



The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus

in-depth critical analysis of the forces shaping the Asia-Pacific...and the world.

“Revelations from the Sea”: An Artist’s Response to the Disasters of March 11th, 2011

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Japanese artist Tomiyama Taeko (b. 1921) has devoted her life to creating works of art that explore contested histories of war and colonialism in East Asia. For several decades she has collaborated with musician and composer Takahashi Yuji to produce powerful audio-visual slide and dvd works that illuminate little-told stories of the past; the two artists see themselves as modern day “*tabigeinin*” (wandering minstrels) who like poets and painters of medieval times, speak through their art to the times.¹

Given Tomiyama’s passionate commitment to art as a vehicle for the expression of poetic vision, memory and social responsibility, it is not surprising that she set to work on a new series of paintings almost immediately after the triple disasters (earthquake, tsunami and nuclear power meltdown) struck northeastern Japan on March 11, 2011. Nor is it surprising that the sea should be the stage for her “Revelations” of, and reflections on, these disasters. In earlier works such as *Memories of the Sea* (1986) and *Hiruko and the Puppeteers: A Tale of Sea Wanderers* (2000-2009), the artist used images of a shaman’s undersea journey to the South Seas and those of a puppet troupe traveling across Central and Southeast Asia, and then along sea routes to Taiwan and to her native Awaji Island in western Japan. Through these works, the artist asks viewers to remember histories of war and natural disaster, linking them to our own turbulent times. In the paintings and collages that comprise the *Hiruko* series, for example, we glimpse burning towers on the sea floor reminiscent of 9.11, and puppets swept away in a swirling tsunami. (Image #1)



#1 “Adrift” (2008) Oil on canvas 800 x 1000mm

When the March 11 disasters struck, Tomiyama immediately asked herself how she might address the enormity of the devastating losses caused by the natural disasters and the ongoing man-made one that began unfolding in Fukushima. Again, the sea is a primary stage, but to convey the larger-than-human scale of the events, she felt she would need to find imagery other than the shaman, fox and puppets used in earlier works to capture the mythic proportions of this man-made nuclear disaster as well as nature’s wrath.

In “Revelation from the Sea: Tsunami” (Image #2), the first work in the series, *shinshou* or divine guardian deities rise up out of the dark, angry sea. Fires burn on the black water and the sky beyond the horizon glows ominously. The four *devas*, originating in India but also appearing in the Buddhist pantheon across east Asia, hold broken parts of a remote control device, now useless fragments of the civilization that has been washed away in the tsunami, a civilization that for Tomiyama has been driven by the “relentless pursuit of wealth and convenience” that began with the Age of Exploration in the mid-15th century. The deities have come from afar to admonish humans who have so foolishly imagined they can control nature and to warn against the frailty of human existence in the face of possible future devastation.²

Tomiyama began working on these large paintings in mid-April, 2011. On April 7th, a major “aftershock” struck the Fukushima area where desperate efforts were being made to contain the already serious nuclear disaster. In early May, Prime Minister Kan Naoto advised the Chubu Electric Power Company to shut down the Hamaoka nuclear power plant immediately. Tomiyama began to imagine other large paintings that would probe the man-made nuclear disaster. Again, she sought images of deities that might become vehicles for her commentary and began work on two large paintings that would become a diptych



#2 "Revelation from the Sea: Tsunami" (2011) Mixed media 1120 x 1620mm

including images of *Fujin* and *Raijin*, Shinto gods of the wind and thunder, lightning and storms often seen in the screen paintings of early 17th century artist, Sotatsu Tawaraya. In "Fukushima: Spring of Caesium-137" (Image #3)



#3 "FUKUSHIMA: Spring of Caesium-137" (2011) Oil on canvas 1120 x 1620

the dark, demon-like god rides on the wind, scattering particles of Caesium-137 along with seasonal cherry blossoms over land and sea. What at first glance appears to be a painting of a commonly seen celebratory theme, Japan in springtime, comes to have foreboding associations. Tomiyama explains that her aim was to make radioactive particles that pervade the deceptive pastoral spring scene visible to the eye. She writes, "I included Fujin, the God of the Wind. Gods too are invisible. And as I painted what we cannot normally see, I began to see the deeper structure of Japan today."³

In the summer and fall of 2011, more questions were being asked about the actual state of the nuclear power plants in Fukushima. It was becoming clear that only limited information had been released in the days following the disaster and that access to information and documentation were still restricted in subsequent months. In the midst of ongoing uncertainty about the state of the Fukushima power plant, Tomiyama began to imagine a work that would also make the devastation at the Fukushima site more visible.



#4 JAPAN: Nuclear Power Plant (2011) Oil on canvas 970 x 1455

In "JAPAN: Nuclear Power Plant" (Image #4) we see the artist's interpretation of the wreckage that is Fukushima Daiichi power plant. This image of the bleak, crumbling frame of the plant, a skeleton against an equally bleak landscape, speaks more boldly of the fragility and hubris of this man-made accident than photos or words. In an attempt to see it with her own eyes before beginning work on the piece, Tomiyama had traveled with a friend to Fukushima in the early fall of 2011. But the site was closed off and under strict surveillance, so again she was left to her imagination. She describes the growing sense of anger with the folly of building so many power plants in this earthquake-ridden archipelago, as she drove with her friend around the abandoned villages and farmlands in the area. In later reflections on this experience, Tomiyama associates the devastation at Fukushima with Japan's defeat in World War II. She writes,

..this 'second defeat' comes as a result of believing too much in technology and the pursuit of becoming an economically 'triumphant' nation; those who continue to go after profit without any reflection on the past, rallying to 'restart' the plants and rebuild are just like those (who failed to take responsibility) after defeat in the war.⁴

Tomiyama goes on to explain that she chose to use 'Japan' rather than 'Fukushima' in the title of this work because she views this as a 'defeat' for all of Japan. As in all of her earlier works, the artist asks us to remember and learn from mistakes in the past so as not to repeat them in the present. Given the obvious connections between the history of nuclear weapons and the nuclear power industry in the U.S., it goes without saying that this message extends well beyond the Japanese archipelago to all of us.

As with earlier works, these new paintings have begun to circulate, but not in conventional gallery spaces. Since the completion of the first three paintings in this series in March, 2012, the works have appeared on the covers of three issues of *Shukan Kinyobi* commemorating the first anniversary of the 3.11 disasters. They have also been exhibited in three events organized by concerned students, scholars and activists in the Kanto area.⁵ In addition, "JAPAN: Nuclear Power Plant" appears on the website of the University of Chicago symposium, "The Atomic Age," held May 5, 2012.⁶ Again, Tomiyama's art is moving with and in response to the times, sparking new conversations and critical dialogue. Plans are underway with Takahashi Yuji to complete a new dvd of the series and make it available online by this fall.

The fifth painting in the series, "Crisis: Prayer for Sea and Sky" was completed in July, 2012 and shown in the last two of these exhibitions. In it, *Raijin*, a god of thunder, lightning and storms soars above the still-blackened sea amidst bolts of lightning that pierce the burning horizon. Once again, the revelation comes from the dark, angry sea; the deity soars above the waves, warning us of the wrath of unstoppable natural disasters and reminding us that we might just be able to save ourselves from the dangers of man-made ones.

Over one year and five months have passed since the March 11th disasters in northeastern Japan. While many of us have begun to forget, survivors of the earthquake and tsunami live with daily reminders of their pain and loss. For those living in the shadows of Fukushima Daiichi, uncertainty and anxiety about radiation have become the norm. It is somehow fitting that the final work in Tomiyama's series reminds us that the "crisis" is ongoing, and that "prayer" as an act of remembrance may point toward new and better directions.

Tomiyama Taeko established her one-woman studio, Hidane Kobo in 1975 and has collaborated with musician and composer Takahashi Yuji since then to produce a number of powerful audio-visual slide and dvd works. She lives and works in Setagaya-ku, Tokyo, and is currently collaborating with Takahashi to produce a dvd based on this new series of paintings.

Rebecca Jennison teaches in the Humanities Department at Kyoto Seika University. With Laura Hein, she co-edited *Imagination without Borders: Feminist Artist Tomiyama Taeko and Social Responsibility* (Center for Japan Studies, University of Michigan, 2010) (see [here](#) and [here](#)) and "Reconciliation and Remembrance in the Art of Tomiyama Taeko," in *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, 2012.

Recommended Citation: Rebecca Jennison, "Revelations from the Sea: An Artist's Response to the Disasters of March 11th, 2011," The Asia-Pacific Journal, Volume 10, Issue 32, No. 2, August 6, 2012.

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Notes

¹ [Biography of Tomiyama Taeko at Imagination Without Borders](#) (Laura Hein)

See also Laura Hein and Rebecca Jennison, eds., *Imagination Without Borders: Feminist Artist Tomiyama Taeko and Social Responsibility*, Ann Arbor: Center for Japanese Studies, The University of Michigan, 2010. See [here](#) and [here](#).

² Artist's statement from March 2 issue of Shukan Kinyobi.

³ Artist's statement from March 16th issue of Shukan Kinyobi.

⁴ Artist's statement from March 9th issue of Shukan Kinyobi.

⁵ University of Tokyo, March 2, Keio University, May, Hiratsuka, June, 2012.

⁶ "Atomic Age" website