



## BMA to Open Exhibition of Rarely and Never-Before-Seen Works by American Artist Matsumi Kanemitsu

*Figure and Fantasy captures the artist's pivotal time in Baltimore and reveals an early, unknown chapter in his career*

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BALTIMORE, MD (March 17, 2023)—On May 14, the Baltimore Museum of Art (BMA) will open *Matsumi Kanemitsu: Figure and Fantasy*, an exhibition of 60 works by the American artist created during and shortly after the artist's residence in Baltimore, including rarely and never-before-seen paintings, drawings, and sculpture. Over the course of his life, Kanemitsu (1922-1992) created a remarkable body of work that blended reflections on personal experience with imaginative fantasy. While he worked across media, he is most recognized for the evocative ink drawings and prints that he created after becoming associated with the Abstract Expressionist movement. The BMA's exhibition emphasizes the depth and range of the early, largely figurative drawings created during a pivotal moment in the artist's career when he was living in Baltimore in the late 1940s, before his association with the New York School. The BMA hosted the artist's first museum exhibition in 1954, and seven decades later, it is introducing new audiences to the artist's work in the Stanley Mazaroff and Nancy Dorman Center for the Study of Prints, Drawings and Photographs. *Figure and Fantasy* will be on view from May 14 through October 8, 2023.

"Matsumi Kanemitsu is an important second-generation Abstract Expressionist and one of the most talented draftsmen of the 20th century. While he was affiliated with both the New York and Los Angeles art communities, *Figure and Fantasy* provides an opportunity to explore the artist's little known, but highly influential time in Baltimore, and reveals how his years in our city helped establish his artistic voice," said Asma Naeem, the BMA's Dorothy Wagner Wallis Director. "The exhibition also advances our knowledge beyond the small circle of well-recognized names to capture a deeper and truer history of Post-War American art."

*Figure and Fantasy* is organized thematically to highlight the ways in which Kanemitsu's period of self-reflection in Baltimore following World War II established the trajectory of his career. The exhibition is drawn exclusively from gifts made by J. Blankford Martenet (1898–1957), a Baltimore collector who befriended Kanemitsu and was instrumental in launching his career. These rarely seen works capture the artist's distinct synthesis of eastern and western aesthetics and poignant expressions of his lived experiences—his boyhood in Japan, his fascination with the humble aspects of daily life, his dual experience as both an enlisted U.S. soldier and a prisoner of the U.S. military, and portraits of those who formed his community in Baltimore. The exhibition also explores the significance of the relationship between artist and patron, and the ways in which Martenet's commitment to the artist has led to the preservation of a critical part of his work and career.

## Matsumi Kanemitsu

Kanemitsu (b. Ogden, UT 1922; d. Los Angeles, CA 1992) was born to Japanese immigrants in Utah. At an early age, his parents sent him to live with his grandparents outside of Hiroshima. His childhood in Japan would later inspire his interest and engagement with emotive depictions of flora and fauna reminiscent of the country's landscapes. He returned to the United States in 1940 and enlisted in the U.S. Army prior to the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941. Despite his American citizenship, his Japanese heritage led to his detention and confinement. Kanemitsu's time in the Army intensified his experience of living between two worlds, an emotional and psychological toll that would influence his work as an artist. Yet, his service provided opportunities to live in Europe, where he became immersed in the arts, visiting museums and connecting with other artists, including Henri Matisse and Pablo Picasso.

After being discharged from the Army, Kanemitsu moved to Baltimore, where he worked at the Bethlehem Steel shipyards and studied masonry and bricklaying. While he had begun creating oil portraits and pen and ink drawings during his service, his years in Baltimore were marked by a concentrated dedication to his artistic practice. During this time, he studied art informally with Karl Metzler and focused his attention on the study of the human body. While his work from the late 1940s and early 1950s retained strong elements of figuration, Kanemitsu often juxtaposed different styles into one work and experimented with painterly abstraction, developing a visual vocabulary entirely his own.

It was also during this period that he met J. Blankford Martenet, an avid collector of the artist's drawings who donated his collection to the BMA in 1957. Thanks in part to Martenet's patronage, Kanemitsu's first professional successes were achieved in Baltimore. He was featured in regional artist invitationals, winning a prize at the Peale Museum's 1952 *Life in Baltimore* Twelfth Annual Painting Show, and receiving his first solo museum exhibition at the BMA in 1954. Kanemitsu would later move to New York and then Los Angeles, becoming a prominent member of noted art world circles and taking on prestigious teaching roles. Starting in the mid-1950s, following his time in Baltimore, he fully embraced abstraction in his practice, and it is this that is most readily recognized.

This exhibition is curated by Leslie Cozzi, BMA Curator of Prints, Drawings, and Photographs.

Exhibitions in The Nancy Dorman and Stanley Mazaroff Center for the Study of Prints, Drawings and Photographs are supported in part by the Henry Luce Foundation.



## Baltimore Museum of Art

Founded in 1914, the Baltimore Museum of Art (BMA) inspires people of all ages and backgrounds through exhibitions, programs, and collections that tell an expansive story of art—challenging long-held narratives and embracing new voices. Our outstanding collection of more than 97,000 objects spans many eras and cultures and includes the world's largest public holding of works by Henri Matisse; one of the nation's finest collections of prints, drawings, and photographs; and a rapidly growing number of works by contemporary artists of diverse backgrounds. The museum is also distinguished by a

neoclassical building designed by American architect John Russell Pope and two beautifully landscaped gardens featuring an array of modern and contemporary sculpture. The BMA is located three miles north of the Inner Harbor, adjacent to the main campus of Johns Hopkins University, and has a community branch at Lexington Market. General admission is free so that everyone can enjoy the power of art.

### Visitor Information

General admission to the BMA is free. The BMA is open Wednesday through Sunday from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m., with extended hours on Thursdays until 9 p.m. The Sculpture Gardens are open Wednesday through Sunday, 10 a.m. to dusk. The museum and gardens are closed New Year's Day, Juneteenth, July 4, Thanksgiving Day, and Christmas Day. The BMA is located at 10 Art Museum Drive, three miles north of Baltimore's Inner Harbor. For general museum information, call 443-573-1700 or visit [artbma.org](http://artbma.org).

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