



Sumo n. 1971-1980
 óleo sobre madera 7'60" x 50" x 50" cm
 1971, 1980 (detalle)

YISHAI JUSIDMAN

RUBÉN GALLO

Though its origins are buried in the religious rituals of ancient Japan, Sumo wrestling has been classified as a sport since the early 17th century. Even today, Sumo matches conserve highly ritual aspects: before each bout, the fleshy wrestlers spend several minutes in their respective corners of the *dohyo* (ring), grunting and flinging salt into the air with great ceremony. At the end of this elaborate display, they attack each another. Tied up in an unwilling embrace, they grapple for a couple of seconds, until one Sumo forces any part of the body of his adversary into contact with the floor. It is also possible to win without a struggle: one may simply hoist the other by his belt and toss him out of the ring (a result that can equally be achieved by a well-timed shove to the abdomen with the palm, as kicks and punches are prohibited in Sumo wrestling). At the end of the fight, which rarely lasts more than ten seconds, a referee, dressed in extravagant medieval attire, comes forth to proclaim the winner.

The private life of Sumo wrestlers is no less regulated and ritualized than their public fights, making their lifestyle more akin to that of a monk or a soldier than to that of any Western professional athlete. The Sumo apprentice begins his trade at the age of fifteen, leaving home to enter one of several Sumo houses (*heya*) established in Japan. A punishing routine awaits him here, with long hours of training, ceremony and community labor, one which the future wrestler will observe for the duration of his career. Like other sectors of Japanese society, the world of the Sumo is structured by a complex hierarchy which stretches from the humble category of *maezumo* (novice) to the rank of *yokozuna* (grand champion).

These are some of the basic characteristics of the world evoked in Yishai Jusidman's Sumos series. This is not the artist's first incursion into Oriental themes. A couple of years ago, Jusidman produced a series of Geishas. In both of these series, Jusidman's interest in Japanese culture is purely formal. The courtesans and wrestlers are not staged in his paintings in order to voice some social or political comment about certain aspects of Japanese culture, but rather as a pretext for another kind of "painterly research" regarding the use of color and the figure.

In Geishas, the women struggle to define themselves against a dazzling white surface which threaten to drown them in a monochromatic miasma. The legendary pallor of geisha girls was the starting point for this formal experiment. In Japan, the geishas resort to white face paint in order to create the illusion of their "colorless" skins, while Jusidman uses the white figures of his courtesans (painted on an equally white background) to produce the effect of a "figureless" painting. The result is a blinding, apparently monochromatic surface, which on careful examination yields up timid female forms lurking in the white expanse. The geishas cling, however elusively, to figuration, refusing to be dissolved into an abstract void. This is a telling metaphor of the historic tension between figurative and minimalist currents during our century.

The theme of a misunderstanding between figuration and abstraction is pursued and intensified in the Sumos. While the Geishas delicately evoked the tension between these two trends in Western painting, the Sumos embody it with greater vigor. The small paintings in this series each present the grappling of two massive figures. One figure is usually depicted realistically, with all the virtuosity of flabby skin texture and furrowed belt, while his rival often appears only as a flat plain shape, a vaguely anthropomorphic silhouette, emptied of figurative content. The combat between such ill-suited antagonists is the battle between figuration and abstraction, waged on the painterly surface itself.

The formal exercises developed by Jusidman in these works parallel the structure and rules of Japanese wrestling. In order to problematize the relation between figure and support, Jusidman experiments with three distinct planes that converge behind the characters. Just as Sumo matches are based on a division between each adversary's space, so in painting the figure cannot emerge without being differentiated from the plane which contains it. Jusidman's Sumos both illustrate and subvert this rule. In one painting, in the background a dark square allows us to make out the anthropomorphic contour of the "abstract" wrestler occupying the foreground. The corner formed by the meeting of two planes permits the illusion of volume and space provoked by the prominent "realistic" wrestler. Oddly, the third plane in these pictures is not suggested by paint, but by its absence, a strip of naked wood left at the bottom of the composition. The wrestlers' meaty bodies are supported on this area as though it were the ring (as we have seen, the Sumo who touches it with anything but the soles of his feet loses). Like the wrestlers who win by hurling their adversary out of the ring, some of Jusidman's Sumos are bent on forcing their rivals out of the plane to which they belong.

However, there is a fundamental difference between the world of Sumo and the paintings of this series, namely, the factor of time. Sumo matches are quick, resolved in a matter of seconds, whereas Jusidman's images remain suspended in time. We see nothing but frozen moments in a match which cannot progress and will never be resolved. One figure lifts the other, holding him up in the air. Who will win, the "realistic" or the "abstract" champion? Which will be the first to hit the ground? Like the historic struggle between abstract and figurative painting, this may be an indeterminate confrontation whose stakes lie beyond victory or defeat.

Ruben Gallo es crítico y curador. Vive en Nueva York.
 is a critic and curator living in New York.