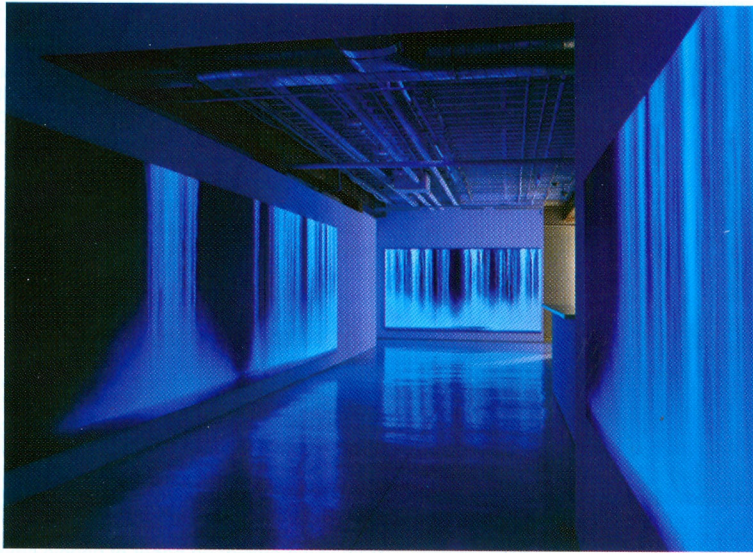


Art in America

September 2008



View of Hiroshi Senju's exhibition "New Light from Afar," 2008, fluorescent pigment on rice paper on board; at Sundaram Tagore.

Hiroshi Senju Sundaram Tagore

Waterfalls or their semblances have been on view of late, from Pat Steir's signature cascades of paint at Cheim & Read in December, to Olafur Eliasson's actual waterworks—public *divertissements* on a royal scale—that opened in late June in four sites along the New York City waterfront, to Hiroshi Senju's recent exhibition at Sundaram Tagore's Chelsea gallery. Tokyo born, Senju is now based in Kyoto, Tokyo and New York, and he has made a practice of combining *nihonga* (Japanese traditional painting) with more contemporary strategies. The eight works in the exhibition, called "Haruka Naru Aoi Hikari" (New Light from Afar), are from the series "Day Falls/Night Falls" and range from over easel-size, vertically oriented formats to the panoramic in scale. Among the latter was the monumental *Day Falls/Night Falls X* (2007), which, at 7½ by 33 feet, is his most ambitious picture to date.

Here, rice paper mounted on board is vertically striated with fluorescent pigment to create soft bands that, under daylight or ordinary gallery illumination, form quietly elegant, gray-white fields that resemble mini-

malistic or ink paintings, a mix of East and West. These flat, reticent images, however, are much more dramatic under black light, which utterly transforms them. The fluorescent pigment, activated when the black lights mounted overhead are turned on intermittently by a timer, asserts itself to suggest an environment of tumultuous, ghostly waterfalls against a radiant, deep blue or blue-black space of indeterminate, mysterious depth.

Senju creates, from the most simple of low-tech means, high-tech, cinematic spectacles that appear to be in motion. They are startlingly beautiful works—perhaps too beautiful, since we tend to be wary of beauty—and raise the question of optical trickery, although that trickery is completely transparent. However, other cultures are not so dismissive of pure visual pleasure. In Japan, the decorative has long been venerated, integral to both the spiritual and the secular. Senju's often super-scaled, day-for-night visions are his version of this tradition, updated so that old mediums look like new ones. Merging landscape, the decorative and the transcendent in a mesmerizing installation, these works function as meditations on the inexorable but cyclical passage of time, enveloping the viewer in a kind of sacred, elemental space—a sensation that might have been even more pronounced had they indeed formed an enclosure, like a chapel.

—Lilly Wei