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ANA DE ARMAS

# Beyond BOUNDARIES

New works by beloved artist Hiroshi Senju mark a turning point in his career and offer a unifying message in chaotic times.

BY JEAN NAYAR

Stepping into the Westchester, N.Y., studio of Hiroshi Senju and watching him work is akin, in many ways, to experiencing a Japanese tea ceremony. There's a reverential air in the space, with the accoutrements of his art—pigments made from ground seashells and precious minerals, delicate porcelain containers, elegant brushes constructed of bamboo, brass, horsehair and sable—pristinely poised for their part in a ritualistic process. None of the painter's attention to detail is surprising, given his grounding in the 1,000-year-old tradition of Japanese *nihonga* painting, which focuses on themes of nature and is produced with skills that require years of training to develop. But a deeper look at his works reveals a point of view that transcends time and place.

"Hiroshi Senju is an artist dealing with universal themes—his approach is syncretic," says gallerist Sundaram Tagore, who presented a series of paintings by Senju at an exhibition he curated at the Venice Biennale in 2015. At his gallery in Chelsea, Tagore also recently

unveiled the painter's newest body of work in an exhibition called *At World's End*. "He seamlessly fuses traditional Japanese painting techniques with an artistic language firmly rooted in Western modernism, such as drip painting, graffiti and—with his recent *Day Falls/Night Falls* series—fluorescent paint illuminated under ultraviolet light, which has an affinity with James Turrell's atmospheric, light-infused installations."

Cherished in Japan as a national treasure, Senju's monumental work makes its mark on the collective psyche in settings as diverse as Haneda Airport, the Daitoku-ji Temple in Kyoto and the Hiroshi Senju Museum, designed by Pritzker Prize-winning architect Ryue Nishizawa and dedicated exclusively to Senju's work. Yet over the course of his career, his influence has spread all over the globe, with his paintings now part of the permanent collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Brooklyn Museum.

Senju's latest works, featuring images of cliffs painted on crumpled mulberry paper, represent a new direction in his exploration of nature. "Being on the side of nature is the essence of Japanese art," the painter says, "and it is needed in the contemporary world now." His long view of art and humanity

Clockwise from top: Hiroshi Senju's "At World's End #2" (2017), painted on Japanese mulberry paper; the artist in his Westchester studio; tools of the delicate trade artfully scattered throughout Senju's work space.



offers a reassuring sense of calm that transfixes and transforms those who appreciate his work. And from the crushed crevices and crags of his most recent paintings, he also elicits a sense of optimism even in today's tumultuous political and environmental climates. "In the damage, we can find the beauty and the joy of life," Senju says. "Art can work as a bridge for people who have different ideas and allow them to experience a common sense of sympathy. Art is hope." *Nov. 9 to Dec. 9, Sundaram Tagore Gallery, 547 W. 27th St., 212.677.4520, sundaramtagore.com*

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