

THE TRAJECTORY OF TOMIYAMA TAEKO'S ART AS SEEN IN *WILD GRASS: OUR LIVES*, THE 8TH YOKOHAMA TRIENNALE

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Abstract

For more than seven decades Tomiyama Taeko (1921-2021) produced powerful series of works in a range of media including lithography, painting, collage and multi-media slide/DVD works. Working on the margins of the art world, Tomiyama developed a unique practice that revisits histories obscured by nationalist rhetoric, re-imagining narratives of colonization and war from postcolonial and feminist perspectives. Often overlooked in normative narratives of postwar art in Japan, her work has nevertheless sparked transnational dialogues, remembrance, and reconciliation. This paper discusses the trajectory of selected works by the artist exhibited in “My Liberation,” one chapter of the 8th Yokohama Triennale, *Wild Grass: Our Lives* (March 15-June 9, 2024), noting the relevance of the artist's works in the larger context of the Triennale.

KEY WORDS: Tomiyama Taeko, Postwar Japanese Art, Feminist/decolonial critique, 8th Yokohama Triennale, Art after 3/11

Resumen

Durante más de siete décadas, Tomiyama Taeko (1921-2021) produjo potentes series de obras en una variedad de medios, incluyendo litografía, pintura, collage y obras multimedia en formato de diapositivas/DVD. Trabajando en los márgenes del mundo del arte, Tomiyama desarrolló una práctica única que revisita historias ocultas por la retórica nacionalista, reimaginando narrativas de colonización y guerra desde perspectivas poscoloniales y feministas. A menudo pasada por alto en las narrativas normativas del arte japonés de posguerra, su obra ha logrado, no obstante, suscitar diálogos transnacionales, memoria y reconciliación. Este artículo analiza la trayectoria de obras seleccionadas de la artista exhi-

bidas en “Mi Liberación”, uno de los capítulos de la 8ª Trienal de Yokohama, Hierba Silvestre: Nuestras Vidas (15 de marzo-9 de junio de 2024), destacando la relevancia de las obras de la artista en el contexto más amplio de la Trienal.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Tomiyama Taeko, Arte japonés de posguerra, Crítica feminista/ decolonial, 8ª Trienal de Yokohama, Arte después del 3/11

THE TRAJECTORY OF TOMIYAMA TAEKO'S ART AS SEEN IN *WILD GRASS: OUR LIVES*, THE 8TH YOKOHAMA TRIENNALE

1. Introduction

In the 8th Yokohama Triennale we wish to revisit a selection of historical moments, events, figures and trends of thought since the start of the 20th century...In this Triennale we prioritize the relationship between intellectual underpinnings and champion engagement of the art with reality. (Liu Ding and Carol Yinghua Lu, 2024, p. 5)

Beijing-based art directors Liu Ding and Carol Yinghua Lu began planning the 8th Yokohama Triennale at the end of 2021, a time when the world was still reeling from, but beginning to come out of the Covid-19 pandemic. They aimed to create something new amidst the already existing 250 or more biennales and triennales held around the world. Against a background of “a profound series of crises brought about by the pandemic, climate change and the widespread turn toward conservative nationalism and authoritarianism,” their aim was to bring the works of artists and artists’ collectives to this vibrant port city near Tokyo that would “speak of humble humanism, courage, resilience, faith and solidarity” (Liu, D., Lu C.Y., 2024, p, 5). Their bold and innovative curatorial project was spread across three venues and several outdoor public spaces in the city including an installation work in the Motomachi China Town accessway and works by present day art activists from Taiwan, Indonesia and Japan in a former bank. All of these works offered viewers a chance to experience and reflect on themes across boundaries of time and location as they explored diverse venues. The century-long time span adopted in the main venue at the Yokohama Museum of Art allowed the presentation of a wide range of works including those by artists engaged in Japanese and Chinese left-wing woodblock print movements of the 1930s, postwar cultural, avant-garde, activist and postmodernist movements of the 1950s, 1960s and 1980s, and works by a new generation of contemporary artists addressing climate change, anarchism, environmental disaster, migration, and war. Tomiyama Taeko (1921-2021) was one of 93 artists selected to include in the exhibition. Like the other artists of diverse generations and backgrounds working in a wide range of media, Tomiyama’s life and work must have resonated with the directors’ aim to present alternatives to a contemporary art world in which

the “intellectual capacity and critical agency of art” have been overshadowed by the logic of capital (Liu, D. Lu, C.Y. 2024, p. 7).

Wild Grass: Our Lives was inspired by the work of the modern Chinese writer, Lu Xun (1881-1936) who lived and studied in Japan early in the 20th century during a period of intense turmoil in China. His collections of essays, *Wild Grass* (1927) and *Morning Blossoms Gathered at Dusk* (1928) recently published in English translation (Cheng, E. J., 2022) are well known in China and both embrace the darkness and uncertainties of the tumultuous times in which the writer lived, and give expression to resistance and “a life force that’s unregulated, irrepressible, defiant, self-motivated, and prepared to fight alone at all times” (Liu, Lu, 2024, p. 4). With Lu Xun as their starting point—one that clearly shifts our perspective from what are often “western-centered” considerations of modern and contemporary art—they were able to revisit such pivotal moments as Lu Xun’s printmaking movement inspired in part by the works of Käthe Kollwitz (1867-1945).¹ The innovative display of works by Tomiyama Taeko in this exhibit brought new insights into the work of this artist who has been difficult to situate in the evolving history of modern and contemporary Japanese art and has sometimes been viewed as too politically disruptive to include in existing canonical frameworks. At the same time, seeing Tomiyama’s works in the context of a large group show of contemporary art shed light on new and unexpected ways in which past and present mirror one another and help us consider new directions in the future.

Needless to say, it is beyond the scope of this essay to discuss more than a few of the many works exhibited in *Wild Grass: Our Lives*. Nor is it possible to delve deeply into Tomiyama’s life and work. Rather, my aim here is to focus on how selected works by Tomiyama Taeko exhibited in Chapter 2, titled “My Liberation” on the third floor of the main venue at the Yokohama Museum of Art, present a view of the trajectory of the artist’s life and work.² I will ask how the artist’s work intersected with the writings of Lu Xun and the Korean dissident poet, Kim Chi Ha (1941-2022) at a formative moment early in her career and how this led to further exploration of themes of witness, mourning and remembrance. This trajectory continues as seen in Tomiyama’s concern with the question of Japan’s responsibility for colonialism and war in East Asia in works of the 80s and 90s (Hagiwara, H. 2003, Hein, L. 2010), and as she directly addressed present-day crises, environmental disasters and wars in her later years. Throughout her life and work, the many intersections between her practice as a visual artist and movements for social justice continued to spark innovative ways for the dissemination of her works. Finally, I hope to show that Tomiyama’s later works clearly reveal the striking present-day relevance of the artist’s trajectory in the larger context of *Wild Grass: Our Lives*.

Upon entering the large open Grand Hall of the main venue, I first felt overwhelmed by the array of sounds, sights and installation works before me. Viewers were invited to move in any direction in the large hall, or to go up stairways or escalators to the third

1 Kollwitz’s *Memorial for Karl Liebknecht* (1920), dedicated to the anti-war politician who was assassinated in 1919 by right-wing paramilitary forces in Germany, was included exhibit.

2 Other chapters include, “Our Lives,” “All the Rivers,” “Streams and Rocks,” “Dialogue with the Mirror,” “Fires in the Woods,” and “Symbol of Angst.” The exhibition catalog is forthcoming.

floor. Just ahead was Pippa Garner's *Human Prototype*, a large and captivating sculpture of a gender and racially ambiguous figure. Beyond that was a table with a circular display of tablets, a collection of e-books titled the *Directory of Life*; behind that enormous monster-like objects woven in maroon fiber by Sandra Mujinga (b. 1989) hovered over the space. Both to the left and the right, stairways and escalators led to the 3rd floor, taking viewers past displays of objects and installations suggestive of refugee or nomads' encampments. This chapter, *Our Lives*, was intended in part to help us imagine our own precarity, that "we might be in this situation any time." Loud, bellowing sounds of voices were coming from a large screen on the left, a video work by Open Group, a collective of three Ukrainian artists who interviewed survivors of the Russian invasion of Ukraine and recorded their voice and video renditions of the sounds of missiles and artillery. They had been taught to recognize the weapons by sound to help them make quick decisions about how to survive an attack. (I could not help but think of the situation in Gaza where it would, I imagine, be impossible even to make such a video work.)

I made my way up the escalator to Gallery 5 where Tomiyama Taeko's works were showing in Gallery 5, part of "My Liberation," a chapter which aimed to "look at subjective agencies, attempts, imaginaries and actions to create horizons for individuals within confining systems" (Liu, L. Lu, C.Y. 2024, p. 7). The unique circular gallery designed by Tange Kenzo (1913-2005) was discreet, allowing viewers to focus on what they saw inside, but also

Fig.1: Gallery 5, Yokohama Museum of Art
Wild Grass; Our Lives, The 8th Yokohama Triennale
Courtesy of Organizing Committee for Yokohama Triennale.
Photo by TOMITA Ryohei



had two wide entrances open to the rest of the venue. I chose to move around to the right, along the outer wall where some of Tomiyama's earliest works, several large oil paintings of the mining regions in Chikuho, Kyushu and Hokkaido were displayed alongside drawings, lithographs and archival materials from the 1950s.

Tomiyama Taeko was born in Kobe, like Yokohama, a bustling port city with a long history of vital links to Asia. She spent a formative part of her girlhood in Dalian and Harbin, then under the control Japan's colonial and wartime "puppet state" Manchuria (Manchukuo; Jpn. Manshukoku, 1932-1945), where her father worked for the British tire company, Dunlop. As a young girl, she had traveled up and down the Korean peninsula (under Japanese colonial rule from 1910-1945), witnessing first-hand Japan's brutal oppression there. In 1937, while still in her teens, she returned to Tokyo to study art, entering what was then the Tokyo Women's Art Academy (Joshi Bijutsu Senmon Gakko); she soon left the school to study with the independent academy founded by Toyama Saburō (1903-1980) and became immersed in the study of European modernism and avant-garde art, Dada, the Bauhaus and surrealism. When the war escalated, she took refuge with her family in the countryside (Jennison, R., Bogel, C. J. 2022, p. 363). Like many of her generation, Tomiyama and her family suffered great hardship after the war.

The early postwar years under U.S. occupation were tumultuous; reestablishing the art world at that time was also fraught with challenges as Japan US-Japan security treaties required Japan's military alliance with the United States. In the midst of this, "the postwar Japanese art world reestablished a full complement of reactionary, mainstream, and avant-garde institutions" (Winther-Tamaki, B. 2012, p. 31). Tomiyama struggled to find her own way to continue her practice as an artist, and to somehow follow her earlier interest in and commitment to avant-garde movements. After returning to Tokyo she found ways to support herself and her two children illustrating books and later became a special correspondent for a news outlet for the Japan Coal Miner's Union; it was through this work that she continued to practice her art and travelled to Hokkaido and Kyushu in the early 1950s (Hagiwara, H., 2010, p. 133) and here that she began to develop her unique practice and trajectory as an artist.

2. Out of Darkness: Resistance and Resilience

Tomiyama's trajectory as an artist began with the paintings, drawings and prints seen along the outer wall of the gallery. She first grappled with the landscapes of the mining region with bold forms and constructions in oil paintings on canvas of the slag heaps in a style reminiscent of cubism. But Tomiyama soon become deeply engaged with the miners and their struggle as well as their strength and resilience. She was inspired by an emerging cultural movement that had opened her eyes to new possibilities for art and social change, but at the same time felt that she was an outsider (Tomiyama, T. 1997/2019, p. 4). She began making sketches and prints that depicted the mine workers underground and wrote frequently about how she discovered "beauty in the darkness." (Tomiyama,T., 2009a, pp. 88-101, Masaki M. 2009 pp. 166-174).



Fig.2: "Miner" 1950s.
Pencil on paper, watercolor, 17.8
x 11.5
Courtesy of Sakata Natsume.
Photo by Kobayashi Hiromichi.

She made sketches as she interviewed the miners and their families and also encountered other writers and artists involved in cultural circle movements. The sketch seen here is one of many that were only recently re-discovered in her studio, many of which convey the hardship and suffering of the workers in the mines. New research and exhibitions are helping us better understand the significance of this period of cultural activism in a region far removed from the metropolitan centers is now (Jesty, J. 2019, Motoi, M., 2009). For Tomiyama this would prove to be a critical moment in the trajectory of her career which has continued in different ways to embody what are now called "socially engaged art" practices (Jesty, J. 2017, n.p. Yamamoto, H. 2021a, pp 52-57). The subject and visual language she discovered in the mines would continue to engage her as she followed major transitions in energy from coal to oil, and to nuclear power in later works.

In 1960, massive protests by Japanese citizens erupted, aiming to halt the ratification of the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty (ANPO). But in spite of this historic movement the treaty was ratified. At the same time, the massive Miike Struggle in which miners and unions organized to protest layoffs in the midst of the shift from coal to oil in the late 1950s was also finally crushed. Tomiyama decided to continue her reportage work and travelled with some of the

miners from Kyushu who went to Latin America in search of work. She began the long journey by ship along the reverse route of European colonialism via South Africa to Brazil. There, she continued her reportage work, and also met artists and activists in exile from Nazi Germany. (Tomiya, T. 2009, pp. 103-138) Through them, she was introduced to Cuban poets and printmakers and travelled there just at the time of the Cuban missile crisis in 1963. On her return to Japan via Mexico, she saw works by the Mexican artists, Diego Riviera, Jose Clemente Orozco and David Siqueiros. (Tomiya, 1983, pp. 221-224; Takagiwa, 2021, pp. 51-76). Later in the 1960s she travelled to central Asia and Afghanistan. When she returned to Tokyo in the late 60s, she was uncertain about how to pursue the path of art.

It was around that time that she became involved with the international movement in support of Kim Chi Ha, the dissident Korean poet who had been arrested and was imprisoned for his writings in protest against the U.S. backed military regime in South Korea. She began producing lithographs that both linked to her earlier works in the mines to her renewed practice as an artist. This would help define her trajectory for the next five or more decades. Out of the beauty and “revolutionary” cultural movement she had found in darkness in the mines, she discovered new ways to collaborate with other artists and writers and to explore the entangled histories of colonialism, war and struggles for resistance in East Asia

As I moved along the outer wall toward the rear of the gallery, I came to a digitalized version of Tomiyama’s first slide work *Chained Hands in Prayer* (1976) projected on the wall. It was being shown for the first time in decades alongside lithographs and archival materials related to the collection of prints and poems titled *Shinya* [Deep night] (Kim, C. H., Tomiyama T. 1976) produced in collaboration with other like-minded artists, actors and musicians.³ After a short documentary about Kim’s imprisonment that included some of Tomiyama’s prints was censored by NHK, Tomiyama launched Hidane Production, and produced the multi-media slide work *Chained Hands in Prayers* (1977) which would become the first of nine slide (later DVD) works produced during her careers. (Hagiwara, H. 1993, p. 61; Hagiwara H., 2010, p. 135).

I stood in the gallery and watched Tomiyama’s prints flash and disappear in rapid succession on the wall as the narrators read Kim’s poetry against a background of music performed by Kuronuma Yuriko, Takahashi Yuji and others. As I listened to the narrators read the passionate and sharply satirical work, an excerpt from Kim’s prison notebooks, *Kugy* [Mortification] there was one phrase that stood out. Expressing remorse and grief at the unjust imprisonment and coming execution of his followers, Kim writes of a moment when he discovered the “political power of imagination,” a moment when he was able to overcome the “maddening and unmanageable gap between my stance as one of the people, my political activity and artistic expression.” (Hagiwara.H. 1993,p. 63).

A closer look at the archival materials reveals that in the afterword to the volume, “*Waga shinya no ki*” [My thoughts in the deep night] Tomiyama writes that the title

3 For details of the arrest and imprisonment of Kim Chi Ha, see Kim Chi Ha, 1980, pp. vii-viii.

of the collection of poems and prints comes from an essay by Lu Xun, “*Shinya ni shisu*” [Notes in the deep night] (Tomiyama, T. 1977, n.p.). Lu Xun had written the essay, a lament giving expression to his grief for Rōshii (1902-1931) and others active in the print making movement in China who were executed for alleged “anti-imperialist” activities. In his essay, Lu Xun also writes of the introduction of Käthe Kollwitz’s prints in China.⁴ Here we see the connection between Lu Xun, Kim Chi Ha and Tomiyama who also wanted to give expression to grief and mourning, and to ongoing resistance through her art.

While Tomiyama’s connection to Kim Chi Ha would fade over the years, this moment of discovery of a way that might bring politics and art together, and a visual language through which she might bear witness or give expression to those who had been silenced or forgotten would continue to take many forms in later series of works. Through Hidane Production (later Hidane Kōbō) she had also found a way to disseminate her work beyond the walls of galleries and museums, a practice that she would continue for the rest of her life.

I turned to look behind me at lithographs from the early 70s. Tomiyama’s journey to Chile, Bolivia and Brazil in the 60s had also inspired her to make prints based on the poetry of Pablo Neruda and Gabrielle Mistral, the first Chilean/Latin American poet to win the Noble prize in 1945, and Victor Jara (1932-1973) who had been tortured and murdered by the Chilean military after the coup of 1973 (Tomiyama, 1983, pp) As seen in the delicate lines and forms of non-human living things, the plants, grasses, flowers and butterflies growing out of rifles in *For Pablo Neruda 4* (1973), Tomiyama also pays homage to the seeds and small buds of hope their works conveyed as a legacy to later generations. This element of Tomiyama’s visual vocabulary is seen again and again in the artist’s later works.

Along the outer wall of the inner circle of the display, I next came to a small digital reproduction of *Prayer in Memory* (1980) projected on a small screen, the slide work produced shortly after the peoples’ uprising in Gwangju.

Fig.3: For Pablo Neruda 4, 1973
Lithograph, 46 x 27.
Courtesy of Sakata Natsume.
Photo by Kobayashi Hiromichi.



4 Read in Japanese translation, *Shinya ni shisu* [Notes in the deep night]. *Rajin-Bokyaku no tame no kinen* [In commemoration of forgetting] , translated by Okamoto Ryuzo, Tokyo: Aoki Bunko, 1963/1974, pp. 165-168). Also see Cheng, E. 2022, pp. 1-4.)



Fig.4: Kwangju Requiem 1, 1980.
Lithograph, 55 x 37.5.
Courtesy of Sakata Natsume.
Photo by Kobayashi Hiromichi.

South Korea on May 18, 1980. Following the assassination of Park Chung Hee in 1979, people all over South Korea demonstrated in protest against martial law. In Gwangju, the citizen's protest at first seemed to succeed in resisting the military. But soon, the uprising was violently suppressed by the military. Tomiyama and Takahashi Yuji worked together quickly to produce prints, music and the slide work *Prayer in Memory* (1980) that was circulated widely in and outside of Japan. Again, they produced a print pamphlet with slides and a 78 RPM record; the prints in the series give testimony to the uprising and to its violent suppression. Tomiyama's bold, black and white images, show crowds of people rising up in the face an army of martial law troops, bearing witness to thousands of innocent civilians who were killed. The text printed alongside the images tells the story of Kwangju; the 78 rpm record included with the text was played with slides at live events.

These images of the people's uprising that was violently suppressed by a military dictatorship sparked new energy in the Korean Democracy movement that was beginning to grow. The text accompanying the images ends with a call for hope.

A great deal of young blood was shed on the streets. Birds and barley wept. [But] the spirit of the dead in Kwangju seemed to become raindrops [that will] wet dry minds, and eventually bring up new seeds to put forth buds someday...these raindrops will also eventually crush solid stone. (Tomiyama, T. 1980, n.p.)

3. Toward the Sea as a Stage, Gods and Puppets

Just outside the inner wall at the center of Gallery 5 between the two entrances was a very different more, colorful series of paintings from the series *Hiruko and the Puppeteers: A Tale of Sea Wanderers* (2001-2008). The artist's trajectory led her to a new visual poetry that takes viewers on a journey across time and space, but at the same time presents us with riveting images of disastrous events in the early 20th century. Some viewers familiar with Tomiyama's work wondered why works from series series produced in the 1980s and 1990s, *A Memory of the Sea*, *Harbin Station*; *Requiem for the 20th Century*, and *The Fox Story* were not on view.

In the early 1980s, Tomiyama produced *Bitter Resentment Deep in the Soil* (1984), the only other work from the 80s on exhibit in Gallery 5. This dark and haunting painting contains both traces of her sketches and prints of the mines and clues to her direction in the mid-late 1980s and 1990s. Bleached white skeletal forms of animals or birds stretch from the top to the bottom of the canvas and in stratified underground layers.⁵ While continuing

5 This painting also became the focus of a documentary film titled *Hajike Hosenka, (Pop Out Balsam Seeds!)* about Tomiyama's work by Tsuchimoto Noriaki.

to explore the history of the coal mines in the late 70s and early 80s, Tomiyama had also learned of the hidden history of Korean women conscripted to work as “military comfort women” before and during the war. At around the same time, she began to work on a new series of paintings, prints and collages that would become the series, *A Memory of the Sea* (1988). Here, the sea becomes a stage where the story of a Korean “military comfort woman,” conscripted to work in a Japanese military brothel unfolds. The tale is narrated by a shaman, or Korean *mudang* who travels through the seas of East and Southeast Asia. In this powerful work, Tomiyama aimed to make visible a part of history that had been hidden from view; the slide work, prints, collages and paintings in this series circulated in Japan, Korea and Europe. (Hagiwara, H. 2010, p. 135; Yamamoto, H. 2019, p. 260).

In the early 1990s, Tomiyama made a journey to Harbin to revisit the landscape and memories of her youth in former Manchuria. She produced two more series of works, *Harbin Station: Requiem for the 20th Century* and *The Fox Story*, both of which also became slide/dvd works. (Hagiwara, H. 2021). All of these works reveal important aspects of the artists material practice and conceptual evolution and as many have written, these works give expression to Tomiyama's deep commitment to feminist activism and her increasingly complex investigation into the intersections between colonialism, sexism and racism. Whether due to limitations of exhibition space (a proper showing of works from these series would require another exhibition hall in itself), the thematic focus of the exhibition, or concerns about the unfortunate situation in Japan that still makes it difficult to show works considered to be controversial in public institutions, works from these series were not shown in “My Liberation,” something no doubt disconcerting to some viewers familiar with the artist's work. In this discussion of works seen in *Wild Grass: Our Lives*, I will focus on Tomiyama's use of an increasingly imaginary, visual language where the sea is a passageway, the sea floor becomes a stage, and the plains of Manchuria are a theater where the artist's alternative tales of history are re-imagined and told. The curators' choice to focus on Tomiyama's early and later works offers a very effective presentation of Tomiyama's trajectory in line with the wider aims of the exhibition.

In the new millennium, after two decades exploring a new visual vocabulary using images of the shaman and the fox, Tomiyama began a new series of works aiming to trace the trajectory of a longer timeframe and a much wider geopolitical spectrum that reaches far back in time. Launched just days after the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks on the WTC in New York, the series was completed in 2008 and shown for the first time at the Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennale in 2009. The new visual language in these images interweaves myth and history, asking viewers to look “not only at what exists within the limits of what we can see in a short span of time and space...so that we might perceive our world and people in it in a more multi-layered way” (Hanazaki, K. 2009, p. 7). The central vehicle of the work “puppets and puppeteers,” also enables exploration of themes that encompass ecocritical perspectives, postcolonialism and disaster. No less “politically imaginative,” Tomiyama and her collaborator Takahashi drew on pre-modern modes of performance and tale-telling common in Japan and other parts of Asia. They called themselves *ginyu shijin* (bards or traveling troubadours), *tabigeinen* itinerant performers and *kugutsushi* (troupes of puppeteers) as they



Fig.5: *Long Ago in Southern Seas II*, 2008.

Oil on canvas, 80.3 x 100.0.

Courtesy of Sakata Natsume.

Photo by Kobayashi Hiromichi.

continued to tell tales of the times, showing their slide/DVD works outside the walls of galleries and museums.⁶

In paintings from the series, *Hiruko and the Puppeteers: A Tale of Sea Wanderers* seen in Gallery 5, the sea is a stage, “a place with no master, free of attachments, owned by no one” (Hanazaki, K. 2009, p. 6) The journey begins in a time long ago when the artist imagines land and sea routes linked all of Asia, and the popular Japanese folk god who protects fishermen, Ebisu, and the goddess Maju intermingle with other gods and puppets and the delicate sea grasses and jelly fish. (Hagiwara, 2010, 143).

In the text that accompanies the visual works, Tomiyama writes that the Age of Exploration brings “a tidal wave of colonization and industrialization” and Japan “joins the ‘Great Powers’ in the race for colonies,” and an era of “blood red seas and plains, burned by the fires of war” begins. With the turn of the century and with “movies and television,” comes the demise of the puppeteers and the puppets can only perform at a “splendid banquet for

6 The Chinese characters for the word *kugutsu* can also be read as *kairai*, the term used in *kairai seiken* to refer to puppet governments and puppet regimes.



Fig.6: *Theater Beneath the Sea
Splendid Banquet for the Empire*,
2008.
Oil on canvas, 162 x 132cm.
Courtesy of Sakata Natsume.
Photo by Kobayashi Hiromichi.

the goblins and demons of empire” deep in the sea. Later the puppets are washed away in a tidal wave when icebergs melt and floods come. (Tomiyama,T. 2009b).

As the series evolved, present-day crises and events continued to unfold, and the artist found ways to weave new images into the series. In Tomiyama’s theater beneath the sea, “we see a satire of the collapse of our 21st century world in which puppets now manipulate humans” (Hanazaki, 2009, 6). Tomiyama’s new visual language combined with the collage of sounds by Takahashi Yuji in the dvd production of the work is a response through art to a moment of uncertainty and crisis; the work shows us that if we only look more carefully we will notice fragments of past histories that help us make sense of our own time. In the last

painting in the series, *In Toxic Seas*, the sea is again a stage where we see surreal, burning towers. Beneath them skeletons of sea birds smothered in oil tap out the message, “Let us have light!” on computer keyboards. We also see oddly ashen jelly fish and other sea creatures, ghosts of earlier times, floating in the dark waters.

By the time Tomiyama produced the *Hiruko* series, she had developed her practice of “taking apart and reconstructing paintings—already a complete system of representation—to create a different system of representation” (Kobayashi, H. 2009, p. 10). Her experimentation in collaboration with Takahashi Yuji allowed her to incorporate images from paintings, collages and installation works in innovative ways that challenge established systems of artistic production (Kobayashi, H. 2009, p. 11, Takahashi Y. (2001) n.p.)

4. Emergency Landscapes, Letters to the Future

After completing *Hiruko and the Puppeteers* which Tomiyama thought would be her last series, she hoped to return to paintings she had begun on the skies of Eurasia. But less than two years later, the artist turned her attention to the earthquake, tsunami and nuclear meltdown caused by the Great East Japan Earthquake of March, 2011. She was living and working in Tokyo when the 9.0 earthquake that was followed by a tsunami killing 20,000 people struck, and the nuclear meltdown in Fukushima, several hours north of Tokyo occurred. For a little over three and a half years she worked on a new series of paintings, collages and a new dvd work in collaboration with Takahashi Yuji that would become the series, *Revelation from the Sea* (2011-2014).

After looking at the *Hiruko* series I turned and saw one of the first paintings Tomiyama produced, *Ruins* (1946), a bleak depiction in oils of early postwar Tokyo, hanging on the outside of the inner wall of Gallery 5. I was surprised to see this early work, on view for the first time in over 60 years, now facing Tomiyama’s last works in the section titled *End of the Beginning, Beginning of the End* on the outer wall. I had come almost all the way around the circle where paintings from the series *Revelation from the Sea* (2011-2014) were hanging, just across from *Ruins*. From there I could also see Tomiyama’s early works from *Chained hands in Prayer* and the lithographs dedicated to Neruda and Mistral on the wall facing them. I had come full circle, to the end, but also back to the beginning. On the wall before me was *Revelation from the Sea—Tsunami* (2011), the first painting in the series.

Again, the sea is a stage. On the surface of the dark, angry sea, guardian deities from the Asian continent hold broken computer parts and seem to skim the surface of the black waves alongside flaming debris. In other works in the series we see images of the collapsed structure—the skeletal ruins—of Fukushima Daichi Nuclear Power plant. In 2012, Tomiyama had tried to visit the site to see it for herself, but as entry into the radiation zone was not allowed, she worked from media images that could be accessed online. Her works in this series appeared on the covers of *Shukan Kinyobi*, a progressive weekly journal that continued to follow the aftermath of the nuclear disaster, as well as an anti-nuclear activists’ websites in the U.S. Tomiyama wrote of her aim to show that both our “relentless pursuit of wealth and convenience” and failure to acknowledge responsibilities for past wars are what led to



Fig.7: *Revelation from the Sea—Tsunami*, 2011.
Oil, mixed media on canvas, 112 x 162 cm.
Courtesy of Sakata Natsume.
Photo by Kobayashi Hiromichi.

the nuclear disaster (Tomiyama, T. 2012, March 2, 9, 16). When she learned of the harmful effects of radiation she added a postscript to the series, a set of collages on a background of deep green with the fragile forms of butterflies and fish balanced precariously alongside broken computer parts. In these collages we see the artist's gesture towards resilience and renewal.

In 2014, after collaborating with Takahashi Yuji to complete a DVD of the same title, Tomiyama again thought these would be her final works. But when Okamura Yasunori, curator of the Maruki Museum for the Hiroshima Panels asked her to contribute works to special exhibition as part of the annual, "Today's Anti-nuclear, Anti-war Exhibition," the artist decided to show selected works from *Revelation from the Sea* along with two new large works in oil titled, *End of the Beginning, Beginning of the End* (2016). Alongside the earlier works, were collages of fish and butterflies and two new paintings in oil, *The First Landscape*, and *The Ending Landscape*.

The burnt red plains seen in the two new works, while referencing the puppet-state of Manchuria in the artist's memory, are also inner or imaginary landscapes not limited to particular times and locations. They might also be seen as "emergency landscapes" like those seen in the works of other contemporary artists concerned with disasters, the impact of nuclear tests and climate change. Although the artist's last painting, *The Ending Landscape: Collapse* was exhibited at the Maruki Gallery in 2016, Tomiyama later painted over the work and now only a photograph of it remains.

In the extant photo of the painting, we see a billowing red cloud depicting a large explosion, while in the lower left corner there is a collapsed nuclear power plant. At the bottom of the canvas, a dragon-like creature like that seen in *The First Landscape* crawls toward an



Fig.8: *The First Landscape*, 2016
Oil on Canvas, 132 x 162 cm.
Courtesy of Sakata Natsume.
Photo by Kobayashi Hiromichi.

exploding mushroom cloud. Perhaps this and other works in this series are the artist's letter to the future, admonishing us to look directly at the reality we may face and heed warning signs around us.

At the Maruki Gallery, Takahashi Yuji and poet Fujii Sadakazu collaborated with Tomiyama in what was their last joint public appearance. Takahashi performed the piano composition by 14th century composer Guillaume du Mauchaut, "Ma fin est mon commencement" [My end is my beginning], adapted by the artists as the title of the series and this section of the exhibition. Fujii read poems from a collection he had written in response to the triple-disaster, and Tomiyama commented that while the Hiroshima A-bomb murals by Maruki Iri and Akamatsu Toshi marked the "end of the war," that "ending" also marked the beginning of the nuclear era. (Jennison, R., 2017, p. 5) Takahashi's choice of this musical composition, an example of du Mauchaut's innovative use of cyclical, isophonic musical forms that move from beginning to end and return from end to beginning, seemed perfect in this circular gallery, perhaps also a personal message from the artist who, near the end of her life, had witnessed cyclical repetitions of history, but also seeds of hope, resilience and change. The curators and art directors made excellent use of the unique space in Gallery 5 to display Tomiyama's work, giving viewers the opportunity to see her trajectory while alerting them to links and resonances between past, present, and future.

As I left Gallery 5, I again heard the voices of Ukrainian refugees making sounds of mis-

siles and artillery fire in Ukraine. To my right, I could see contemporary photographer Shiga Lieko's deep red, wall-sized images nearby Shiga is widely recognized both in Japan and abroad for her powerful works on the triple-disaster of March 11, 2011 (Shiga, L. 2012); the works shown here were based on interviews with a hunter in the Fukushima area who had told her about the impact of the 3/11 disaster on animals and wildlife in the region. In the gallery to the right, I caught a quick glimpse of video works by Tomas Rafa, Slovenian film and video artist whose works explore new nationalisms and extremist protests and demonstrations. On the level below, I could see Shiga's *Emergency Library* with dozens of books including Orwell's *1984* and Oka Mari's *On Palestine*. I rushed through the 3rd floor gallery to the left to look one more time at woodblock prints by Pi Ling and others involved with the woodblock print movement that linked Lu Xun, Kollwitz, Tomiyama as well as the Asian port cities Shanghai, Kobe, and Yokohama. Before heading down to the exit, I walked along the corridor outside of the gallery, again passing the alcove where Lu Xun's and Kollwitz's works were displayed. On the first floor, just in front of the exit. I glanced at *The Directory of Life*, with books by authors including Karatani Kojin, Saito Kohei, and Judith Butler (Wang, Q. 2024). It was already 5 O'clock and museum attendants were nudging me out the door. I left the museum thinking about this timely exhibition, *Wild Grass, Our Lives*. Now, on the 79th anniversary of the end of WWII and in the midst of ongoing certainties and conflicts, the artworks and ideas generated by *Wild Grass, Our Lives* seem more relevant than ever. I left hoping that there will be more opportunities to reflect on and discuss this innovative curatorial project ■

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