for Donald Kuspit, the *Gesamtkunstwerk* that unites multiple modalities into a conceptual whole. This panoply of artistic strategies better reflects the realities of contemporary multimedia practice, but it also reads against the history of painting as the preeminent Western medium (Kuspit 2003, pp. 8–9). The reliance on many media de-emphasizes oil, fully rejecting the Academic standards that Manet and the Realists were themselves beginning to dismantle in works like *Olympia* at its origin (Nochlin 1990; Fried 1990).

Photography is central to this reading because these notions of decentering and displacement dovetail with longstanding critical conversations about photography's relationship to painting. On its face, the picture documents Morimura's performance, an indexical reference to his body's reconfiguration into a pictorial cultural touchstone (Gonzalo 2000).⁵ However, photography also emphasizes *Portrait (Futago)*'s mimetic relationship with *Olympia*, raising the issue of reproduction. In print, *Portrait (Futago)* becomes a copy of an original, upholding the Manet as real and the photograph as fake. Morimura reinforces the association between his photograph and forgery by explaining that he only knows Western art through photographs from books and not through encounters in museums. For the artist, then, his work has always been a copy of a copy. "Real art, for me, meant oil painting", he says, further suggesting that *Portrait (Futago)* is fake by virtue of its photographic state (Morimura 2003, p. 113).⁶

The juxtaposition of real and fake by photographic means—of original and copy—activates key elements of *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, where Walter Benjamin discusses how mass media technologies compromised the authority of artworks by bringing formerly elite experiences to the masses. Contact with an original object was no longer required, and so it became less valuable when its image could be dispersed across space and time. The aura of the object—its lofty elevation above the pedestrian—depends on its status as a unique and rare thing. If the proliferation of copies diffuses the aura of the object, as Benjamin suggests, then Morimura would appear to be actively participating in dismantling the power of Western art (Benjamin 1968, pp. 222–24).⁷

Lena Fritsch has cautioned against reading Morimura's parody as anti-Western or anti-painting (Fritsch 2011).⁸ For example, "the copy" may imply something beyond reproduction for his Japanese audience and should also be considered. Traditional relationships between masters and students called for the relentless imitation of artworks until the student could perfectly replicate the master's style and assume their own master status. As such, copying served a fundamental role in the training artists received in Japanese art schools until the mid-90s (Stearns 1995, p. 53). With this in mind, the series could instead be interpreted as a sign of respect in recognition of a masterwork. Nevertheless, the successful copy would also frame Morimura as the consummate artist by acting as a sign of great skill and expertise. To be sure, *Portrait (Futago)* is significantly larger than the *Olympia*, making it literally greater than the original.⁹ In this light, it may be more appropriate to think of the photograph as a cheeky claim that Morimura is the superior artist, one who has ascended above the level of Manet.

However, through either lens, there remains a type of competition created when bringing two works into dialogue with one another the way Morimura does in *Portrait (Futago)*; though humor and the interrogation of cultural binaries are clearly primary concerns, notions of originality and reproduction are foregrounded by Morimura's use of photography. By the time the *Daughter of Art History* series began in the late 1980s, the theoretical dimensions of the medium, its ability to question the nature of representation and image making itself, had also assumed a primary role in scholarly discourse.¹⁰ Morimura's work cannot escape that context, regardless of artistic intention, especially since the series echoes the concerns of his 1970s predecessors who also used the documentary function and the reproducibility of photography as key elements of critique.

Whether by re-photographing the work of Walker Evans or assuming the roles of B-movie heroines, photographers such as Sherrie Levine and Cindy Sherman exposed

the mythologies of identity and authorship embedded in our codes of representation, encouraging critics to consider how the medium in turn presented a new mode of avant-garde exploration. For Douglas Crimp, the approach seemed to take the reins from modern painting and heralded the end of modernity itself. Reading formalism as the defining project of modernism, Crimp argued that this new group of artists thought beyond the self-contained art object to instead pursue the contingency of the image in relationship to its history, culture, audience, and reception: “Those processes of quotation, excerptation, framing, and staging that constitute the strategies of the work I have been discussing necessitate uncovering strata of representation”, Crimp wrote in the seminal essay *Pictures*. “Needless to say, we are not in search of sources or origins, but of structures of signification: underneath each picture there is always another picture” (Crimp 1979, p. 87). By continually pointing outside of themselves, these works indicated the emergence of a postmodernism for Crimp, at once moving beyond the tenets of formalism and rejecting its most valued methods of making.

Similar to these earlier artists, Morimura’s photography presses on the rules of signification, provoking conversations about authenticity, mass media, and the role of artistic mastery. He similarly engaged with appropriation, archetype, replication, and performance in the decade that followed, leveraging the complex meanings of the medium in ways that also allowed his work to function discursively. Such similarities emphasize the significance of his medium and the critical work it performs. However, Morimura’s conceptual parallels to these artists are especially significant here because when placed in continuity with these Pictures Generation artists, his work can be read as part of the wave of artistic interventions that nourished the Death of Painting debate.

The connection between photography and the Death of Painting again comes through Crimp, who codified the rhetoric in a 1981 essay entitled “The End of Painting.” In his estimation, the radical photography of the Pictures Generation clarified the mechanisms of image making, critically examining the systems that give images their meaning. In doing so, it eclipsed painting, which already stripped itself down to its most basic elements and identified its limits. Painting, he argued, still depended on materiality, human touch, and museum contexts to achieve significance, and as the rules of the medium were pared away during 20th-century exploration, these conditions were increasingly satisfied to the point of saturation. As such, Crimp suggested that painting was not a medium but an epistemology, one sustained by modernist conditions that no longer functioned in and of themselves (Crimp 1981, pp. 75–80). It could produce new images and new narratives, but it could not press any further on its own boundaries and still remain in continuity with a history of innovation “from Altamira to Pollock” (Crimp 1981, pp. 74–75).¹¹ For these reasons, Crimp reasoned that painting was dead, and photography had killed it.

Portrait (Futago)’s medium and its proximity to Pictures Generation concepts brings the work in line with Crimp’s argument, but while the Death of Painting conversation is largely subtextual in those 1970s photographs, deduced from other systemic critiques, Morimura’s work directly engages with the question of Western painting and the cultural frameworks that sustain it. In taking on the art historical canon (and oil paintings, more specifically), the Japanese artist makes room for a reflexive discussion about painting’s preferential status. It suggests that if painting is over, it is because the conditions upholding it at the single most important artistic genre—the Academy, history painting, binaries, local capitalism, and the West as center—are antiquated and defunct.

4. Globalization, Art, and Capital

To be sure, the Death of Painting may have been about a crisis in innovation, an inability to continue pushing the medium into new formal territories, but it was also a recognition that the system it operated in was also in crisis. In the words of Arthur Danto, “painting was finished because the social and economic structures which supported it were held no longer to be viable” (Danto 1998, pp. 138–39). Thus, it can be said that the Death of Painting was not so much about the function of the medium as it was about the changing

art market and its audiences. Both were in transition in an increasingly interconnected world whose networks were forged through transnational commodities markets. In this system, art and culture had become just another consumable product sold across borders in pursuit of profit, divorced from history or local context in a dramatic departure from modern processes as Fredric Jameson prognosticated (Jameson 1984).

This troublesome alignment between capital and culture played a significant role in the rejection of painting in the 70s and 80s. In the decade before, art movements flourished counter to collector values, either resisting commodification or making their commodity status explicit in the vein of Happenings or Pop Art, respectively, for example. The return to painting in the late 70s and 80s, by contrast, benefitted private collectors and other conservative social forces, especially as public funds for art dwindled (Pearlman 2003, pp. 9–16). This cast suspicion on the medium as a yuppie commodity bought and held like a stock market security and contributed to perceptions of painting's newest "ism", Neo-Expressionism, as regressive and authoritarian (Buchloh 1981). In the United States, the rejection of Neo-Expressionism specifically went hand-in-hand with a rejection of Reaganism (Pearlman 2003, p. 14; Artforum 2003). Painting seemed increasingly complicit with systems that sought to relegate it to the status of any other economic commodity and became suspect.

In spite of that conversation, art nevertheless continued to be braided into the expanding market economy while also becoming significantly internationalized. Postwar, new international biennials expanded the field of artists and audiences while important dealers and auction houses established branches worldwide (Enwezor 2008, pp. 155–59; Chong 2011). Fine art, it seemed, was not much different than any other mass produced good (Buchloh 2015, pp. xxviii–xxxii). When all realms of contemporary life, including art and culture, became global commodities in this way, Jameson saw a shift into a new stage of capitalism, one that signaled the death of modernism (Jameson 1984, pp. 77–80). Thus it could be said that the globalized commodification of artworks played a significant role in the "endless diagnoses of death" (Bois 1993, p. 229) that scholars declared across disciplines by the 1980s.

Globalization may in fact be the crux of the Death of Painting discussion, as we can see similar conversations manifest when local traditions come into conflict with international concerns in other historical contexts. For example, increased Western contact put Japanese artistic traditions in a tailspin in the Meiji period (1868–1912) with the downfall of the *bakufu*, the formal opening of Japan to the West, and the rapid influx of Euro-American ideas. The imperative to modernize brought with it a taste for Western art dependent on oil paint and naturalism. This style, called *yōga*, became an ideological foil that forced Japanese painting to define itself as *nihonga*, creating two divergent but coexisting concepts of the medium. Artists in turn feared the *nihonga metsubōron*: the death of Japanese painting. Postwar, this impulse re-emerged. Japanese artists were said to be "killing" *nihonga* through neglect, putting the medium in crisis again at midcentury as artists consciously aspired to international significance (Larking 2019, pp. 163–66).¹² However, as the Death of Painting debates in the West indicate, *yōga* was itself a moving target; it seems that artists trained in Morimura's generation might have abandoned Japanese tradition for an art concept that was also being declared null and void.

As Norman Bryson has argued, Morimura's work is intimately connected to globalization and 20th-century international consumerism, and so his art consciously partakes in the changing market conditions scholars believed signaled the end of modernism and the Death of Painting, as discussed above. His work is truly the "portrayer of the new global economy", for Bryson, not just mimicking "Western art, or Western bodies, but capital itself" (Bryson 1995, p. 77). Both *Portrait (Futago)* and Bryson's analysis arrived at transitional moments in Japanese history. The photograph was made at the end of the Shōwa era and initially exhibited in the first year of the Heisei era. Bryson's analysis came shortly afterward, just after the popping of the post-war bubble economy that situated Japan among the strongest economic powers in the world (Zohar 2021, p. 575). However,

Bryson is still processing the ascension of Japan in his analysis, even after the economy had faltered. Reading through the lens of Arjun Appadurai, he connects the work to the Japanese *zaibatsu* that strategically cornered the manufacturing industry by transcending the national borders that historically delimited the flow of capital. Savvy assessments of international markets permitted these mega conglomerates to gauge consumer desires then successfully satisfy these needs with Japanese products.

Morimura's art reenacts this process, Bryson suggests, by tailoring his art "products" to various international audiences (Bryson 1995, p. 78). *Portrait (Futago)*'s black *maneki-neko* figurine thus waves out at a customer not only as a tongue-in-cheek reference to the woman's bed as the site of commercial exchange, but also to indicate the conditions of our own consumption. Asian commerce in service of the Western audience is here likened to Olympia's prostitution.

However, Morimura's product is not a perfect replica—rather, it is a Japanese version—and so in the picture's counterfactuals, disjunctions, and reversals, Bryson also sees the new conditions of accelerated global media transfer, not just capital. As the image stream shoots across time and space, pictures begin to collapse in on themselves. They become disentangled from fixed national and cultural contexts only to make new connections elsewhere and mutate into something odd and different, similar to the children's game "telephone".¹³ Thus, Bryson's interpretation locates Morimura deep within the burgeoning global and transnational discourse of the 1990s, and it foregrounds mixture and hybridity in Morimura's early work as the de-facto condition of socio-political identification at the turn of the century. *Portrait (Futago)*, like information or capital, transgresses and dissolves national boundaries, unmooring identity from historically specific geographies and disintegrating the foundations of essentialisms. The changing economic conditions of the 70s and 80s, addressed by both the Death of Painting debates and in discussions of Morimura's art, was then believed to have produced a new subject and a new market that destabilized the cultural rules of the old systems.

5. Morimura's Ruined Picture

While these changing conditions were interpreted as the harbinger of painting's death by scholars in the 80s and 90s, they did not emerge *ex nihilo*. Manet's oeuvre was itself a result of transformational socio-political ruptures that already began to point to important re-interpretations of Western painting's meanings and values in the 19th century. Morimura returns to Manet repeatedly, suggesting that there is something about these paintings in particular that demand remaking.¹⁴ His abiding interest in the French artist's work is especially pertinent here because it is with Manet that Jeff Wall identified the beginnings of painting's end.

As another photographer who rose to prominence in the late 70s and 80s, Wall used his work to explore the meaning of the photographic medium, its artifice and structure, and its relationship to painting. Wall likewise turned to Manet as he did so, emulating the painter's compositions in *Pictures for Women* (1979) and *Backpack* (1981), for example. In his essay "Unity and Fragmentation in Manet", Wall evaluates the Realist's contributions to what he calls the "Western pictorial concept" in order to explain his own preoccupation with the artist, but his reflections on Manet more broadly underscore why *Olympia* is an especially loaded choice in the context of the Death of Painting debate.

Wall looked to Manet as a way to think about the fractures in artmaking, society, and tradition that haunted Realist innovations in form. He argues that Manet painted ruined pictures whose canvases show the broken threads of a pictorial concept beginning to unravel in the wake of photography's invention. The technology made it unavoidably clear that pictures have internal mechanisms of production and are not spiritual, generative acts. The pictorial unity of Western painting was then threatened by the realization that it too manifested through mechanistic means, in this case through the totalizing law of perspective. Painting was not a sensuous gesture but rather a mathematical system that processes bodies into representations, separating the image from the erotic touch of

the artist and transplanting it—disembodied and alienated—into geometric space. This menacing “mechanized interior” of painting, Wall claims, in turn demanded an alternative relationship between the painter and the picture through 20th-century modernism, driving the formalist experimentation that rejected pictorial illusionism (Wall 2007, pp. 77–79).¹⁵

For Wall, the threat of dehumanization inherent to perspective’s process was exacerbated by 19th-century economic conditions. Industrialization also disembodied individuals, transforming them into functional parts to serve capitalist production. When painting revealed itself to be complicit with this process of objectification—turning individuals into representations in the way that industrialization reduced individuals to functional labor—Wall argues that the classical concept of the picture began to disintegrate. Manet still needed perspective to be a painter in his time, but by rendering the estranged body within “the negative persistence of perspective”, Manet made the problem visual, creating a disjunctive, fragmented picture ruined by perspective’s alienation of human beings (Wall 2007, pp. 80–83).

In mimicking Manet, Morimura’s images not only revisit Realism’s controversial subject matter, but also its challenges to the traditions of painting. Both point to crises in representation and medium in their respective eras, responding to the dilemmas brought on by different stages of capitalist development. Linked to institutionalized modes of thinking and being, painting was critiqued for its complicity with capitalism and establishment order and became subject to radical change. However, in Morimura’s case, the international commodification of art revealed codes of value defined by Western financial markets and Western historical narratives, a persistent cultural imperialism in the globalized age.¹⁶ His photograph makes these codes visible, defying a unified history of painting defined by Occidentalist models. Like the Death of Painting debate more broadly, *Portrait (Futago)* repudiates the notion that painting has a monolithic identity that stretches from prehistory to postwar and questions its ability to stand in for all traditions and meanings in the late capitalist phase.

Here, the dissolution of a unified historical narrative creates literal and figural ruptures in *Portrait (Futago)*, just as it did in *Olympia*. As such, the fragmentation that Wall sees in Manet’s work is also present in Morimura’s reinterpretation as conventions of media and identity continue to be compromised in new ways. Contrary to popular belief, Morimura physically combined an image of his performance as Victorine with an image of his performance of Laure rather than using newly available digital editing tools.¹⁷ Printing each photograph in four quadrants, the artist merely replaces the empty upper-right segment with one depicting him as the maidservant in an analog process of making (Morimura 2003, pp. 122–23). In its post-production assembly and multimedia composition, Morimura builds his picture out of discrete parts. The visible seams between each quadrant of the image appear on the immediate surface of the picture and point to the internal logic of assembly found within it. Inside the frame, the color palette and the different levels of painterliness in the photograph work to subvert the cohesiveness of the image, drawing attention to the particulate nature of the picture as an assemblage of parts and continually reasserting its artificiality.

Photography and painting are strange bedfellows here, and the ease of their joining is marred by the unpleasant appearance of the work their union has wrought. The longer one looks, the more easily one can identify pieces of the image as painting, as prop, as performance, or as male, female, Asian, or Western. Once the viewer can put a name to each component, hybrid bodies and spaces begin to dissolve.

Wall suggests that photography first revealed perspective’s alienating properties and prompted the dissolution of the Western pictorial concept, but here it serves as the only thing that can hold Morimura’s fragments together to make them read as a picture. No single medium can visualize the artist’s place in the work, and so he uses as many as possible to build an accommodating space for himself. The eye is so unsettled by pattern and passages of haptic detail that the image seems to vibrate as if it could collapse back into its composite parts. However, the photograph prevents this from happening; it keeps the

image intact by holding all the pieces in place like glue. Photography's fixative properties allow discrete identities to occupy the same site simultaneously, and it organizes and sutures the various elements into a shape that can read as a picture. The pieces cooperate and produce the image, but they ultimately remain separate elements tamed and collaged together by the photographic process.

If Manet's figures are "emblematic of the new 'fragmentary' type of person produced within capitalism" (Wall 2007, p. 81), Morimura's figures show us the state of existence in late capitalism at the dawn of the global era, where the local identity of the individual is brought into contact, often violently, with international commodities that repulse rather than solicit identification. Culture is commodified and fetishized, enabling art and art history to become an additional commodity with which we may identify. However, Morimura's commodity—*Olympia*—has alienated him, and inserting his body into the image cannot reclaim it for identification and empathy. Even forcing himself into physical contact with the picture, Morimura realizes that he cannot see himself in the object, and it triggers a crisis of identity.

The high level of hybridity in Morimura's picture is only visually sensible when read in the framework of the original image and only possible when captured by the photograph. He uses as many media as possible to create a condition where identification could be feasible and obstinately prolongs the moments where he achieves his moment of empathy and unification. Nevertheless, Morimura's assemblage of parts is composed of additive elements with discrete identities that *cannot* unify under the conditions of representation at that moment in history. Morimura carries forth Manet's ruined picture when he reproduces it, but his modified version reveals a new type of ruination composed of fragments of identity and medium that no longer inhere in the picture under a global capitalist regime.

Much like Crimp, Morimura's work suggests that the view of painting as continuous, unbroken history dominated by Western concerns and shared amongst all viewers is no longer viable and is therefore at its end. As such, he produces a new kind of ruined picture where any attempt to unify the disparate lines of history and cultural meaning must fail. This is especially true of painting, which Morimura shows to be synonymous with the entire Western picture concept. Perspective is no longer in crisis here, but rather the idea of the picture as the locus of collective social and historical identity.

Morimura paints his own skin and places himself in the work as both artist and subject, which reestablishes the erotic connection between the artist's hand and the body and reinvests his figures with the paganism Wall claims is missing from Manet's empty ones (Wall 2007, p. 81). Yet, by inserting himself into the image, Morimura finds that the picture cannot support his presence, and it will not read as Manet's painting once could. His appearance foregrounds disjunction, lack, and inconsistency, rendering the image as fragmentary and tenuous, and these pieces become visible in the collage of elements the artist brings together in his work. Morimura occupies the space in-between, but in doing so reveals the impossibility of a coherent third identity in the interstices, a complete inability to hold a true hybrid representation separate from the polarities that define it. It is not just the mechanism of representation that is insufficient, as it was in Manet, but the idea that the image can be a site of collective meaning in a globalized society at all.

6. Hybridity

Hybridity can be dangerous to social order because it suggests an alternative way of being, but it is not necessarily a comfortable or productive position. In fact, its bleakness is present in the aesthetic of *Portrait (Futago)*, which assaults taste and indicates the artist's pessimism toward hybridity and its sustainability. The "paint" in the image is almost grotesque in its color and thickness, and it seems heavy, sedimented, and restrictive. With its abrasive color palette, thick brushstrokes, and excessive use of gold, the work reads as a gaudy misinterpretation of the original and could be described as kitschy or garish.

In the context of mass media culture, such a campy take evokes the notion of a "cheap reproduction"; it carries forward the adversarial relationship between original and

copy proposed by Benjamin and reinforces *Portrait (Futago)*'s status as a secondary image. Combined with the East/West dynamic of the picture, it also conjures the more racist implications of the "knockoff", a product associated with Western Chinatowns or Asian wholesale sites and derided for its lack of authenticity and quality.¹⁸ Therefore, in many ways the formal properties of the work emphasize not only the impossibility of duplication, but also the futility of the attempt.

This is indeed a "picture of things gone amiss, imbalanced, distorted, disturbing and strange" (Morimura 2003, pp. 113–14). It may stimulate laughter, but it visualizes hybridity as unnatural, disruptive, and borderline grotesque, not unlike the kinds of hybridity proposed by other artists in the same period. For example, American painter Robert Colescott expresses similar feelings in his ruminations on racial mixture, visualizing prejudice and the social anxiety over miscegenation in his bloated and contorted figures (Platow and Sims 2019). His formal tendency toward bright, saturated colors and thick brushstrokes resonates with Morimura's compositional elements, further suggesting that formal discordancy often works to undermine the superficially functional hybrid identity presented in the artwork.

Morimura's investigation into the gray spaces of identity is not celebratory, and the fracture in the image speaks to the deep unease found in occupying the interstitial space, which is itself a condition of Japanese society after war and American occupation (Vettese 2008, p. 18). Indeed, the tenuous joining of the pieces within *Portrait (Futago)* constantly reminds the viewer that the photograph and the painting are "almost the same but not quite" and that Morimura is, in the words of Homi Bhabha, "almost the same, but not white" (Bhabha 1994b, p. 89). The artist's imitation cannot overcome his physiognomy or the fraught social vision that marks his body as periphery rather than center.

Though Morimura's mimicry would seem to realize the purpose of colonization (namely, to become like the colonizer), his attempted conformity to the image is disturbing rather than reassuring. Indeed, Bhabha theorizes that as mimicry becomes more complete, it erases the distance between the colonizer and the colonized, between civilized and barbaric, and thus menaces those wielding the power. The formal qualities thus work not only to express Morimura's personal discomfort but also the threat of hybridity more broadly. The menace of Morimura's mimicry is on full display in his picture, literally manifested in the visual passages of the grotesque.

Mimicry challenges the colonizer's right to authority, and it necessitates a re-articulation of essential difference to maintain cultural superiority; but rather than await this re-articulation, Morimura's image preemptively reiterates the power of the center on the colonizer's behalf (Bhabha 1994b, p. 88).¹⁹ His disruptive picture of hybridity demonstrates that he has internalized the logic that keeps him separated from full assimilation, and it continues to buttress the center-periphery model rather than reveal its emptiness. To this point, though his position in the picture threatens the binary, the use of blackface inadvertently activates histories of racial discrimination against Black individuals, unintentionally recreating the colonial power dynamic in a performance designed to challenge it.²⁰ Coming from an Asian context, these historical nuances were missed, emphasizing what the form of the picture already tells us: Morimura can only present himself as *Westernized* but never *Western*.

Throughout the 90s, Morimura obsessively cycled through commodified images as if he sought a moment of pure identification with the cultural object, but the images he produced continue to visualize a ruined picture fragmented under the pressure of divergent cultural imperatives.²¹ For example, Morimura becomes Velasquez's *infanta* in *Daughter of Art History (Princess A)* (Figure 2), but once again, the image is characterized by disjuncture and estrangement (Morimura 2003, pp. 113–14). Even though he focuses on a solitary figure, the artifice of the image is immediately apparent and the viewer is again confronted with the incommensurability of Morimura's body with the Western picture, what one literary scholar calls the "sheer freakishness" of the image (Murphy 2013, p. 244).²² The bright red rosettes and gaudy accessories on the dress draw attention to Morimura's overly-large

head and hands as well as the architectural quality of the stiff, papier-mâché dress and curtain. Morimura's *infanta* looks more like the dwarf in *Las Meninas* than the petite blonde princess, but her waist is disproportionately too small to support even that identification. The viewer's gaze comes to rest on Morimura's face, but such a focal point only serves to reinforce how unusual that face is compared to the rest of the body. The body begins to disassociate and the eye perceives the head as separate, detached, disembodied. Once again, Morimura has tried to empathize with the object and has been rejected. He is Velasquez's *infanta*, but not quite; he remains almost the same, but not white. This Western picture cannot support his presence either.



Figure 2. Morimura Yasumasa, *Daughter of Art History (Princess A)* 1990. Color photograph, 82 3/4 × 63 inches (210.2 × 160 cm). Edition of 5. © Yasumasa Morimura; Courtesy of the artist and Luhring Augustine, New York.

7. Conclusions: The Afterlife of the Death of Painting

The works in the *Daughter of Art History* series implicate painting in a Western framework of innovation and meaning that was in the process of redefinition in the 1980s. Associated with artistic mastery and the very definition of Western art, painting became suspect in a globalized economy of competing traditions and identities. Morimura's work reflects that problem, showing that Western notions of viewership, narrative, history, and medium were not capacious enough for all viewpoints and concerns.

Painting was not “dead”, but something about the medium had clearly changed for critics in that moment. Looking back on that feeling of endings at a 2003 *Artforum*

roundtable, David Joselit reframed the question to accommodate the possibility for a kind of beginning instead: “If the “Death of Painting” of the 80s corresponded to the death of the game called “Modern Painting” (and this is by no means self-evident), then is this death also potentially a birth of a different kind of game?” he asked ([Artforum 2003](#)). Likewise, if Morimura’s photographs echoed the logics of the Death of Painting debate, might they also highlight resolutions to the problems the discourse once presented?

While Morimura expresses the discomfort and pessimism of the hybrid identity in early works such as *Portrait (Futago)* and *Daughter of Art History (Princess A)*, Bhabha’s writing further suggests that this is a natural and transitory state of global acculturation. In this way, Morimura’s art may also permit us to hypothesize what might come after the dominant epistemology of Western painting. Bhabha argues that anxiety is a byproduct of the interstitial state, a growing pain that arises as the collision of culture is productively interrogated, negotiated, and ultimately translated into a new subject identity. He writes, “it is only through a structure of splitting and displacement—‘the fragmented and schizophrenic decentering of the self’—that the architecture of the new historical subject emerges at the limits of representations itself” ([Bhabha 1994a](#), p. 217). Morimura’s image could then be read as visualizing the extended moment of cultural collision and the burgeoning awareness of the process through which the international is translated into the native. It reveals the state of identity in early global capitalism, but it also actively works to construct a future where that tension and division may eventually be resolved.

In the 30 years since *Portrait (Futago)*, the artist has continued to take on the concept of the art historical masterwork, but while his methods are similar, these digitally-altered images produce a completely different visual effect. As a result, the profound unease seen in *Portrait (Futago)* and *Daughter of Art History (Princess A)* becomes much less prominent, offering new modes of representation in the Death of Painting’s afterlife. These photographs are more cohesive, as if time and technological advancement have enabled the artist to settle into the state of hybridity that once seemed so ill-fitting.²³

Morimura revisited Velazquez and Manet in the 2010s in compositions that introduce new changes to address his role in a globalized art discourse long after the Death of Painting trend ended. *Une Moderne Olympia* (2018) sees him again as Olympia, but this time Morimura dons a traditional geisha updo as he lays on a bright red kimono. His role as maidservant has been swapped for a role as a gentleman, still in Laure’s pink dress while also sporting a top hat and mustache. Morimura now quotes himself, making a photograph based on his photograph, a new copy with new artefacts as *Olympia* gets further from its 19th-century roots. He points to his own role in the canon, referring more to his 1988 photograph than Manet’s 1863 painting as the source ([Zohar 2021](#), p. 573; [2019](#), pp. 50–51). Morimura now positions himself as a generative creator rather than an outsider and copy-cat, and suggests that his work forms a new origin point in art history, that it is itself a significant contribution.

One of his new takes on Velazquez, *Las Meninas renacen de noche IV: Peering at the secret scene behind the artist* (2013) ([Figure 3](#)), performs a similar operation. The viewer appears to stand behind a group posed in Renaissance garb. They turn away from the picture plane to gaze into a mirror on the wall, but instead of a reflection, we see the original version of *Las Meninas*. The line between mirror and canvas is muddled even further when we realize that the whole scene unfolds in the Prado among the distinctive green walls that surround Velazquez’s artwork today. The back view of the entourage also provides a glimpse of the meta-picture in *Las Meninas*, and appropriation comes full circle; the canvas concealed in the Spanish painter’s source image is here revealed to be Morimura’s *Daughter of Art History (Princess A)*. Morimura as Velazquez paints Morimura as *infanta*, pointing to the latter as a work by his own hand. For the first time, the Japanese artist has created a parallel history of Velazquez and Western art that positions him within the work at the moment of its conception.



Figure 3. Morimura Yasumasa, *Las Meninas renacen de noche IV: Peering at the secret scene behind the artist*, 2013. Chromogenic print, 58 1/4 × 65 3/4 inches (148 × 167 cm). Edition of 5 and 2 AP. © Yasumasa Morimura; Courtesy of the artist and Luhring Augustine, New York.

Morimura is no longer so preoccupied with indissoluble binaries and instead takes pleasure in the deep assimilation that masks rather than emphasizes his presence. The new digital interventions accordingly rely on different methods of making and they produce different types of images that begin to soothe the kinds of visual disjunctures present in the images from the late 80s and early 90s. His new *infanta* looks like a little girl with proper proportions and a cloth dress that falls in natural folds with natural shadows. The collagist aesthetic is still somewhat present; his repeated appearance in the work and the too-crisp outlines of his figures hint at the digital assembly of individual elements. Yet the increased sensitivity to muted color palettes and soft lighting works to conceal the passages that suture the figures into place. Morimura's hybridity is no longer as garish or disruptive as it was during the acceleration of global capitalism in the 80s.

It is possible that by working through the old binaries, Morimura has learned to move beyond them and define himself by new terms. His true self-portrait appears for the very first time in *Las Meninas renacen de noche IV* in the version of *Las Meninas* found on the wall. The painting around him remains just as the original, but Morimura appears un-costumed and undeniably contemporary in chic slacks and a vest. Standing in the place of Velazquez, he comes into his own as the artist in control of the illusion, unburdened by expectations of gender, race, age, or culture. The picture finally accommodates him once he translates the collision of binaries into a functional language of identity that he can understand.

I do not think that Morimura's resolution to the dialectic is necessarily positive or "correct", much in the way that I do not wish to argue that Morimura's work merely illustrated the theoretical dimensions of the Death of Painting and postmodernism more

broadly. Almost four decades later, we know that both those theories were transitory, quickly outmoded through skeptical analysis (Foster 1996). Limiting the artist's value to those ideas would make his work irrelevant, and I do not believe that is so. Instead, I think Morimura's oeuvre articulates a problem that the scholars working around him in the 80s and 90s were also coming to terms with. Both Morimura's photography and the tenor of the discourse ultimately point at significant social, political, and cultural fractures in their time, which I think are related to the de-centering of Western models of art, history, and meaning that were unfolding around globalization. Morimura's work shows that painting defined the Western picture concept and derived its power from binaristic relationships, suggesting that the crisis was not in the medium itself, but in its inability to continue to define a new, global shape of art. Rather than a death, then, it might be more appropriate to think of this decade as one of acute change, where cultural conditions and logics evolved so dramatically that old visual frameworks proved insufficient.

The medium of oil—once synonymous with Morimura's concept of art itself—has become almost irrelevant in the artist's contemporary practice as he downplays facture and mimicry. The works continue to facilitate dialogues with art history but are not prescribed by their sources and no longer compete as subservient or bastardized versions. Playing more wildly with compositions and historical media, Morimura refers to previous models without trying to fully replicate them, and in doing so has robbed oil of its psychological hold over him. The afterlife of the Death of Painting, for Morimura's art, is neither the end of painting nor its rebirth, but a recognition that the medium is a tool and not a definitive mode. "Real art" can be more capacious than that.

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Notes

- ¹ It is very likely this story is apocryphal, but it is regularly considered the first moment in which the Death of Painting discourse manifests (Crimp 1981, p. 75).
- ² The problematic nature of blackface in this work needs to be acknowledged and has yet to be sufficiently addressed. Some discussion of this issue can be found on page 10, but a richer accounting of the context, history, and significance of the gesture is beyond the scope of this essay and requires further analysis.
- ³ Much has been said of *Olympia* since Clark's seminal analysis, including an important recent discussion of the identity of the model for the Black maidservant, Laure, and the racial dynamics present in the picture and in France at mid-century (Grigsby 2015).
- ⁴ On the power dynamic of the gaze see (Mulvey 1975).
- ⁵ Here I am referring to Krauss' notion of the index, which Gonzalo also seems to highlight in her analysis (Krauss 1977).
- ⁶ He conveyed this anecdote again in a 2010 lecture at Columbia: "All the art teachers at my junior high school and high school had been trained in Western art, and all of them were oil painters. [...] So having been raised in an educational environment that revolved around European and American ideals, it was normal for me to define painting as "oil painting", or in other words, Western painting." Morimura quoted in (Zohar 2021, p. 577).
- ⁷ More specifically, Morimura would appear to participate in the diffusion of the aura through the democratization of the work of art's image.
- ⁸ Similarly, drag performance reads differently in a Japanese context considering the *onnagata* tradition where female roles in Kabuki theater are played by men (Stearns 1995, p. 94). Fritsch goes even further to suggest that Western post-colonial interpretations, while significant, overshadow the more important role of humor for Japanese audiences, which should be considered first. See

(Kasahara 2012, pp. 500–501). However, I am not entirely persuaded that Morimura’s early photographs are primarily intended for a Japanese audience at all based on the “masterworks” he selects and the stereotypical Japanese accessories he chooses to place in his copies.

The SFMoMA copy used here measures 82.75 × 118 inches compared to *Olympia*’s 51 × 74.8 inches.

Some of the most important photo theory texts were published in the late 70s and 80s (Barthes 1981; Crimp 1979; Krauss 1977; Sekula 1986; Sontag 1977). For historiographies of photography theory, see (Kriebel 2007; Nickel 2001).

Crimp quotes Barbara Rose as he seeks to define what painting meant to critics in the 80s, here pointing to the concept of the medium as sharing a unified history across time.

Larking also sees the similarity between the *metsubōron* discourse and the Death of Painting discourse in the West. Like every other Death of Painting debate, the *metsubōron* did not mean the end of *Nihonga*, either.

Ironically, this game is sometimes called “Chinese Whispers”, which one can only assume is a racist reference to the incomprehensibility of East Asian languages and the stereotypical belief that Asians are unable to properly pronounce English phrases.

Morimura works that use Manet as a referent include *Portrait (Musume 1)* (1988), *Portrait (Musume 2)* (1988), *Portrait (Shounen 1)* (1988), *Portrait (Shounen 2)* (1988), *Portrait (Shounen 3)* (1988), *Daughter of Art History (Theater A)* (1990), *Daughter of Art History (Theater B)* (1990).

Wall’s emphasis on touch and physical connection echoes Meyer Schapiro’s claim that modernism emphasized gesture in order to define itself in opposition to the photographic mechanism and the division of labor in industrial capitalism (Schapiro 1978, pp. 222–23). The “mechanization” of the artist is also addressed by Yves-Alain Bois (Bois 1993, pp. 232–33).

One of the major problems of globalization so far is that the beliefs, behaviors, and values that rise to the level of shared discourse are not taken up across borders in equal measure and remain predominantly Western. In the words of Jonathan Harris, “Two part-synonyms for ‘globalization’ are ‘Americanization’ and ‘westernization.’ ‘Imperialism’ might be a third” (Harris 2011, p. 7).

The resulting work is frequently misattributed to digital editing tools (Zohar 2019, p. 42).

The word “knockoff” here is responding to stereotypes about Asian reproductions that continue to color Western perceptions of Asian and Asian diaspora artists and their works. It is partly informed by the work of Japanese-American painter Roger Shimomura, a contemporary Pop artist who uses mass media imagery to explore Asian stereotypes and American racial dynamics. Born in Seattle, Shimomura was incarcerated in Camp Minidoka as a child during World War II. His work explores how visibly Asian individuals are perpetually viewed as foreign to the American public: an “American knockoff” and never the real thing. See (Shimomura 2014).

Others have addressed Bhabha’s theory of mimicry in relation to Morimura, but to different ends. Zohar discusses Morimura in relation to Bhabha and Deleuze’s simulacrum (Zohar 2021, pp. 571–74). Murphy discusses Morimura in relation to Bhabha and Heidegger’s concept of silence as a model for Japanese literature (Murphy 2013, pp. 244–45).

For some history on blackface and minstrelsy see, for example, (Mahar 1999).

In addition to the *Daughter of Art History* series, Morimura also posed as Pop stars and Western actresses (Friis-Hansen 1997; Kagesato 1996).

Murphy similarly reads this visual disjuncture as a reinscription of difference (Murphy 2013, pp. 244–45).

I think it is also worth noting that old social binaries such as race and gender are increasingly recognized as fluid with transgender and multiracial studies. The space “between” binaries is instead a spectrum of possibilities, making the discourse far more complex than scholars in the 80s and 90s originally conceptualized. This should alter how we frame both *Olympia* and the nude more broadly (Getsy 2022).

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