

glass

HOME ABOUT FASHION&BEAUTY ART MUSIC DESIGN&ARCHITECTURE FOOD&TRAVEL NEWS ARCHIVE SEARCH



A SENSE OF THE SUBLIME

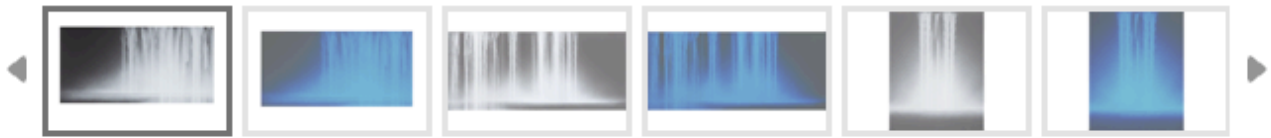
GLASS IS MESMERISED BY JAPANESE ARTIST HIROSHI SENJU'S MYSTICAL WATERFALLS AT HIS NEW SHOW IN HONG KONG

A sense of the sublime

Glass is mesmerised by Japanese artist Hiroshi Senju's mystical waterfalls at his new show in Hong Kong



**Falling Water 2013 Acrylic and fluorescent pigments on Japanese mulberry paper 33
1/2 x 66 7/8 inches © 2013 Hiroshi Senju**



Gazing upon Hiroshi Senju's large-scale, mystical waterfalls, one isn't immediately struck by the questions: What is beauty? What is art? "Here is beauty", you think. "Here is art". Hiroshi Senju's paintings are art in its purest, simplest form: an interpretation of nature's beauty by the hands of a human being. Nevertheless, these were the questions on Senju's mind as he embarked on a new series, a set of large-scale waterfalls painted using a phosphorescent industrial paint that looks pure white in natural light, but glows electric blue under a blacklight.

At first glance, Senju's paintings seem *sui generis* – almost divinely conceived in their elemental simplicity – but the reality is more complex. Senju worked hard and struggled before settling into his signature style. His graduation series from the Tokyo National University of Fine Arts (sienna-coloured surrealist architectural studies of Tokyo) are well executed but heavy and ponderous, which Senju allows. They look like the work of a student, still trying to figure it out.

Senju's work transformed dramatically when he discovered, at another artist's exhibit, the material that now defines his work – a natural pigment made from hand-crushed oyster shells and lapis lazuli, bonded in a medium of animal-hide glue. In the Japanese tradition of Nihonga painting, over 1,000 years old, the paint is applied to mulberry paper or silk. Senju, who uses mulberry paper, is widely recognised as one of the few Nihonga masters remaining.

After Senju "met" the pigment, he began to ruminate on the subject of time. This pigment, he thought, was made out of materials that we see as mundane, yet were created before time memorial, perhaps 4.6 billion years ago, in the Big Bang. "The world began as a fireball," he reflects, "which resulted in the creation of precious metals. This is something that impresses and amazes me still. People often talk about fossils, but for me, these old pebbles we find on the street are far more interesting."

The pigment, which Senju used exclusively for years, became more than a medium – it is the foundation for his artistic philosophy, a motive, and a drive. The provenance of the pigment has taught Senju a deep respect for the passage of time, and perhaps a certain patience in his work. "Whatever the subject matter," he recalls, "I became interested in expressing the passage of time." Senju felt that with the rise of video and new media, painting was seen as a dying art. He says, "I thought, if you could capture the passage of time, then painting is not dead."

In 1993, Senju took a trip to Hawaii to observe the Big Island's beauty and chartered a helicopter to view Kilauea Volcano from the sky. The party landed where the lava meets the seashore, and Senju found the ground still warm. "I was awed and impressed," he remembers. "In this landscape, four billion years of history was held. I wanted to capture this landscape –the impression was that strong."

The resulting series, *Flatwater*, reveals a vastly different painter than the painter of Senju's graduation series. Senju depicts a stark, otherworldly landscape, defined by the simple contrast between dark textured rock and flat pockets of water, which glow like morning light. The series is masterful and immediately arresting. With the series, Senju seemingly birthed the ethereal and eerie, yet almost photorealistic, style that still defines and distinguishes his work.

Not long after the success of Flatwater, Senju began painting waterfalls. A painter interested in studying time, he moved from still water to water in movement. Shortly after, he was invited to exhibit Flatwater at the Venice Biennale; instead, he offered to show the waterfalls. "I had moved on," he explains. "If I could capture a waterfall on canvas, I thought I could capture the passage of time."

To capture the movement of a waterfall, Senju began by pouring paint down from the top of the canvas, tilting it at varying angles to experiment with different speeds. Some of the waterfalls are more figurative, some more abstract. Mostly, they focus on the moment when the waterfall hits the water, erupting in a delicate explosion of light and froth. Senju believes that his entire life carried him towards the moment he successfully captured the look and feel of the waterfall. "It was like I was inside a laboratory. Rather than capturing the image of 'real' waterfalls, like Niagara, or Iguacu, I created the waterfall on canvas, like a scientist. When I first painted the waterfalls, I was 35 years old. So I can say it took me 35 years to come to this. At the beginning, I was interested in the energy, the motion, the activity, and the boldness of the waterfall. Later, I was more interested in creating balance, a sense of the sublime."

The waterfalls were an international success. They've since been installed in such public spaces as the Haneda Airport, and in 2003 Senju created 77 waterfall murals for Daitokuji-Jyukoin, a prominent Zen Buddhist temple in Japan. In October 2011, The Hiroshi Senju Museum opened in Karuizawa, Japan, designed by architect Ryue Nishizawa. The museum is built against a gently sloping hill that the concrete floor is contoured to follow naturally. It is entirely enclosed by glass walls, which were designed to let in natural light and give access to the green outside. "I wanted it to look as if nature was a painting, and my paintings as if they were nature," says Senju.

In his current **exhibition at Sundaram Tagore Gallery** in Hong Kong, Day Falls / Night Falls, Senju reveals a new twist on his now-iconic waterfalls. The phosphorescent series is a departure from the delicate grisaille waterfalls he is famous for. He stumbled across the idea of using phosphorescence while walking through the streets of Tokyo, observing the ubiquitous neon signs and contemplating the "mysterious luminosity of neon."

Neon, he reflects, "might be associated with cheap ideas, but as a medium, I found it interesting." He began to experiment, incorporating neon into his waterfalls. It was the first synthetic material he'd used since turning to Nihonga.

Viewed in natural light, the waterfalls are muted, elegant, feminine. Under the black light, they become powerful, deep, inscrutable. Senju felt that in the process, he'd unearthed a duality existent in human life. He reflects, "When you look at human beings –taking myself as an example, I'm wearing suit, I look like a gentleman, a rational being. But at night, in the glow of the black light, I'm often surprised at changes in myself. I feel mysterious, dreamy. The daytime self is different from the nighttime self."

Recently, Senju has been developing a new subject matter – cliffs. He discovered inspiration in a discarded, crumpled piece of paper in the wastebasket. "I looked," he says, "and the cliffs were there." He began to crumple large pieces of mulberry paper, and paint them, following the ridges and folds.

He sees the cliffs as the development of a theme, not a departure. To this day, Senju is focused on capturing time in nature. He continues to find newness and inspiration in the theme. "When you continue to ask yourself questions, there are messages, and answers from the nature:

those become my inspirations," he says. "I do believe that visual art, such as painting, can still capture the overwhelming impression of the universe. My subject matter is a gift from the goddess of art. I didn't choose it. It chose me."

by Madeline Gressel

Hiroshi Senju, Day Falls / Night Falls is at **Sundaram Tagore** gallery, 57-59 Hollywood Road Central, Hong Kong
tel +852-2581-9678 fax +852-2581-9673 until June 9

Opening hours:

Monday - Saturday 10am - 7pm

Sunday 11am - 7pm

Posted: 14 May 2013