

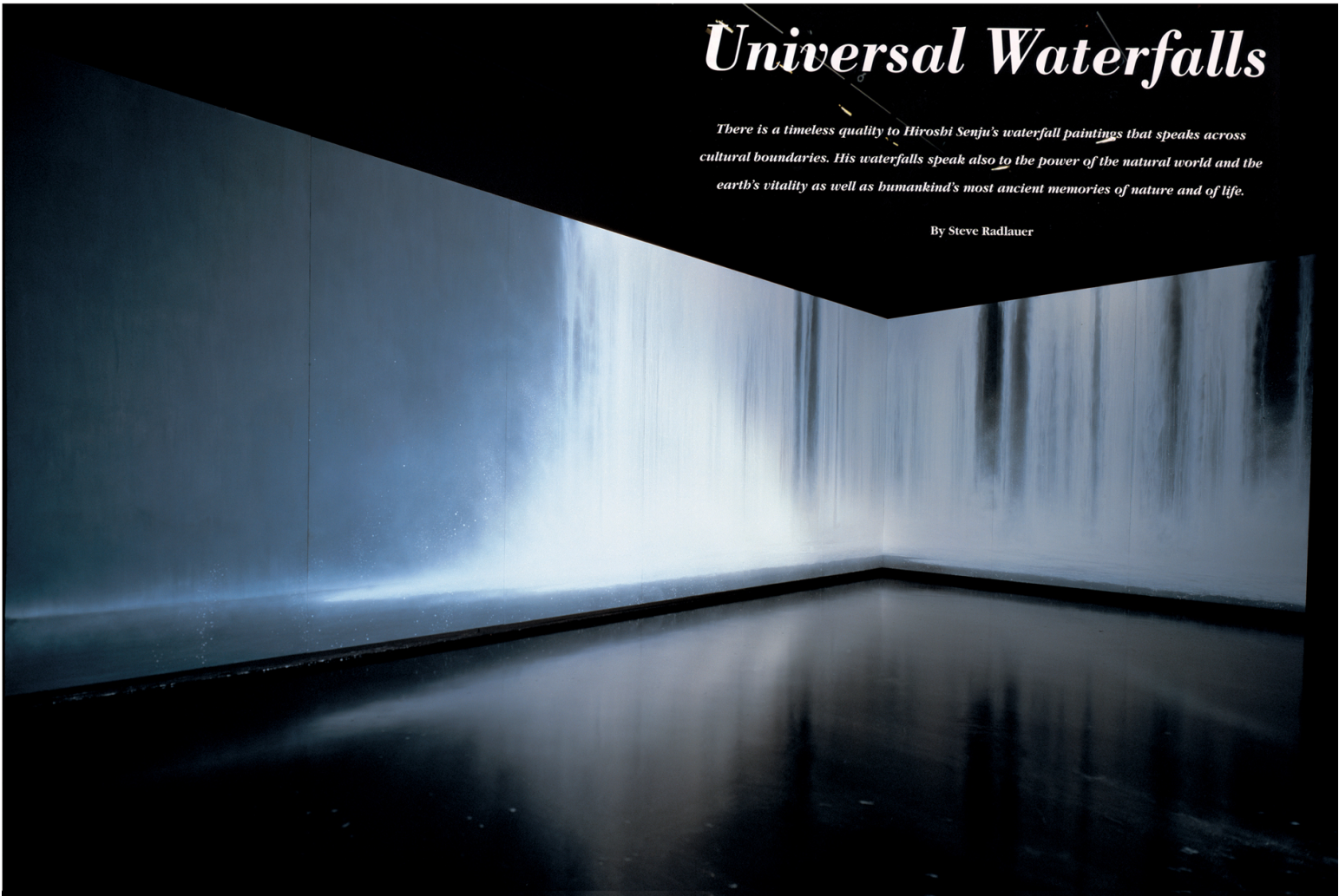
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ASIANART NEWS

Universal Waterfalls

There is a timeless quality to Hiroshi Senju's waterfall paintings that speaks across cultural boundaries. His waterfalls speak also to the power of the natural world and the earth's vitality as well as humankind's most ancient memories of nature and of life.

By Steve Radlauer



From the outside, Hiroshi Senju's Westchester studio is an industrial redbrick building. Inside, however, it is the Platonic ideal of an artist's loft. The centerpiece is a vast space with pristine white walls, warm lighting, and gleaming white floors—an amalgam of viewing space, studio, and living room. Then there are the satellite spaces: an office, a room for mixing paint, another office, and storage spaces. The whole is suffused with a Japanese aesthetic of minimalism. In the midst of a bustling suburb, it is a place of contemplation, of calm.

Although not so much on the day I visited. A few days earlier, a storm had dumped prodigious quantities of water on the New York metropolitan area, flooding parts of the studio. The artist, his wife (and translator), Hiromi, and I sat in the dry main room as workers attacked the soggy floor of the spaces toward the rear of the building. At one point our conversation, which had been repeatedly interrupted by construction sounds, was stopped cold by a new barrage that was louder than anything that had gone before, and that came from directly over our heads. I looked up, wearing what must have been a puzzled—possibly terrified—expression. “Don’t worry,” said Senju, poker-faced. “It’s just a waterfall.” And then his face cracked into a big smile.



Above: Hiroshi Senju, Day Falls / Night Falls V, 2007, fluorescent pigment on rice paper mounted on board. Previous pages: Hiroshi Senju, The Fall, 1995 at the Venice Biennale, 3.4 x 12.6 m. All images: Courtesy of the Artist and Sundaram Tagore Gallery.

We’d been talking about waterfalls, of course. It is an unavoidable topic around an artist whose prime subject, since the mid-1990s, has been waterfalls. (And, no, the sound wasn’t, strictly speaking, a

Senju one of an artist’s supreme achievements. The pursuit of this form of transcendence influences every aspect of his process, from the subjects he chooses to the materials he employs.



Hiroshi Senju, Waterfalls II, 2007, fluorescent pigment on rice paper mounted on board, 63 ½ x 177".

waterfall. It was rain, sudden and heavy, on the studio’s skylight.) Indeed, in the entire history of art there are few painters so closely associated with falling water. Certainly there were traditional Japanese painters, as well as any number of Western artists—Turner, Courbet, members of the Hudson River School—who depicted waterfalls; the abstract expressionist Clyfford Still often suggested waterfalls non-representationally; as I write, the four *New York City Waterfalls* installations of the Danish artist Olafur Eliasson can be seen from Manhattan as they pump away. And, while strictly speaking not an artist, architect Frank Lloyd Wright famously built a masterpiece around a waterfall. But it is hard to recall anyone who has focused almost exclusively on waterfalls over the length of time that Hiroshi Senju has. It may be that he relates differently to time than the rest of us. For him, an understanding of time—and the incorporation of that understanding into the work—is a crucial component of art. He speaks reverently about classical Japanese *Nibonga* paintings that still speak to us after more than 1,000 years. The ability to transcend one’s own time and place is for

Take the paper that is the substrate of his paintings. Yes, it's paper, not canvas. A Japanese rice paper crafted to his specifications. Why? Because, he says, aside from its silken finish, this paper (properly mounted on board) is stronger than canvas: "In Japanese art we have centuries of history with paper, so we have proof." Some admirers have written that he uses paper because it is the traditional Japanese way, but Senju, who was born in Tokyo in 1958, disputes this. "Yes, the paper is from Japan. But strength is the reason. Not because it's the Japanese tradition." The paint he uses has also been the subject of much complimentary exegesis. The idea of him grinding oyster shells and semi-precious stones to produce *iwaenogu*, Japanese natural pigments, then carefully mixing the fine powder with animal-hide glue, is as quaint and exotic as the image of a guitar virtuoso who hand-crafts his own instruments. In Senju's case, the truth may be somewhat less exotic but, I would argue, more interesting. Indeed, he does make his paint out of finely ground natural materials, but he doesn't typically do the grinding himself—most of the beautiful and costly pigment-powder comes from a company in Japan. And he doesn't necessarily mix the paint all by himself; he has a number of studio assistants working with him.

If it is not a throwback to the old ways, or a form of meditation, or even a protest against mass production, why does he insist on homemade paint? There are two very good reasons. First, says Senju, the natural pigments are exceptionally beautiful and come closer than any commercially available paint to



Hiroshi Senju, paintings on *fusuma* at the Jukoin, Daitokuji, Tokyo National Museum, 2003.

making his pictures look the way he imagines them. Second, he believes (based on the longevity of *Nihonga* paintings) that these natural pigments won't fade or mutate over time. With mass-produced paint, he says, "It's hard to imagine what it's going to look like after 100 years, so it's taking a chance." By way of example, he adds that certain of Monet's paintings have suffered because the artist used cheap pigments: "The color Monet imagined is different from what we actually see today. It's very unfortunate that we don't see the color he used." So, while Senju's paint and paper

are similar to those used by the ancients, he maintains that this is not a sign that he's working in or extending their tradition; those painters just happened to have chosen their materials brilliantly.

And what of his technique, his method of turning a blank expanse of paper into a work of art? Again, it is tempting to focus on Senju's Japanese brushes that could have been made centuries ago, or the way he can be said to emulate his forebears by blowing fine particles onto his paintings to enhance the mist effect of a waterfall's spray. But those forebears wouldn't recognize most of the other tools in his quiver. "Ice-age people blew paint through a straw or tube. I'm not an ice-age person," Senju says. "I use whatever works." Such as air, pressurized by an industrial-size electric pump, with which he has been known to apply paint. Or misting paint on paper with a plant sprayer, or slinging it with a toothbrush, a hairbrush, a comb. Or sometimes using special Swiss pigments that fluoresce under ultra-violet light. And, above all, employing gravity, and probability, in ways that would be quite unfamiliar to the ancients: to fashion a waterfall, Senju pours paint onto a vertical sheet of paper, so the liquid is subjected to a controlled version of the same elemental forces that act on a cataract streaming over a cliff. "It's a way," he says, "to accommodate nature in my painting. Like a real waterfall." Typically, Senju's scale is heroic; the waterfall vista currently covering the back wall of his studio is a good 10 meters long and 2.5 meters high. To keep the paint from going straight to the floor, a work in progress is rested on blocks and then leaned against the wall



Hiroshi Senju, Tokyo International Airport (Haneda), Terminal 2, 2004.

at a narrow angle (adjusted to control the flow.) Even so, Senju says, "My assistants are very busy because there is a flood when I'm painting. They use many bowls, many buckets." This is a messy, aleatoric, and thoroughly contemporary process.

As for his subjects, it is clear that even before he discovered waterfalls Senju had an affinity for big, universal themes. He'd painted any number of landscapes—from arid craggy deserts to urban jungles—but he was restless. In 1994, his quest took him to Hawaii. "I wanted to paint something that will not be old-fashioned after 1,000 years, a timeless landscape," he says. "I wanted to relate to something of the Earth that we're living on, like volcanic activities." In the course of scouting for lava-flow landscapes, he came upon several waterfalls. They didn't make a big impression at the time, he says, but "after I came back, I could not forget the image." Senju tries—as rain continues to hammer the skylight—to describe how

the waterfalls haunted him. "I thought there were some very important memories that were forgotten... maybe millions of years ago there were waterfalls everywhere, and people living then would have seen them... it's like a genetic memory, in the DNA. I knew I had to paint waterfalls."

As exciting as it was to realize he'd found his subject, figuring out how to render that subject was not an easy task. "He really struggled at first," says Hiromi Senju. "He tried everything. He ripped up a lot of things that didn't work. It took a while to evolve."

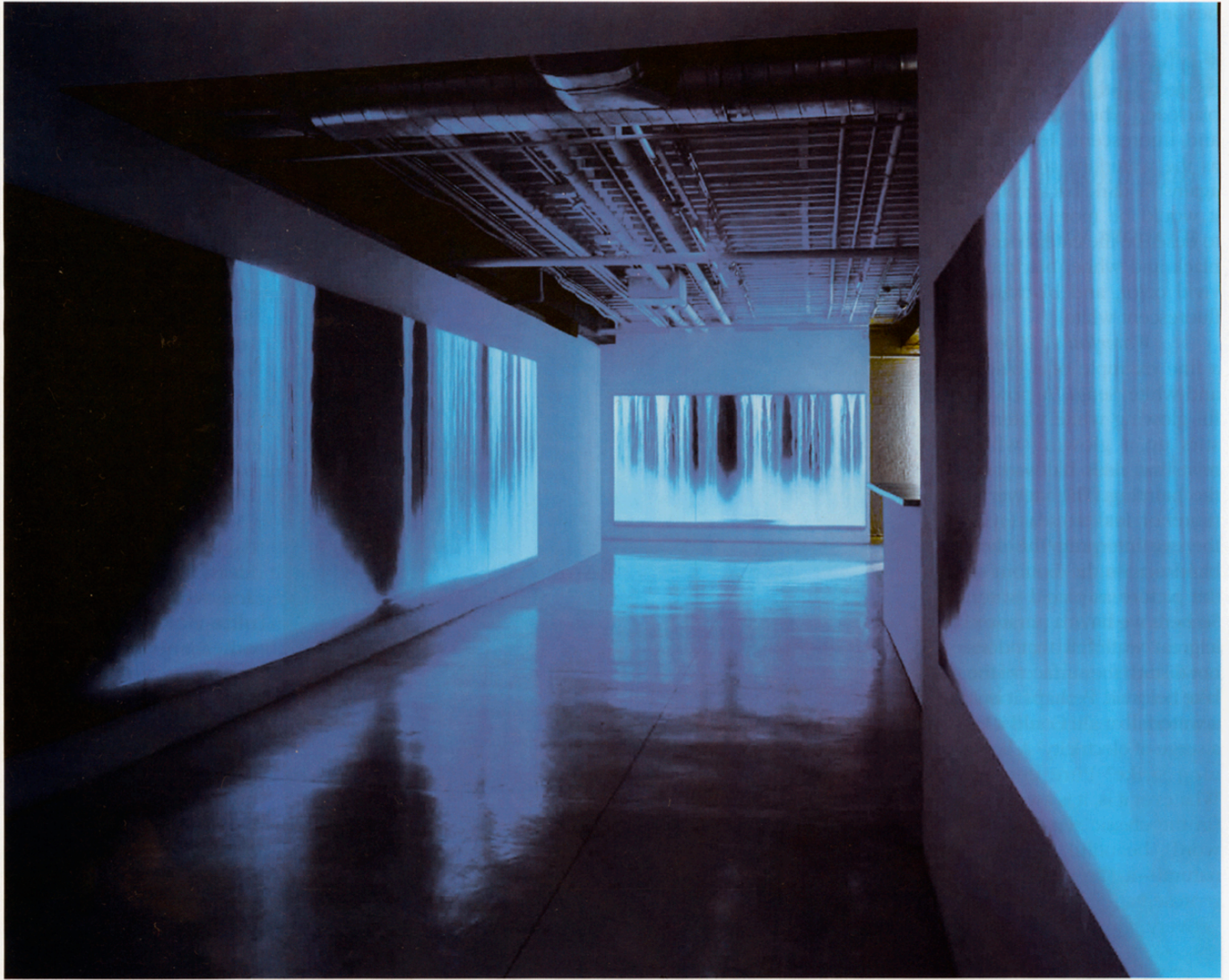
"I started painting by brush," Senju says. "It didn't really work the way I wanted it to. It was more like the Hudson River School or the work of 19th-century European artists, which was not what I wanted to do. The more I painted, the closer I felt to the two most important elements on the earth—gravity and water. And I thought: why don't I try to use gravity, to pour down the paint from the top?"

Three of the early waterfall works from 1994 illustrate Senju's arduous evolu-

tion. First, a lovely, inarguably representational landscape, entitled *Waterfall, Trees on the Cliff*, with a dark, nearly black tree-covered mountainside reaching almost to the top of the picture, a hazy-gray rounded V of sky, and glowing white water flowing through the low point of the V and plunging over the cliff. Second, a picture, entitled simply *Waterfall*, that can be seen as a close-up of the previous image: a segment of shimmering white waterfall—no top, no bottom—against a dark wall that could be anything from a tree-covered promontory to the vastness of space. And finally, another waterfall, also entitled *Waterfall*, against a dark background, but this time we see the bottom: falling, glowing water roiling the pool below, concentric circles of turbulence flowing from the epicenter, vapor tossed up by the endless torrent. It is not so different from the waterfalls Senju paints today: it is both abstract (set in limbo, lacking many realistic details) and representational (there's no doubt that it is a waterfall); which is another way of saying it is both modern (the kinship with abstract



Hiroshi Senju, *Falling Color*, 2006, pure pigment on rice paper mounted on board, 19.6 x 23.8".



Hiroshi Senju, *Haruka Naru Aoi Hikari*, 2007, installation, December 2007 at Sundaram Tagore Gallery, New York.

expressionism and action painting, the eschewing of the illusion that the picture is framing a real-life scene, the various ways in which attention is drawn to the painted surface) and ancient (not only is it a waterfall, it has—at least to my eyes—overtones of the *Nibonga* masters.)

“My waterfall,” Senju says, anticipating the abstract-versus-representational question, “isn’t Niagara Falls or Victoria Falls but more the concept of a waterfall.” Which leads me to what I momentarily fear could be a delicate question: how does he feel when someone approaches one of his paintings and thinks it’s a geyser instead of a waterfall? Or (as I overheard a visitor to the Sundaram Tagore Gallery in New York say) the tower of light from the World Trade Center memorial?



Hiroshi Senju at his studio, 2007.

Hiromi says then. “At the Venice Biennale”—at which Senju was the first Asian to receive an individual fine-arts award [1995]—“someone asked if it’s a painting of a bomb at Hiroshima.”

“Someone else asked if it was a ‘light waterfall,’ and if that means ‘enlight-

fazes him. “The paintings mirror what’s in the observer’s mind. They’ll see a god, they’ll see Hiroshima, they might see 9/11. But I’m just painting waterfalls, the whole emotional aspect of waterfalls.”

Talking about his paintings’ power to trigger a wide range of responses brings

Senju back to the subject of universality in art. Earlier he had praised the old Japanese artists for communicating with us across the centuries. Now he mused on how his own paintings appear to have the ability to cross cultural barriers.

“Some people who see my paintings think they’re Italian, they think Senju is an Italian name. Or maybe South American. Not necessarily Japanese. I think it’s because people connect with what’s universal in the work. It’s not just about my background, my history, but it goes beyond every boundary. That’s important, for art to go



beyond every boundary.”

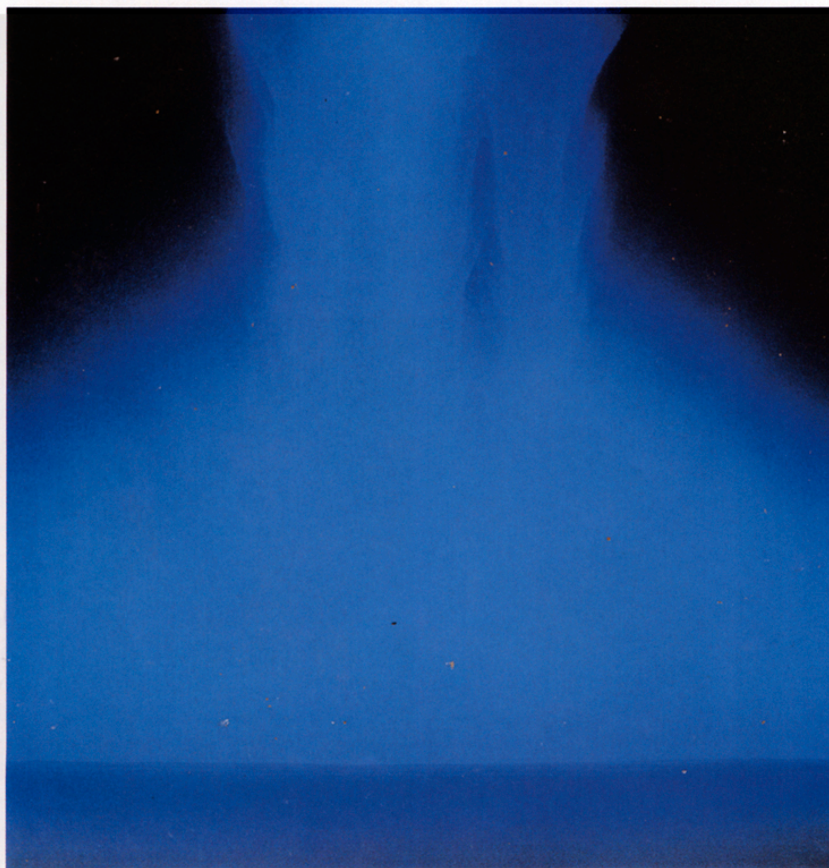
Senju's current waterfall works can be loosely divided into three categories: black and white, vivid color, and fluorescent. However, as the waterfalls are all set against a dark background, it would be more accurate to describe the categories as black and white, black and vivid color, and black and fluorescent white.

Waterfall V (2008) is a fine example of a black-and-white Senju. A powerful glowing white waterfall stirs up a glowing white mist that rises halfway up the painting. The viewer is more or less at sea level; the eye interprets the dark band across the bottom of the picture as placid water. So here we have a paradox: a great waterfall that does not disturb the surface of the lake below it. Perhaps it isn't a waterfall at all. Could it be a surge of electricity? A lightning strike? Pure energy? Whatever it is, it is awesome (in the classic sense of the word), beautiful, and, yes, natural—a stirring, visceral representation of undefined yet very real primal forces.

One counterintuitive aspect of Senju's waterfalls is that the black and white paintings often have a more naturalistic feel than the color works. Senju does not use color to mimic nature. Rather, he uses color because he loves color—specifically, the color he painstakingly produces with his rare pigments. Take *Falling Color* (2006) In this piece the mist does not seem to be stirred up by the falling water but, rather, to be rising from the southern edge of the picture to embrace the waterfall. In the intense redness it is difficult to discern where the mist ends and the waterfall begins, or even if it is a waterfall: a waviness suggests nothing so much



Hiroshi Senju, *Colored Falls Green*, 2007, pure pigment on rice paper mounted on board, 63 x 47".



Hiroshi Senju, *Falling Blue*, 2006, pure pigment on rice paper mounted on board, 21 x 21".

as *flame*. Again we see the forces of nature merging harmoniously in Senju's hands. Note, incidentally, that the "flame" form is not necessarily driven by the color red; there are other works in this series where the effect is similar though the color is not.

"Nighttime in the modern world," says Senju, "is filled with lights. Regular light, neon lights. It's a very important time for us." He is explaining why he uses fluorescent pigments in such works as the overwhelming installation *Haruka Naru Aoi Hikari* (*New Light from Afar*). In daylight, the palette seems identical to that of his black and white works. But by ultra-violet light a whole other universe emerges, with the white waterfall now glowing a deep cobalt blue fringed by an even deeper purple aura. "Daytime," he says, "is gentle, tranquil. But nighttime, it completely changes, like human beings. Very mysterious, very chaotic. Multiple personalities." Which isn't to say that Senju is troubled by these transformations. On the contrary, for him the neon-lit modern night is just another place to seek, and find, beauty and hope: "This fluorescent light, it's our light in the darkness."

Does he, I ask, foresee any new types of boundary-crossing in his future—specifically, does he think he'll continue to focus primarily on waterfalls or is he considering taking on any new subjects? "Tomorrow I go to China and Korea," he says, smiling, "to look at a very old kind of painting, map painting. I feel the possibility of doing something in that direction." Δ

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