

ARTFORUM



Hiroshi Senju, *Cliff*, 2012, natural and acrylic pigment on Japanese mulberry paper, 6' 4¼" x 12' 9⅝". From the series "Cliffs," 2012.

Hiroshi Senju

SUNDARAM TAGORE GALLERY

The exquisite works in Hiroshi Senju's series "Cliffs," 2012—eleven mixed-media paintings, one a triptych, all on mulberry paper mounted on board—appear to illustrate Lao-tzu's idea of Tao as a sort of universal flow or elemental flux informing all things. Yet they also bear an intriguing affinity with two strands of nineteenth-century Romantic landscape painting: the work of the English painter J. M. W. Turner and that of the German painter Caspar David Friedrich. The trace of Turner is evident in Senju's depiction of light, his embrace of surging, mystical luminosity. (In some works, this light dominates; in others, it competes with an ominous, intimidating blackness, as though Senju were struggling to balance forces while acknowledging their natural differences.) Friedrich's work is called to mind by Senju's exquisite sense of detail, specifically when he renders cliff-side trees. (One thinks of Friedrich's *Chalk Cliffs on Rugen*, 1818–19.) Thomas Cole's *Scene from Byron's "Manfred,"* 1833, may be a further Romantic-era touchstone. Senju's work similarly evokes extreme, terrifying contrasts, not only between light and dark, but between organic growth and inorganic matter, the vital and the barren. Cole's painting is also noteworthy because it may have been based on a Catskill mountain landscape, as Senju's probably is, at least in part. (He works in Pleasantville, New York.)

In all these works, we're dealing with the sublime—both the mathematical as well as the dynamical sublime, in Kant's sense of those terms—"aspiring" to become numinous. As Kant writes, the sublime "forces us, subjectively, to *think* nature itself in its totality as a presentation of something supersensible, without being able *objectively* to arrive at this presentation." The sublime suggests the "subjective purposiveness of our mind in the employment of the Imagination for its supersensible destination." However empirically objective and detailed Senju's description of the naturally given may be, he is reaching beyond nature, as it were, to imaginatively feel its supersensible totality, which,

paradoxically, is peculiarly objectified in his calm, intimate handling of light and dark.

Senju's paintings are dramatic and touching at once, uplifting and unsettling, like nature itself. In some works, we look up at an overwhelming cliff. In others, we seem to be standing on its edge. In still others, we seem to be falling off a cliff, as though caught in an avalanche—an avalanche of cascading light and solid darkness, as well as of rock and earth. A few depict a kind of apocalyptic radiance, a sort of explosion of light that fails to blot out the blackness entirely. All suggest how precarious our existence is, especially when we aspire to unreachable heights. We try to rise above the void, but all we can do is face it unflinchingly, perceive it without being overawed by it, devote ourselves to it without being diminished by it, and master it by making it memorable.

—Donald Kuspit