

Katsutoshi Yuasa

Miraculous

Introduction by Maggie Gray
Q&A with Katsutoshi Yuasa and Diana Ewer
Essay by Kohei Kuwada

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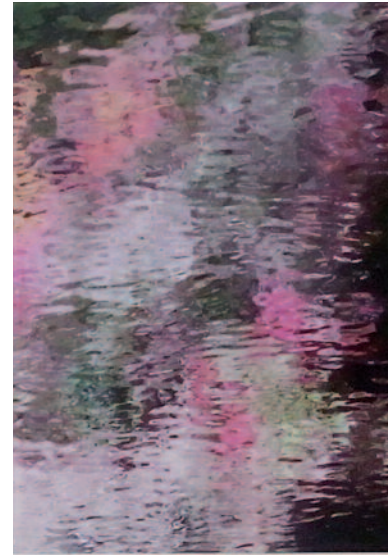
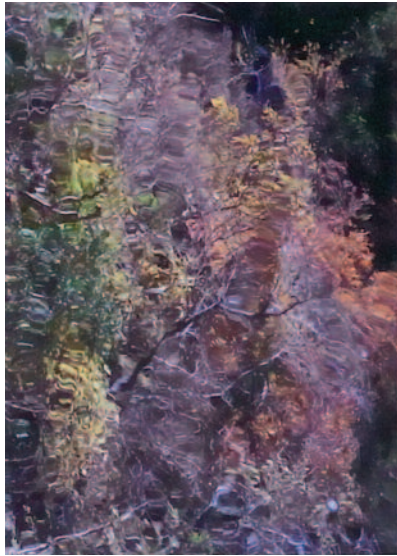
Katsutoshi Yuasa's woodcut prints reveal themselves slowly, as though the wealth of detail contained within them is only just coalescing. Complex, evocative, and exquisitely finished, they bear the hallmarks of an artist who is steeped in his medium's traditions; but they also retain a decidedly contemporary edge. His subjects hint at fragments of modern experience: the images flicker and shift as if on a computer screen or television set, raked with digital noise.

Yuasa achieves this distinctive combination of modern and traditional effects through his working process. His starting points are digital photographs, which he enlarges and converts to monochrome to use as the basis for his striking woodcuts. In contrast to the instantaneous 'snapshots' that inspired them, these prints take weeks to complete, as he translates the pixels into a network of hand-carved lines on the wooden block. Transferred onto fine art paper, the final prints are intricately detailed, but as the ink pools and bleeds unpredictably through the weave, they also acquire a soft, indistinct edge.

Much of Yuasa's imagery is of a fleeting sort best captured, initially, by the camera: empty park benches snapped in passing; treetops glimpsed from the forest floor; shop windows cluttered with temporary displays. Some of his most recent works, by contrast, show momentous events that the majority of us only ever experience through media photographs. Either way, the camera is the mediator between a particular site and how we remember it. But for the artist, a photograph alone is never enough: "I lost the vague atmosphere and personal emotions when I take photographs... I have decided to use the woodcut technique as a way of exposing images, adapting the subjective perception to the objective fiction."

Unsatisfied with photographic reproduction, Yuasa attempts to rediscover the elusive emotional resonance of each image. In an approach which echoes Wordsworth's conception of art as 'emotion recollected in tranquillity,' he forces himself (and subsequently the viewer) to look closely and more meditatively. The images linger in the mind rather than just on the page; at once precise and enigmatic, they are like favourite videos paused for a second, longer look.

Since graduating from the Royal College of Art in 2005, Katsutoshi Yuasa has secured back to back residencies and exhibited internationally. His work was featured in Paul Coldwell's key publication 'Printmaking: A Contemporary Perspective' in 2010 and has entered numerous public collections including the Royal College of Art and Clifford Chance. In 2011, he won two major UK printmaking prizes: the Towry Print Prize at the RA Summer Exhibition, and the Northern Print Prize. In 2012 he was invited to speak at the Second International Printmaking Symposium (SNAP) in Germany.



Pictures of Colours, 2011, inkjet print with pigment,
29.4 cm x 21 cm, 11.5 in x 8.3 in

Katsutoshi Yuasa in conversation with Diana Ewer

DE Can you recall when you carved your first woodcut? What was the subject?

KY My very first woodcut was in art class at primary school. Woodcutting is a common task in Japanese schools. But I don't remember what I carved. My second experience of woodcut was in printmaking class as a second-year art student in Japan. I entered an oil painting course but took printmaking as an optional subject. I made a woodcut using a snapshot of railroad crossing, which I took outside my home. It was a really fresh experience; a completely different feeling to oil painting.

DE How influenced are you by the legacy of traditional Japanese woodcut printing? Your work certainly draws on it – your reverence to nature, your attention to detail and pattern – yet you seem to be effortlessly pushing the medium further, encouraging the viewer to question modes of interpretation.

KY I have loved to look at old master Japanese prints since I was a student. However, for me, the most influential prints were those of the German artist Horst Janssen. I'm a fan of his work. He was also influenced by Japanese woodcut, especially Hokusai. But they have a type of genius such as Picasso; they are too far from me. I prefer Hiroshige's woodcut print: he was a well-known artist in the same age as Hokusai. I really like his landscapes, such as *The Fifty-Three Stations of the Tokaido*. I think that the repetitive print series format can be very important in framing questions; not only for me but for the viewer. I cannot ask anything without being able to form the question. It is similar in printmaking; printing is a form of creation.

DE Does the woodcut medium appeal to you because it offers an opportunity to work on a large scale, without the restriction of a printing press for example?

KY Yes, woodcut has more flexibility than other printmaking methods such as etching or lithography. Additionally, woodcut is very far from photography. If someone wants to use photography in printmaking, most people will recommend etching or screen print. But my interest is how to connect these completely different modes.

DE What prompted you to develop your subject matter from relatively anonymous and often intimate scenes to the more monumental ones you have created recently? Do you see it as a step in a new direction?

KY Both anonymous landscapes and monumental images are important for me. There is a flow of my thoughts in the order of the works. For example, if I make a very monumental image, I will make an abstract work next. All works are in one flux. Total rhythm of creation is important. So I don't stay long in one place physically and mentally. The mutation of the work is necessary.

DE There has been a remarkable resurgence of interest in the woodcut medium in contemporary printmaking. Why do you think this is and where do you see your work within the context of this renaissance?

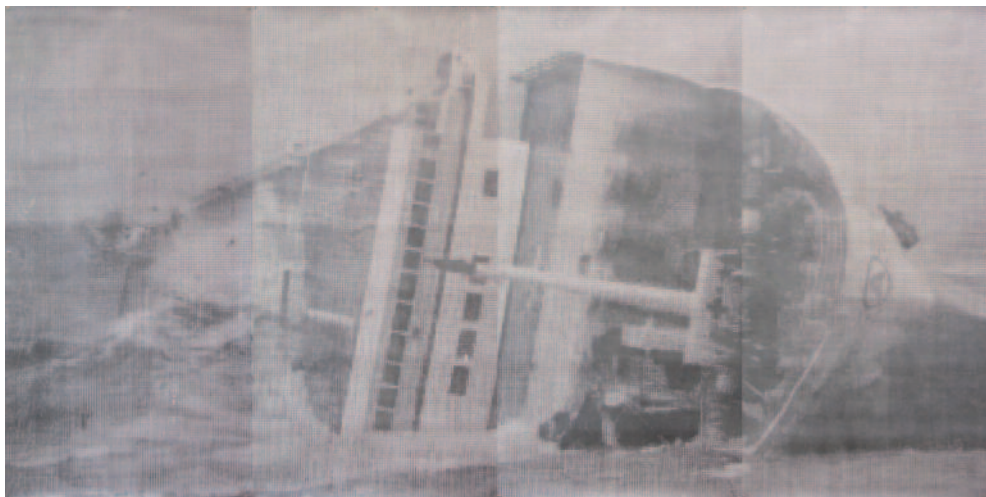
KY Woodcut is one of the oldest techniques of printmaking but painting is also very old. While painting has a position in contemporary art, printmaking has been remarkably insular, with people talking about techniques and arguing about whether digital printing is printmaking or not. I think they need to talk more about philosophy and ideology. Printmaking was a medium for communication and information. Tradition is important but we should think also about future traditions. Contemporary printmaking should have the universality of photography. We need talk about printmaking without technique.



An Impossible Extreme Reality #1, 2011, oil based woodcut on paper,
163 x 122 cm, 64.2 in x 48 in



An Impossible Extreme Reality #2, 2012, oil based woodcut on paper,
163 x 122 cm, 64.2 in x 48 in

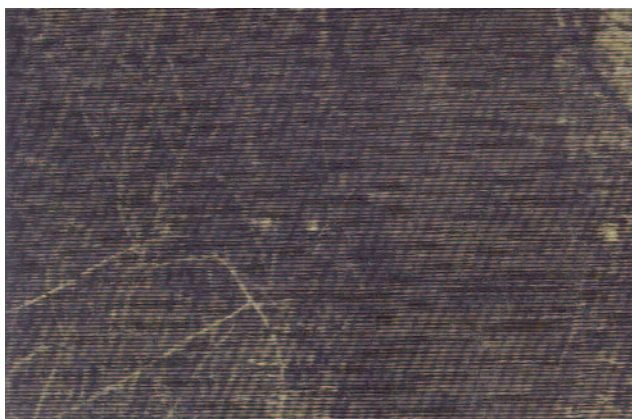
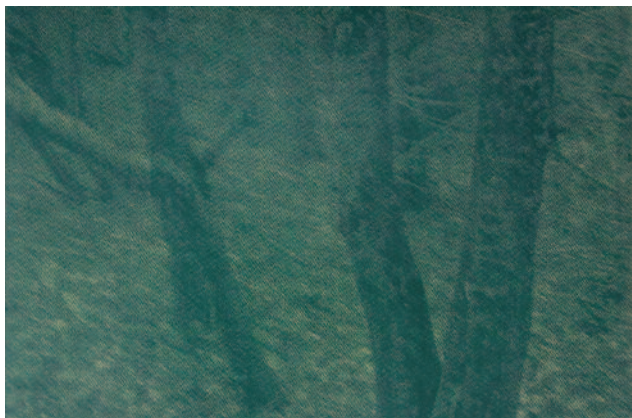


above top: *Pseudo Mythology #3*, 2011, oil based woodcut with pigment on paper,
243 x 488 cm, 95.6 in x 192.1 in

above: *Pseudo Mythology #2*, 2011, oil based woodcut with pigment on paper,
243 x 366 cm, 95.6 in x 144 in



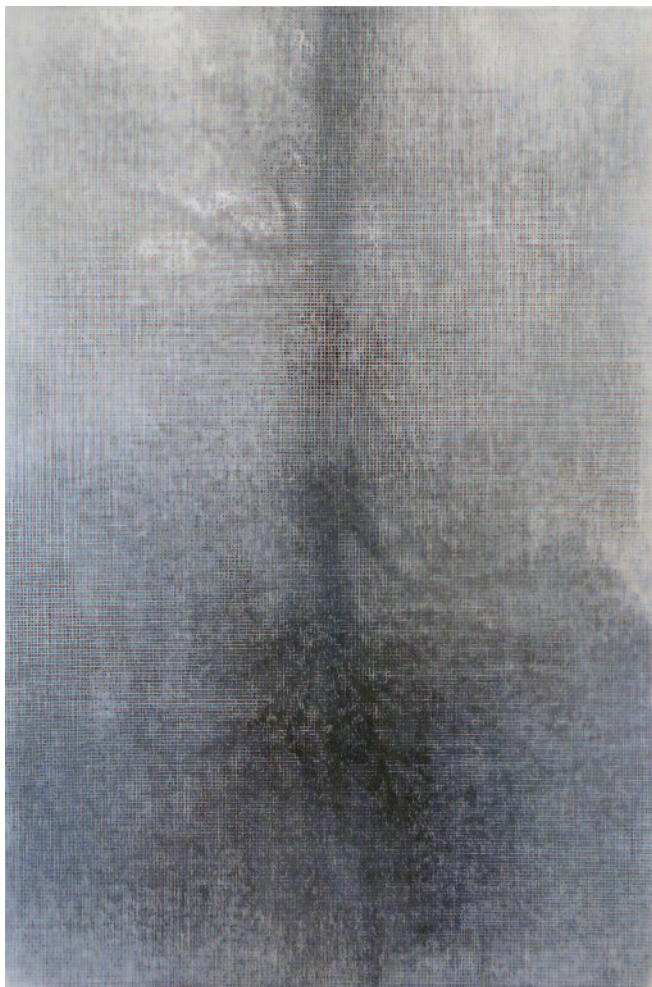
Interrupted recognition, 2011, oil based woodcut on paper,
90 x 150 cm, 35.4 x 59 in



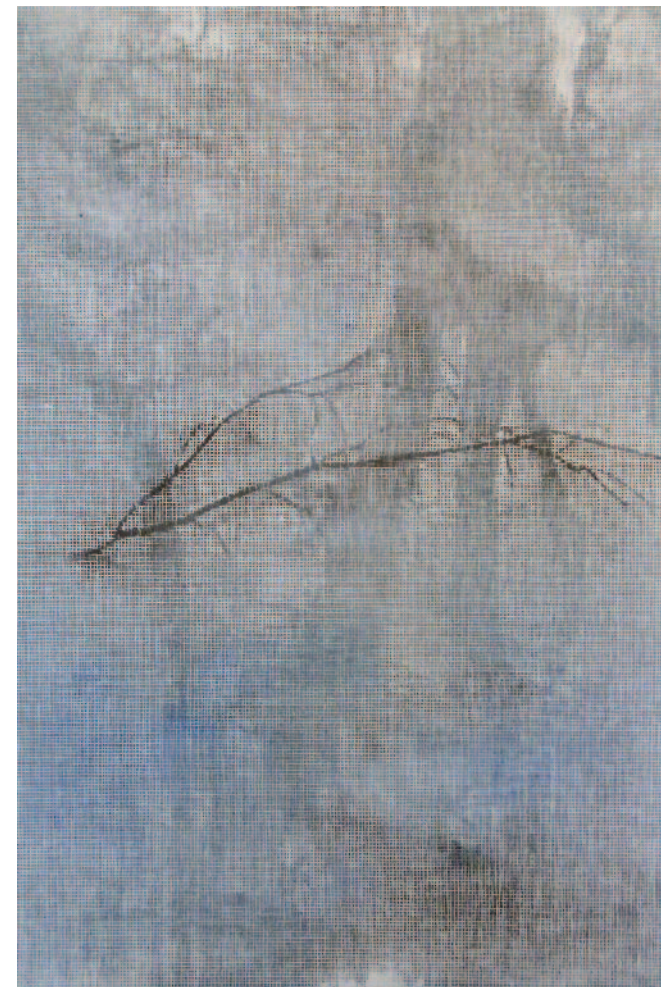
Slow Screaming #1, #2 & #3, 2011, oil based woodcut on paper,
61 x 91.5 cm, 24 in x 36 in



We Have To Wrestle Anxiety, Chagrin and Sorrow But We Survive Every Day With Smiles, 2011, oil based woodcut on hand-painted paper,
46.5 cm x 62.5 cm, 18.3 in x 24.6 in



Signs Of A Story #1, 2011, water based woodcut on hand-painted paper,
60 x 40 cm, 23.6 in x 15.7 in



Signs Of A Story #2, 2011, oil based woodcut with pigment
on paper, 60 x 40 cm, 23.6 in x 15.7 in



32, 2012, oil based woodcut on paper, 120 x 91.5 cm, 47.2 x 36 in



33, 2012, oil based woodcut on paper, 120 x 91.5 cm, 47.2 x 36 in



Listen, nature is full of songs and truth (left), 2012, oil-based woodcut with pigment on paper, 61 x 243 cm, 24 x 95.7 in

An Art of Re-birth by Kohei Kuwada

Katsutoshi Yuasa positively affirms the weakness of printmaking as a medium, and he transforms its weakness into rich and varied images by his critical thoughts. Yuasa bids farewell to the worn-out word "hanga," the traditional Japanese term for woodcut printmaking, in favor of "utsuro na image." Utsuro means both empty and unstable in Japanese, and as a concept is fundamental to the medium.

The most well-known school of Japanese printmaking has got to be Ukiyo-e (Floating World), which depicted everyday life in the Edo period. In the early 20th century, printmakers broke away from Ukiyo-e as "low art," and the Sosaku-hanga (creative print) movement was pioneered by Kanae Yamamoto and Koshiro Onchi, so that printmaking obtained the same status as autonomous arts such as painting and sculpture. Departing from the Ukiyo-e collaborative system, such principles as "self-drawn", "self-carved" and "self-printed" became the foundations of the movement as individual printmakers aspired to be "artists" in the true sense of the word, distinguished from craftsmen. Even now, printmaking occupies a peripheral position in the Japanese art world, but it is undeniable that the medium has risen in status owing to the creative print movement effort. In his book *Modern Japanese Prints: An Art Reborn*, 1956, the American researcher Oliver Statler provided an overview of this movement, touching on its continuity and severance with Ukiyo-e, and evaluating Japanese contemporary printmaking as "an art reborn."

Yuasa is well aware of this historical context, but in his eyes, the creative print movement caged printmaking into one closed norm. Kanae Yamamoto advocated making a print as a painting, without emphasising its reproduction, in an approach reminiscent of the Pictorialist photographers who, in the early days of the medium, attempted to mimic

painterly effects. After that, however, new styles of photographic modernism came into vogue such as Straight photography and New Objectivity, encouraging diverse styles and arguments. In *Camera Lucida* (1980), the French philosopher Roland Barthes attempted to define the nature of photography in what could be described as a critical reaction against the contemporary situation. Paradoxically, by repeatedly questioning the identity of photography, we have not reduced the medium to its essence but have expanded its varied potential. Unlike photography, which provokes many critics and repeatedly engages with other media, Japanese printmaking remains stuck in the aesthetic thoughts of the creative print movement. The subject of little critical or theoretical discussion, it is forced into a more closed genre, like the margins of a print. From a historical point of view, this is the weakness of printmaking.

Woodcut print falls behind photography in its potential to capture a decisive moment, and in its reproducibility. In the woodcutting process, the original image - the drawing or photograph - is transformed. While Barthes wrote that the nature of photography is to record the "that-has-been (ça-a-été)", in printmaking, the concepts of "that", "has" and "been" are uncertain. Yuasa constructs a dialogue between the image in his mind, the image formed during his carving and printing, and the image of the finished work: just like a painter would allow one brush stroke to decide the next. Unlike Kanae Yamamoto, who followed the example of painting, Yuasa emphasises the repetitiveness of printmaking. The image is transformed with every print, as differences creep in, but the repetition nullifies the idea of the original and creates images without origin. With printmaking, it does not matter whether the print is original, or the woodblock (Yuasa may throw away the original woodblock after working on it.)

In the words of Michel Foucault who analyzed René Magritte's work, printmaking does not represent the "resemblance" between the original and image, but "similitude" between images. In Yuasa's work, the real and imaginary, the visible and the invisible, and mind and matter float uncertainly within the borders. The finished image can be described as 'utsuro', as 'instability' and 'emptiness' are the qualities which lend his work such particular intensity. Yuasa gives each piece a title, not to confine the images to the words, but to maintain their instability. The words obscure rather than stabilise meaning, and lead viewers to ask further questions – what the narrative is, what the reality is, what perception is, what colour is, what photography is, what printmaking is, what the image is... The questions draw out a never-before-seen image, gathering words for an answer. Thus the printed image is never stabilised and keeps transforming. Yuasa liberates printmaking from the historical evaluation of "an art reborn" and sublimates it into "an art of re-birth" which constantly generates new images with shifting meanings.

Kohei Kuwada is a researcher of French modern literature and art, specialising in the works of Roland Barthes. He is a lecturer at Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, Japan.



Nebula, 2012, oil based woodcut with pigment on paper, 122 x 244 cm, 48 in x 96 in

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TAG Fine Arts | 129a BDC, 52 Upper Street, London, N1 0QH
+44 (0)20 7688 8446 | info@tagfinearts.com

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