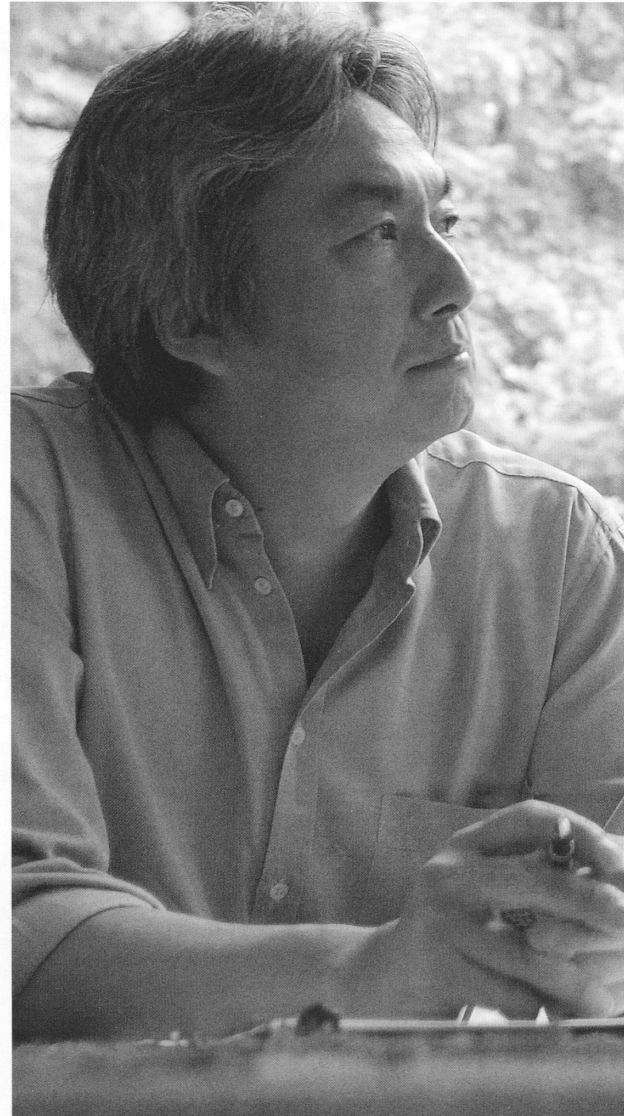


Hiroshi Senju

Over the past few years, Takashi Murakami, Yoshitomo Nara, Hiroshi Sugimoto – and more recently Mr. – are the artists who have ‘monopolised’ the forefront of the contemporary art scene when it comes to artists from Japan. It is not the whole picture, of course, of contemporary art from that country, rather it is the case that these artists have actively used public relations in order to create awareness. Hiroshi Senju does not belong to that category. Born in Japan in 1958, Hiroshi Senju could be considered an ‘atypical’ artist in the sense that he is one of the few of his generation to paint landscapes. Using ancient techniques, he has developed a fantastic repertoire providing a modern rendering of nature.

His now famous waterfall paintings carry substantial depth, and it is not unusual to hear viewers raving about the state of contemplation they find themselves in when admiring his works.

Among Hiroshi Senju’s many accomplishments, one should mention the extraordinary project for Shofuso in Philadelphia (www.shofuso.com). In this Japanese house and garden that is the only representation of the 17th-century Shoin style of Japanese architecture (*Shoin-zukuri*) in the US, he created a series of 20 murals for *fusuma* (sliding doors) to replace those that had been previously vandalised. As can be seen in the interview below, Hiroshi Senju is an artist of substance, who walks his own path regardless of the latest fashion or demands.



HIROSHI SENJU

ASIAN ART NEWSPAPER. You have been living in the US since 1994. What prompted you to live in New York?

Hiroshi Senju: I knew I had to find out where my place in the world should be - to go beyond thinking about Eastern/Western boundaries. I wanted to send out a message that I was not tied to any specific culture or art movement. In order to do that, I felt that Japan’s long history was too ‘invasive’ After training in the *nihonga* school (which has a very long tradition) and then also being influenced by Chinese art, I felt that I needed to distance myself from this type of ‘heritage’

AAN: What message did you want to send out? Can you be more specific?

HS: When we look at flowers, we find them beautiful. When we drink French wine, it is not just appreciated by the French, but by many people around the world. It is clear that all human beings embrace the theme of beauty. When we listen to Beethoven and Bach, we do not just listen to these composers as thing it is ‘German’ music, but simply listen to it as music. It is about labelling. I simply needed to keep a distance between Japanese art and myself. What I found in New York was independence, the feeling of being free from any culture, and of being in a neutral place. I find the diversity and the lack of that sort of history in New York very attractive.

AAN: At the beginning of our conversation, you mentioned *nihonga* painting. When did you decide to distance yourself from this?

HS: I studied art in Japan and clearly my work reflects the very essence of Japanese art. Having studied traditional Japanese painting,



FLATWATER #3 (1993) 227 x 324 cm, natural pigments on Japanese mulberry paper

I wanted to distance myself from it. I have therefore tried to learn other techniques in order to be as broad as possible: fresco, European tempera, oil painting, etc., but amongst all these techniques, I was still very much drawn to nihonga painting. It is not until I moved to the US that I decided to keep this distance.

AAN: What makes nihonga painting unique?

HS: It is a traditional and ancient method where only natural pigments are used together with animal-protein glue and natural rice paper. These natural pigments help portray or reveal natural powers found in the universe. A style that is still being practised today.

AAN: Colour is a very important element in your work. What can you achieve using natural colours that you cannot achieve by using artificial colour?

HS: The difference between the two is how fine the mineral natural material is being ground. The finer it is ground, the more the colour changes. This aspect becomes more apparent, obviously, when you are using the colour rather than just describing it. Artificial pigments only have half the brilliance of natural ones, and I am always very disappointed when I try to use them. The interesting thing about natural pigments is that they come from all around the world. Using a more global perspective, Japan's history has been very much influenced by other countries: Centuries ago, pigments came to Japan from Africa and Turkey, which Japanese artists ground and then on which they stamped their own identity. Different cultures reached out to Japan with the result that many of these first contact can still be seen today, one example being these natural colours used by various Japanese craftspeople.

AAN: A lot of your work tends to be either in two colours or monochrome. What does colour mean to you?

HS: I like using colour and, I think, I am good at working with it. As a college student, I used lot of colours. Now, however, I mainly rely on black and white because this is what we mainly see in a waterfall. As artists we do not try to eliminate colour when we see it – even when a work is monochrome. I love colour and I find one can see it even though some of my series, like the *Waterfall* series or the *Flatwater* series, are black and white. When I paint a pink or a blue waterfall, it also refers to the colours I see. When I look at the waterfall in the sunset, red and pink colours dominate whereas in the morning it would be bluish. That proves that a waterfall is a complex mixture of many colours, not just simply the white of falling water. I soon realised that I had put myself into a mould by painting in black and white, however, being very sensitive to colours may be the reason that I can also bring out all the other colours in these waterfall paintings.

Nihonga is a traditional and ancient method where only natural pigments are used with animal-protein glue and rice paper

AAN: Does rice paper provide you with the best effect in conjunction with the pigments with which you work?

HS: For the project at the international airport in Tokyo, I tried to paint on every possible material – even artificial skin – but ultimately rice paper works best. The great advantage of rice paper is that there are not any changes in terms of colour, which allows me to paint the details, too. I am not working with rice paper because I am Japanese, but because after trying various media, I came to the conclusion that Japanese rice paper just has no equivalent.

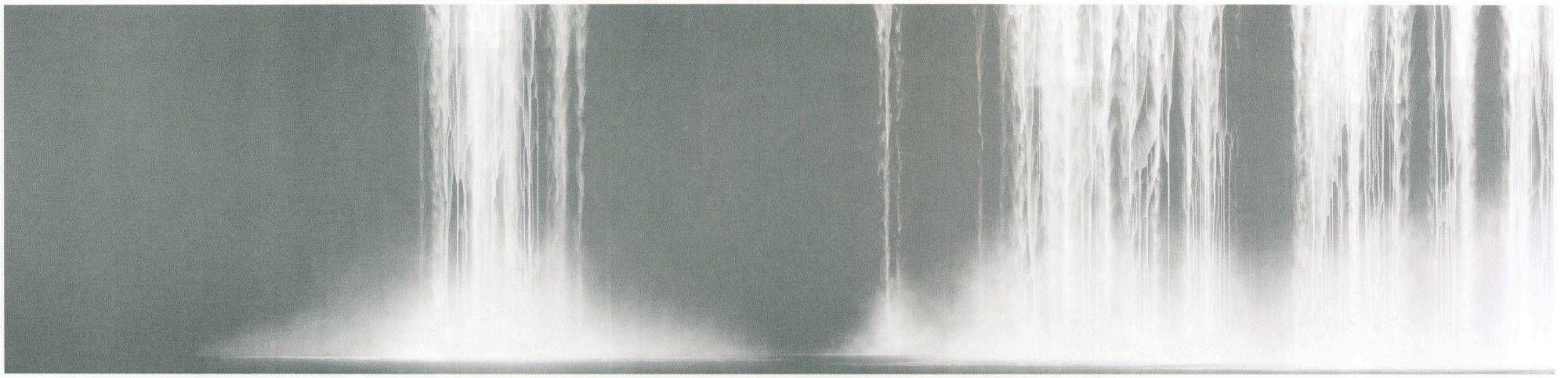
AAN: Nature is a major aspect in your work. As a student were you drawn towards landscape painting?

HS: I have studied the European and the Western art, painting figures and still lives. Of course, some of my artist friends have very different styles like Takashi Murakami, for example, who taught at prep school with me. Actually, at college, I used to paint buildings and all different types of things, but over time, I found that the landscape was the most interesting subject matter. I never get tired of waterfalls, because I find them beautiful.

AAN: As an artist, did you find your 'style' relatively quickly?

HS: When I was in college, the teacher encouraged us to paint anything we liked. I was only 20 at the time, and I kept asking myself what I wanted to paint. How was I supposed to know? How about flowers? Actually, there were already many women artists who could paint flowers in an extremely beautiful manner. How about woman? I soon came to the conclusion that I knew nothing about them. Then, I realised that I had been living within the city of Tokyo for 20 years, and while commuting to school, I was passing some landscapes that I could actually paint. First, I started painting Tokyo with its buildings. Then, I began to become interested in the landscape surrounding the city. That is how my interest shifted. And finally, after being interested in the sky, I discovered the waterfall. As I saw it, not only did I find it beautiful, but also I felt something clicking as if I recognized some kind of DNA that I had in me, like a memory. Something similar to a natural emotion came from my heart. I find that a lot of people whether they are Europeans, Americans or Japanese have similar feelings towards waterfalls. I find that these emotions go beyond the boundaries of East/West, or old/new. Once I understood what art was all about and that art should go beyond people's boundaries (race, time), it was very important

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WATERFALL (2007), 230 x 1000 cm, acrylic pigments on Japanese mulberry paper

for me to further explore that path.

AAN: Would you describe yourself as a figurative artist or as an abstract artist?

HS: I find art very important, but even more important is to enrich your imagination. I do not go out to the waterfall and paint on site. My waterfall paintings are very much figurative, however, at the same time they are very abstract. Personally, I feel that I may have gone beyond the abstract or the figurative. I am indeed painting a waterfall, but which waterfall am I painting?

AAN: You completed a very challenging project in Philadelphia (Shofuso). Could you say a few words about it?

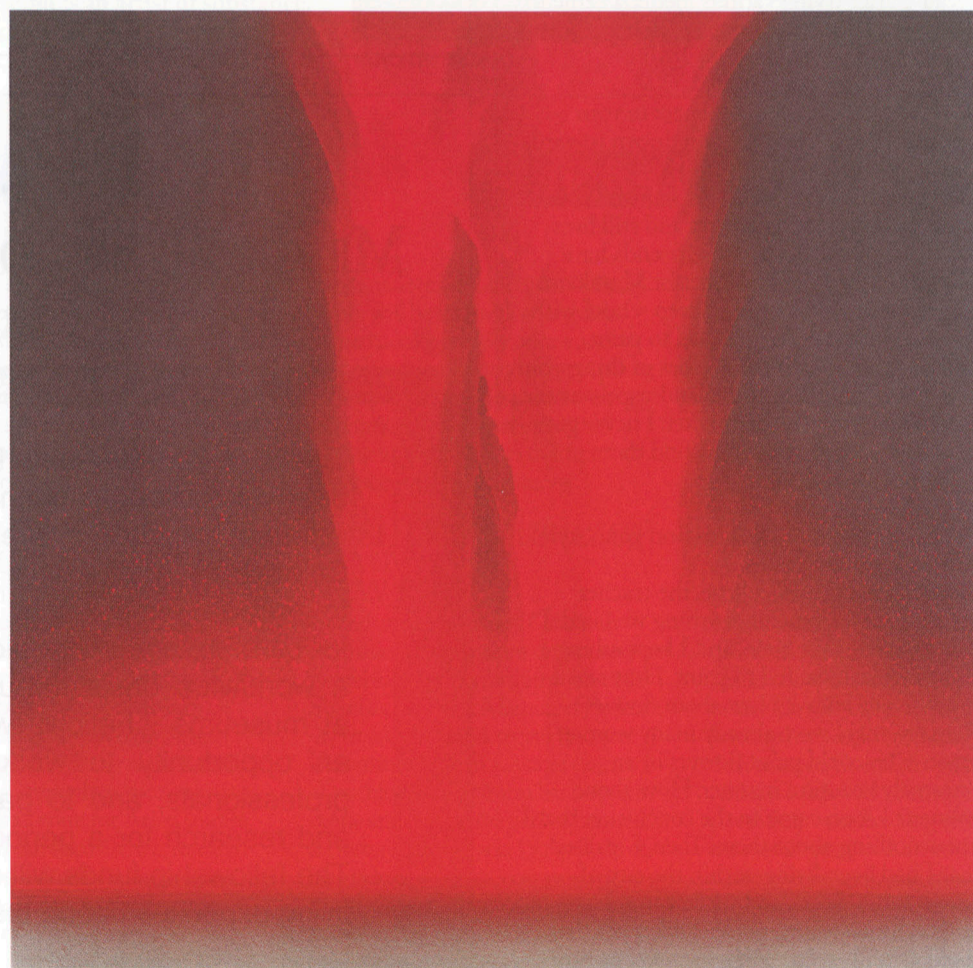
HS: Philadelphia is home to the American Constitution originated, and what can basically be interpreted as the beginning of the country we know today as the United States. America is made out of different races and different ideas. For the work in Philadelphia, I challenged myself with that thought. I have relied on all different colours from the landscape, the flowers, the walls, the land, the lakes, the leaves, combining them together. I prefer to call it the 'Shofuso colour' or 'the colours from Philadelphia' creating a true harmony of all the paintings.

Initially, I thought of painting the four seasons. I first thought about painting four pieces with completely different characters and put them into one painting – in reference to this theme found in some of our Japanese National Treasures. I thought I would respect Japanese culture and present the work as an homage to the building. However, I did not carry on with this particular project, as when I thought about Shofuso, I realised that the landscape surrounding it would be much more beautiful. Acknowledging the beauty of the landscape from all sides of Shofuso, I decided to use my senses. By closing my eyes and 'feeling' the atmosphere, I heard the waterfall coming out of the pond. I was perhaps not able to create a work referring to the four seasons that was strong enough, but I could paint the waterfall. Maybe I could not capture all the colours, but I could try to capture the sound of it and that this should be captured within the painting. I only realised that art should also respond to the five senses after I had done some research on the building. So the waterfall it was. There is also an image of a waterfall by the French artist Sophie Callé, which keeps reminding me of the importance of the five senses in art. For Shofuso, I wanted to create something without breaking the harmony whilst also addressing these senses. I realised that art was not just something that is created and just 'there', but that art had more to do with an appeal to all the senses (including the things that we do not see). As long as we only paint things that we see (using just one sense), we will always be defeated by their true nature.

In my work, I tried to use the shapes that have two different elements, for example, water and gravity. Water is the most important element for the human being. Gravity is an essential power that affects everything. I felt that combining water with gravity would create a work that would leave the audience with a lasting impression. I believe that harmony is to be found in nature. Shofuso provides people with the opportunity to think about what the earth is all about and the paintings can help them consider the idea of gravity seen through



VIEWS OF WATERFALL (2006), screen paintings for Shofuso, acrylic pigments on Japanese mulberry paper



FALLING COLOR (2005), 40.9 x 40.9 cm, acrylic pigments on Japanese mulberry paper

falling water. By adding all these elements together, I tried to create a certain sense of harmony. It is similar to an orchestra: all string instruments have their own score, but by playing together they can achieve a greater harmony.

AAN: Was this your most challenging project to date?

HS: Yes, definitely.

AAN: What are your upcoming projects?

HS: I will be painting an old temple in Kyoto, which will be a permanent installation. In addition, I will work in the new Osaka train station building as well as

on a guesthouse in Tokyo.

AAN: I know you are involved with a university in Kyoto. Does this mean you are also teaching?

HS: One day, a student came in with his artwork and asked me for advice. That made me realise that I had to get out there and teach. Many students in Japan are looking for a mentor. I felt that it was my mission to teach.

AAN: Art has become a very competitive field these days, and although numerous artists have very high technical skills, not all of them will succeed at an international level. As a teacher, and as an artist with

international recognition, what are you hoping to pass on?

HS: Art is the communication of the imagination. It is not a matter of technique. Using the power of art, we can understand each other without using words. In my opinion, art, performance and even cooking are all to be considered as art. The fundamental of art is communication, the imagination of communication. Therefore, I am saddened by the fact that there is so much almost 'game' or 'puzzle-like' art currently in contemporary art. It is almost like a TV station game, giving the audience a try at Play Station. Art is a method for people who may have not been able to understand each other to communicate. I find that to be the common ground between all the great works of art starting from Christo and Jeanne-Claude to Michelangelo. It may sound very exaggerated, but I find that art is a peacemaking process in addition to being about harmony and communication. I find that very important and that is what I want to pass on to the next generation.

AAN: Did you have a 'mentor' while at art school, or was there a key figure that was a great inspiration to you?

HS: Fortunately, there was not! Retrospectively, I believe that it gave me more will to succeed in order to 'be somebody' This I realised whilst I was still working in Japan and around the world. I now want to give students the essence of 30 years in the art world. I hope that the next generation will go beyond what I have accomplished.

AAN: After 9/11 in New York, you were involved with *Tribeca Temporary*. Is that an ongoing project?

HS: Tribeca Temporary offered a space to start up in the area where all the damage had happened. I opened it for all the artists in Tribeca to use the space and start from scratch. I organised a group show there in my studio. Before 9/11, it used to be about similar artists showing there as a group. With Tribeca Temporary, I tried to do something completely different: combine different genre, different artists, races, and religions.

AAN: Was this a way for artists to show their work, or did the structure somehow also support them financially?

HS: It was more for people to show their work, and also support them mentally as they were in a stage where they did not know where to go. A lot of artists that lived around there felt the need to show their work to seek out and share. That has now stopped. I moved to my present studio outside New York three years ago.

AAN: Did you achieve or get close to what you had envisioned with your artwork 20 years ago?

HS: My goal is to live long and to continue painting. I cannot judge my paintings. I might have passed my peak, but truthfully, I do not know.

AAN: Where do you see your work going in the future?

HS: What I find is that this, right now, is my future. What I want to do in the future is what I am doing now. My goal naturally, is to create the work that I want, and to exhibit it.