

WATERFALL HIROSHI SENJU



The fundamental theme that forms the nucleus of the recent paintings of Hiroshi Senju centers on the fact that all life originated from water. The new series, *The Waterfall Paintings*, represent the artist's continual search for the essential representation of water as the embodiment of all the forces of nature. Senju has approached the point in these new paintings where representation and the true concept of abstraction meet; the expression of the miracle of nature reduced to its purest form.

In this sense, Senju's waterfall images are a combination of Eastern and Western philosophies; the quest for spiritual transcendence through nature grafted with the concept that individual vision alters our perception of the world. One can also see the connections with both traditions in contemporary terms; the emphasis on control, balance, composition and craft of the East, the spontaneity (i. e., as expressed through the unconscious mind), directness and reductive tendencies of the West. It is important to note however, that even though Senju's work is rooted in both traditions, the *Waterfall paintings* are not something we have seen before, but rather offer a unique, transformative interpretation of natural phenomena, regardless of cultural distinctions.

In fact, Senju has been preoccupied with the significance of the image of water at least since his last groups of paintings, the *Flatwater series* shown in 1993 at the Maxwell Davidson Gallery in New York, these paintings of the area surrounding the active crater of the Kilauea volcano of Mauna Loa on the island of Hawaii were an opportunity for the artist to study the relationship between the incipient forms of nature without impediment. In this environment, Senju found his subject matter in the powerful elements that together generated the origins of life. By depicting the dark, hardened lava formations that contain the jaggedshaped pools of water, Senju allows the eye of the viewer to move back and forth between so-called "positive" and "negative" areas, reminiscent of the expansive black and white paintings of Franz Kline.

However, the focus of Senju's paintings is primarily on the areas of water: placid, luminous bodies of ocean water, resembling liquefied silver, that reflect the brilliant light of the sky like a mirror. Senju has stressed the importance of the white area in his paintings, which when experienced "reflects the mind of the viewer."¹ Only the shadows cast by the rocks and an occasional stretch of sand momentarily breaks the pristine whiteness of the water's surface. In the

Hiroshi Senju *The Waterfall Paintings*—Robert G. Edelman

Flatwater series, Senju found a metaphorical setting that offered the opportunity to, in the artist's words, "represent the origin of reality."²

The new *Waterfall series* of paintings treat the image of water in a very different manner. Here the rushing water is freed of restraints, only gravity affects its flow, its nature. Senju, having recently studied Niagara Falls from a helicopter, has attempted to reduce the concept of a waterfall to its simplest terms by focusing on the specific moments of transition from one state (of motion), to another (of repose). The space surrounding the waterfall is infinite, or rather without descriptive detail. However, this dark space is not empty, but rather makes it possible for the energy of the rushing waterfall to dominate our attention, much like the "zip" in Barnett Newman's *Onement series*. The drips of glowing white paint against the rich black or deep blue backgrounds (built up with a brush in many layers) induce the sensation of a process of perpetual change and also one of timelessness. Senju allows us to view the waterfall at close range, as if we can hear the roar of the water, and from a distance, as we see the mist rising from the surface of the pool below. Seen together, the *Waterfall paintings* form a sequence of dramatic moments that seem like both a majestic and intimate portrait of the eternal mysteries of nature.

What is so compelling about Senju's *Waterfall paintings* is the clarity of vision with which they are made. They are ultimately Eastern in conception and execution, but also informed by Western art and ideas. In the final analysis, Senju has sought the essence rather than the fact of nature, and has created images that have a profound spiritual aspect. It is not at all surprising that Senju concludes, when describing the difference between the concept of art in East and West, that "art is dealing with everything that cannot be measured."³ What we as viewers are offered is the chance to re-establish a connection with both nature and painting that deeply informs and enriches both arenas of experience.

¹ *Dialog: Phyllis A. Goldman Hiroshi Senju, "Flatwater/Senju", exhibition catalogue interview, Maxwell Davidson Gallery, June 1-July 9, 1993, page 12.*

² *Ibid*, page 7.

³ *Ibid*, page 16.