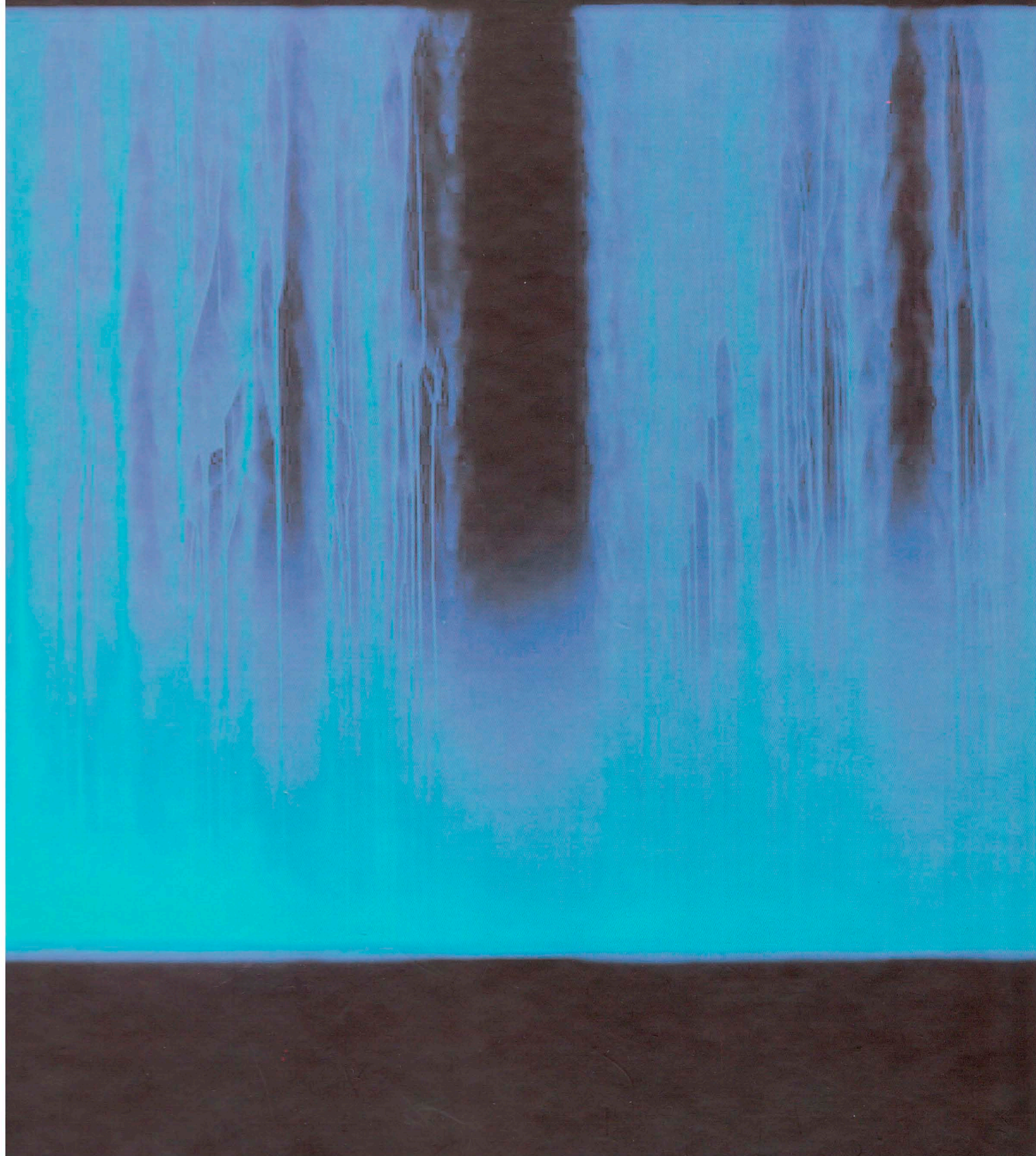


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..... *An apparition!*

..... *Don't even call it a dream.*

..... *In this world of ours*

..... *What we hear about, what we see*

..... *As transience – this is it!*

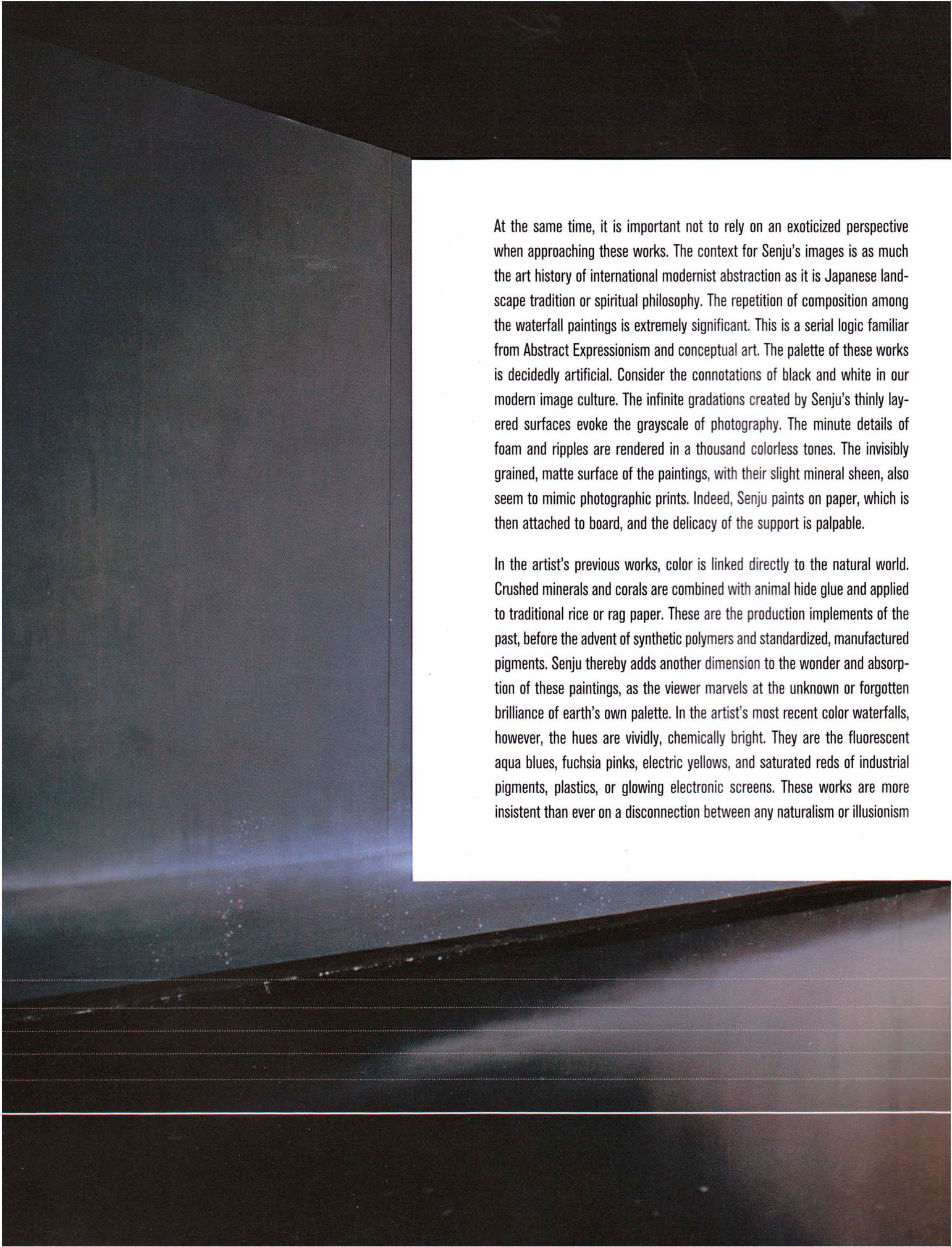
Fujiwara no Teika (Sadaie) (1162-1241 C.E.)¹

HIROSHI SENJU'S ALTERNATIVE MATERIALISM

The Waterfall Paintings in Contemporary Art Historical Context – Rachel Baum

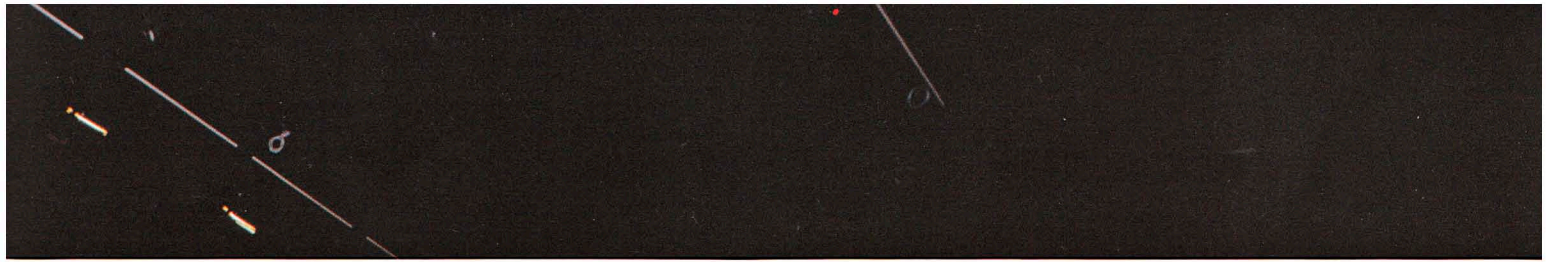
Whether engulfed by Hiroshi Senju's vast murals or walking along a row of smaller paintings, the viewer feels drawn through the gates of an hallucinated temple. The suspended screens and columns of racing water lure the imagination into the scene and dissolve the boundaries between eye and image. Whatever the scale or palette of the waterfall paintings, there is an intensely synesthetic presence to the surface, which is as flat as satin and just as luminous and tactile. What Senju has done is perform a primal alchemy, transforming earth, in the form of ground natural pigments, into water and air. Beyond this transmutation of states of matter, time and motion are transfixed, each streaming curtain and soaring droplet hanging in a frozen present, as if either the viewer or the cataract itself were bewitched.

Senju's waterfall works, which are many and varied, are an ongoing exploration of the poetics of the material world—the continuous, cyclical passage of liquid flow into translucent vapor, all rendered through a velvety powder of rocks, plants, and shells. The waterfall seems symbolic of this fundamental unity of elements. Dense columns of water are pulverized into ether and solid rock is dissolved by the torrent, each natural state always in the midst of change. These are not processes that the artist observes from the outside, from a separate space or through a frame or a lens. Rather, Senju immerses consciousness itself in the natural world as a complementary energy, synchronized with the forces of water and wind. In the West, this might be called the sublime, that sensation of losing the boundaries of the self in awe of the majestic powers of nature. Like so many Western concepts, however, the notion of the sublime hinges on domination – specifically, the mind and volition of the individual being overmastered by nature's vastness, indifference, and violent intensity. In this sense, the sublime represents a loss of authority, a state of uncontrol, and a fearful submission to unknowable chaos. This agonistic model could not be more removed from the subjectivity proposed by Senju's waterfalls, in which the dispersal of self occurs through a hypnotic concordance of mind and sensation, rather than the shattering awe described by European Romantic poets and painters. As the artist explains, "I think paintings should stimulate all the five senses . . . In a masterpiece, you can hear the water flowing, smell the air, and even feel the temperature. You can experience the atmosphere of the painting physically and mentally."²



At the same time, it is important not to rely on an exoticized perspective when approaching these works. The context for Senju's images is as much the art history of international modernist abstraction as it is Japanese landscape tradition or spiritual philosophy. The repetition of composition among the waterfall paintings is extremely significant. This is a serial logic familiar from Abstract Expressionism and conceptual art. The palette of these works is decidedly artificial. Consider the connotations of black and white in our modern image culture. The infinite gradations created by Senju's thinly layered surfaces evoke the grayscale of photography. The minute details of foam and ripples are rendered in a thousand colorless tones. The invisibly grained, matte surface of the paintings, with their slight mineral sheen, also seem to mimic photographic prints. Indeed, Senju paints on paper, which is then attached to board, and the delicacy of the support is palpable.

In the artist's previous works, color is linked directly to the natural world. Crushed minerals and corals are combined with animal hide glue and applied to traditional rice or rag paper. These are the production implements of the past, before the advent of synthetic polymers and standardized, manufactured pigments. Senju thereby adds another dimension to the wonder and absorption of these paintings, as the viewer marvels at the unknown or forgotten brilliance of earth's own palette. In the artist's most recent color waterfalls, however, the hues are vividly, chemically bright. They are the fluorescent aqua blues, fuchsia pinks, electric yellows, and saturated reds of industrial pigments, plastics, or glowing electronic screens. These works are more insistent than ever on a disconnection between any naturalism or illusionism

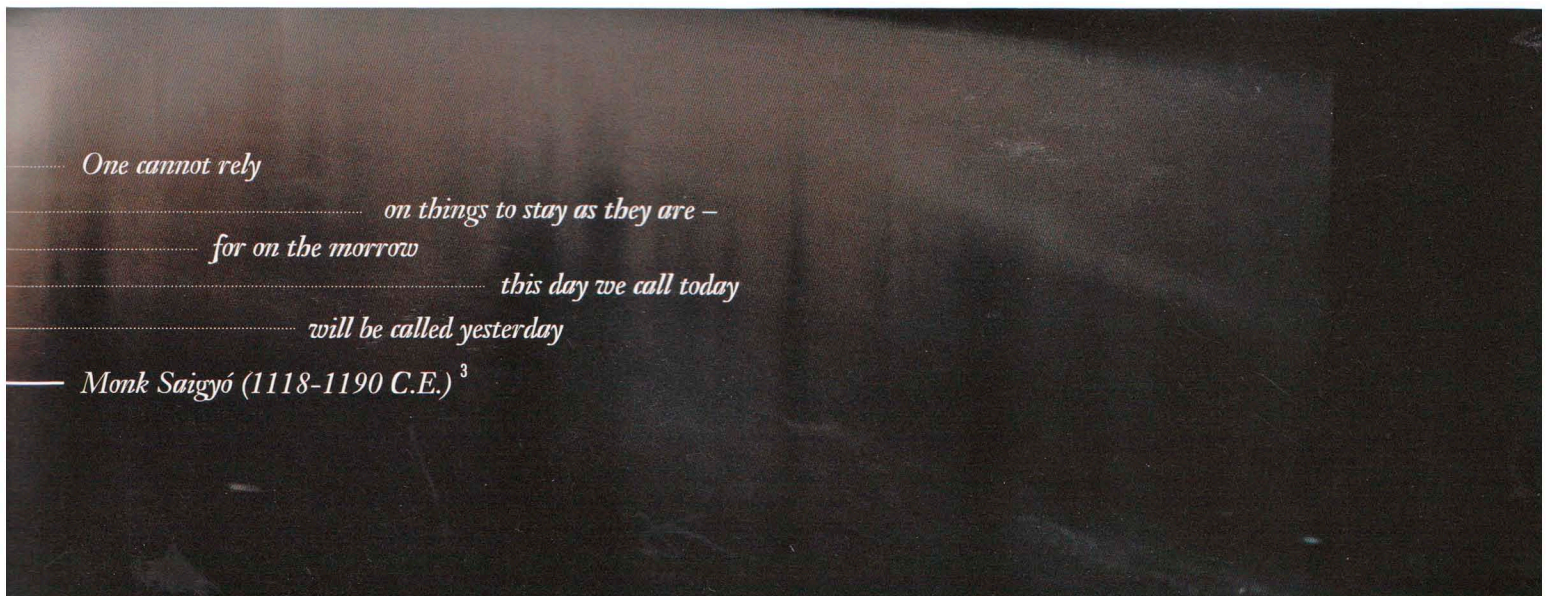


in the subject matter and the materiality of the painting itself, eschewing representation in favor of optical sensation. The chromatic auras created by these flows and clouds of ardent color penetrate the eye, and the viewer carries in the retina the afterimages and imprints of contrasting hues, creating another order of experience. Every surface, from the gallery wall to the inner screen of the eyelid itself, becomes an extension of the painting, as a halo of rich, sometimes burning color persists in the viewer's gaze. The glow of these phosphorescent falls invokes the dizzying Shinjuku district–Tokyo's Times Square—with its towers of multicolored lights streaming down high-rise hotels and office buildings. In expanding his palette to include the hyperbright hues of the modern electronic world, the artist is incorporating lived reality and the contemporary conditions of perception into his project of resisting distraction with engagement. Our everyday landscape may be lit with neon rather than moonlight, but it can still engender moments of reflection.

Further indication that Senju is invoking abstraction's formal play is the paintings' ambiguity and flexibility of scale. Like the scope of his palette, the breadth of his formats, which range from multistory architectural installations to easel-picture dimensions, defy any claims of realism. These images are not to be construed as big waterfalls and small waterfalls – in other words, as accurate depictions. They certainly have more in common with Pollock's *Autumn Rhythm* than they do with an illusionistically rendered landscape. Indeed, one of the fascinating formal aspects of Senju's waterfalls is the scale of the drip. In suggesting the churning foam

of falling water meeting still, the artist flecks the surface with sprays of translucent paint. Some spatter lands as tiny spots that read as minute droplets of evaporating mist, but others are larger—trails of paint that cannot be reconciled with the motion or scale of the waterfall as an image. These drips of paint interrupt the pictorial space and insist, instead, on the painted surface. The result of this contrast is not a fragmentation of attention or a disruption of the immersive field of the work but, rather, a transcendent synthesis of liquids: matter and sign, paint and water. Indeed, the artist will disperse the pigment through the force of his breath, transposing the air of his body into the air within the scene. It is these intricate, indexical correspondences of material, process, and image that create the paintings' unmistakable sense of unity. This is the power of Senju's waterfalls—the essential material integrity of the works, with their demonstration of the laws of nature, from viscosity and reflectivity to gravity and opacity. More than images, they are the reflexive material expressions that make manifest the transience of experience.

To expand the art-historical assessment of Senju's waterfalls, it is important that they be placed in the context of the larger field of contemporary Japanese painting. For more than a decade, the dominant style of Japanese art on the international market has been a “pop” aesthetic derived from such commercial illustration modes as animation (*anime*) and comics (*manga*). These mass-media sources have played an important role in shaping current Japanese visual culture at every level. Indeed, in a situation that parallels the reception of Warhol in America, contemporary



One cannot rely
on things to stay as they are –
for on the morrow
this day we call today
will be called yesterday

— Monk Saigyō (1118–1190 C.E.)³

Japanese pop art is premised on collapsing the categories of “high” and “low.” The primary figure of the movement is Takashi Murakami, and he has titled it Superflat to signify this de-differentiation of value. Superflat is characterized by juvenile and erotic cartoon figures and candy-colored landscapes populated by anthropomorphic animals and flowers, like a somewhat menacing and perverse children’s television show. The puerile and often sexualized imagery and the related product styles are described as *kawaii*, which translates as “cute,” suggesting an intentionally superficial and adolescent perspective. The most insightful readings of the historical origins of this style attribute it to a state of political and cultural castration and regression that is thought to stem from Japan’s defeat in World War II. Superflat is interpreted as a reflection of the postwar malaise of Japanese society and the replacement of traditional social and spiritual values with a national consciousness based on market economics alone. As Eleanor Heartney explains in her review of the blockbuster Japan Society show of 2005, curated by Murakami and titled “Little Boy,” Superflat is a movement of “trauma and kitsch.”⁴

Both Senju and Murakami studied traditional Japanese painting, or *nihon-ga*, at Tokyo National University of Fine Arts and Music. The two artists have also produced oeuvres that depart from ancient historical styles, but they have taken very different directions. Here, in a small fragment of an interview, Murakami explains the basis of the rupture that he perceives between tradition and the present moment in Japanese culture:

David Pagel: You were trained as a traditional painter?

Takashi Murakami: Yes, for more than 11 years. But I threw it away to start my new career in contemporary art.

DP: Does the distinction between high art and low culture mean anything to you?

TM: In Japan, there is no high and there is no low. It’s all flat.”⁵

This is the reigning materialism in Japanese painting: the commodification of aesthetics and the exchangeability of artworks and merchandise.⁶ Hiroshi Senju’s art could not be further from this nihilistic consumerism and seamless integration of artistic and commercial production. Senju’s waterfall paintings propose a poetic materialism of form and process. These works achieve a unified, reflexive demonstration of an infinite capacity for transformation: of vision, consciousness, and memory. It is not the traditional content of the landscape scene that gives the waterfalls their historical depth but the activation of the senses and the imagination of the viewer; this creates a continuity of knowledge and pleasure that seem drawn from ancient sources.

To extend the comparison with contemporary trends, one might label Senju’s waterfalls “superdeep.” There is nothing either *kawaii* or ashamed about Senju’s art. Rather than speaking to a historical subject determined by violent trauma and pathological drives that exists in a state of distraction and isolation, the subject proposed by the waterfall works possesses awareness and agency. Because of their tactile and formal complexity, as well as their elemental materiality, Senju’s waterfalls demand an active

experience by the viewer. The sensory intensity of the images makes the gaze a matter of bodily engagement and orientation. The paintings produce a direct awareness of the reception process itself. There is absorption and transporting openness in viewing these works, but there is also a demand for sustained attention and exploration. The artist explains that by invoking nature, these paintings allow each viewer to incorporate the scene into his own experience, regardless of individual differences. "This is the beauty of nature...because everybody can relate to it in some way...as if the painting were a mirror to their memories. This shared memory defines art as a power to break any boundaries between people."⁷

While the culture of *anime* and Superflat art may have progressive effects in creating a language to express disaffection and refusal in relation to mainstream cultural authority, its negations may not have a corresponding productivity in terms of practice. Japan's mass-market pop art may be trapped in the very circuit of repression that it seeks to critique, merely replacing patriarchal ideologies with the manipulations of fashion.⁸ By addressing the viewer as a damaged and greedy child, this art reciprocates the playful anomie and affective vacancy of a generation. In contrast, Senju's paintings enter the flow of history and allow for a continuity and development of the imagination from the past into the future. Senju's ongoing contemplation of the elusive materiality of water and the forgotten intensity of nature offers an alternative to the culture of art viewing as shopping.

This alternative is both timeless and of immediate import.

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1. Carter Steven D., trans. *Traditional Japanese Poetry: An Anthology*. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), 194.
2. Hiroshi Senju, interview. <http://www.hiroshisenju.com>.
3. Ibid, 166
4. Heartney Eleanor, "A Marriage of Trauma and Kitsch." In *Art in America* (October, 2005), 56-61.
5. Pagel, David, "Takashi Murakami" In *Interview* (March, 2001).
6. In 2003, Murakami designed a line of luxury purses for French fashion house Louis Vuitton. The graphic the artist produced combined the logo of the company with cartoon eyes, cherry blossoms, and other signature motifs. The conflation of corporate trademark and artistic style was total in this case, suggesting that Murakami's enterprise as an artist is the manufacturing of decorative goods. The production of Murakami key chains, mousepads, and t-shirts suggests a full range of marketing, from disposable to couture goods.
7. Hiroshi Senju, interview. <http://www.hiroshisenju.com>.
8. Darling, Michael, "Plumbing the Depths of Superflatness" *Art Journal* 60, no. 3 (Autumn, 2001): 76-89.

Rachel Baum writes on contemporary art and teaches modern art history and critical theory at Hunter College in New York City. She received her Ph.D from Harvard University and is completing a book on Warhol's early silkscreen paintings.