

## PEOPLE

By LIANE GRUNBERG

An eyeball set in a whorl of pastel streaks begins to take on the face of a fetus — if you look hard into a painting called "Flower." It nuzzles a brooding black tulip as big as its own head.

Nourit Masson Sekine is pleased when friends bring, to her art interpretations that she herself doesn't see, even when the reaction borders on terror. Masson Sekine knocks the stuffing out of contemporary Japanese art with her demons from the closet.

"Flower" is one of a dozen new canvases that the French-born artist is exhibiting through June 28 at Asacloth Gallery in Nishi-Azabu.

She never paints the pretty or the limpid. From her imagination, Masson Sekine paints wrinkled people with knobby hands and grey, deathly skin tone. Sometimes, the artist puts these solitary figures in hellish backdrops — paint dripping, streaking or partially blanking out an image she may have labored over for days.

Masson Sekine dramatizes space in disturbing ways that puts us off balance without our quite knowing why. "Everyday Life" (see photo) shows two sets of groping hands, clawing away on diagonal extremes of the canvas. Separating the hands like an oily ocean is a sludge of black paint.

Masson Sekine began this painting in 1985. She intended it for an exhibition in South Korea but brought the painting back to Tokyo still in its original packing.

"Somehow I felt it was in a trap — all pink with two hands. It was too delicate." She describes this dilemma as "licking the canvas with a brush," where technique becomes a way of hiding emotions.

"So last year I took this painting out again. I was ready to damage the painting

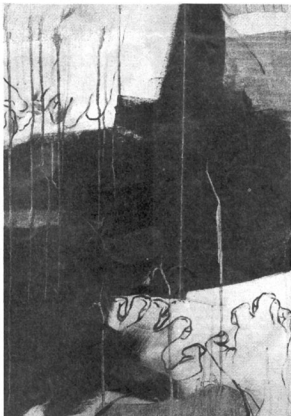
# Painter sets demons free



the eyes from outside. Then I'm free of judgment."

It isn't entirely true that Masson Sekine, the quadrilingual French-born mother of a 4½-year-old, doesn't give a hoot about public opinion. Her complex art is not — to borrow a quote uttered more

Nourit Masson Sekine in a portrait taken by her husband Yuri, and "Everyday Life" (1989).



**'I don't have to go to nature to paint. Nature outside me is too big. I feel oppressed by the power. I have to find the landscape strengths in me.'**

and said to it: Go to hell."

Taking black paint, Masson Sekine went to work, arching great streaks of paint over three-quarters of the image.

"I worked on it really freely. And it's exactly like life and death, the moment I'm most happy, that I'm always looking for in my art . . . when I am not afraid to damage it, not self-conscious for

than 100 years ago — about "flinging a pot of paint in the eyes of the public."

The only place paint flies is in Masson Sekine's Nishiazabu atelier, where she curses the poor lighting, the cramped space, the "mechakucha" (chaos) of stacked and scrolled paintings, but still manages to turn out monumental canvases at a clip.

She wears a cloak of gruffness but lights up a room with her raspy, tobacco-veiled laugh and her motherly advice to friends and strangers about where to find good shiatsu therapy in Yoyogi.

She is a magnet for the foreign-artist community, helping many French artists arrange their first Tokyo exhibitions.

This is important to know, perhaps even more so than her longtime involvement in Butoh dance as a photographer of Kazuo Ono and other Butoh stars, her radical poster art for Tokyo performances of friends. Masson Sekine is not the tigress that her art suggests.

Take "Flower" for example, commissioned with no further instructions than the painting's title.

"When I started, I wanted to paint a flower that looked like a flower. My goal was never just to represent nature. It's more what is behind things that interest me.

"I began by looking in the mirror. I inhaled my tummy and saw my diaphragm. And I thought where is this flower in me? I don't have to go to nature to paint. Nature outside me is too big. I feel oppressed by the power. I have to find the landscape strengths in me."

Masson Sekine says she's more interested in balance than in darkness — between the noise and silence, emptiness and fullness in human relationships. "All the paintings I don't have names for I think I'll call 'What is human in human beings,'" she said.

Such existential questions aside, Masson Sekine challenges us with her ambiguous messages.

"Sometimes I start a painting and I don't know what I want to do. I just put down some color and it causes vibrations."

"I begin to see ghosts, faces, an invisible world comes into my conscience where I give life to those ghosts, following their presence or movements. If I like what I see, I follow it. If it frightens me, or I know it already, I reject it.

*Asacloth in Nishiazabu, where Nourit Masson Sekine's paintings are on exhibition through June 28, is open 11:30 a.m. to 6 p.m. every day except Sunday. Tel. (03) 423-9894.*