MINDSCAPES
PAINTINGS BY
RYO TOYONAGA

SANDRA KRASKIN, CURATOR

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Sidney Mishkin Gallery
Barnard College, The City University of New York
113 East 11 Street, New York, NY 10023
CREATURES FROM ANOTHER WORLD inhabit the mindscapes of Ryo Toyonaga. They appear to be both biological and mechanical; their inventive terrains are constructed with biomorphic architecture that resembles and encases the creatures. The world is red, and it is undulating. It remains hard to tell if it pretends history or is located in the future. Were are the people? Do they exist? Toyonaga poses many questions but leaves the answers to the viewers’ imaginations.

Ryo Toyonaga’s personal journey began in Motosuyma, Japan. He attended the National University of Shibusawa, Japan, receiving a Bachelor of Arts degree in psychology. In 1986, he moved to New York City, and by 1996, he began creating his ceramic creations. As he built his new life in New York, he created a parallel world in his work, first in ceramic sculpture and then in drawing and painting. When he started drawing in 2003, he used sumi ink and brush on paper, and his early black-and-white landscapes of islands, mountains, and seas may be lingering memories of Japan. Later, in 2010, architecture appeared, and, by 2011, in "Divided-C17" (plate 6), the tall buildings that are near the water and crowded with working red creatures suggest a scene more likely influenced by New York.

Like many Postmodern artists, Toyonaga relies on narrative and builds his own original iconography. His is basically a creation narrative saying: In the beginning... the creatures were formed from clay. Then, they were cast in aluminium and bronze. Later, the universe was flattened and turned into black and white. These sumi ink and brush drawings on paper include vistas with mountains, islands, and seas. They are populated with periscopes...
like pipes that may provide a view from underground, but no human figures can be seen.

Toyonaga's paintings seem with activity, but what is going on? In Unfolded BIFTH, an oil on canvas (plate 3), two specimens are being examined on a wooden table. The specimen seem alive, and they emit smoke or steam from their pits. They have roots at their base and tentacles that grow upward. The smearing of the table surface cannot be seen but must be standing in front of the picture space.

The narrative continues. As evolution takes its course, the universe changes to Technion. The landscape have developed into towns and villages with biomorphic architecture. The sky is red, the creatures are red, and the architecture is bathed in red. In Unfolded-CI (plate 18), tall buildings are perched on top of a mountain overlooking the sea. The creatures project out of the architecture.

In its next phase, Toyonaga's minidiscapes reverse the architecture is no longer totally placed on the ground. The creatures have picked up this village and become nomadic. In Unfolded-Cg, 2011 (plate 1), one of the most recent developments in Toyonaga's narrative, each red creature holds parts of its village and dances on spindly legs. This whimsical vision pays homage to Matisse's painting Dance (1910), in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art. Then, the creatures come inside. They wear shirts and appear domesticated, dancing politely on a rug. In Unfolded-C1, 2011 (plate 8), the architecture adheres to the creature's shell, like barnacles from the sea.

The visual minidiscapes that Toyonaga paints flow from his unconscious to "see" the images fixed in his mind before he captures them with his brush. They evolve as he works. This automatic process is akin to that of the Surrealists and the Abstract Expressionists that followed them. Although the images are more three-dimensional, Toyonaga's creatures have an affinity with Joan Miró's biomorphic personnages, and they sometimes display the raw or grotesque quality of some of Jean Dubuffet's "voceral forms" like Dubuffet, Toyonaga rebelled against the conventions of "high art." Like the Abstract Expressionists, Toyonaga refers to the Jungian collective unconscious. He says of his imagery, "They are creatures that are living in the ocean of my subconscious. At first, I don't see them, but I know they will emerge."

Toyonaga's paintings also reflect the admission he has for Philip Guston's late work, which Toyonaga saw in an exhibition of works on paper at the Morgan Library and Museum in New York City in 1988. Toyonaga recalled that experience: "Something happened to me after that. I have no idea what Guston's late drawings are about. I guess he did not explain it ... I wish I could see more years of the drawings, because he does a lot of innovative stuff and he's always looking for something new."

Philip Guston's appropriation of cartoon imagery in his late work initially horrified many artists and critics. The art critic Mark Sueres noted that "it was one of the most startling transformations in the history of American art." Yet, it provided artists with an early path out of Abstract Expressionism through Pop Art and into Postmodern painting. When Toyonaga saw the Morgan Library and Museum exhibition in 1988, he immediately responded to the cartoon characters and the world that Guston had created in the late 1960s and 1970s.
Perhaps Guzman’s cartoon-like drawings engaged Toyonaga’s imagination and created a model for his own interest in this popular culture style. After seeing Guzman’s show, Toyonaga began to draw large black-and-white works on paper. His creatures are still there, drawn with sumi ink, acrylic, and charcoal, but they are no longer three-dimensional objects. They have been located in their own world. Like Guzman, Toyonaga animates his world with inventive forms that recall popular culture, like Guzman’s. Toyonaga’s imagery also has a dark side. Yet, Guzman often painted mundane objects—shoes, a hand, or a head—while Toyonaga’s mindscapes are densely populated with less familiar, more inescapable forms. By absorbing the lessons from Guzman’s work, Ryo Toyonaga and his creatures leap from the 20th to the 21st century and onto the canvases of Postmodern painting.

large-scale drawings in black为中国 in white papers. With bold, almost cartoony lines, Toyonoaga simulates his sculptural subjects in landscapes that verge on lost narratives. Prior to this body of work, the artist’s creatures could only be seen in our world, now are seen in theirs. These large works, ranging in size from 35 by 10 inches to 8 feet, are dense with visual information. Exposed bones and flesh merge with the machinery of industrial plumbing, spouts, valves, and pipes. Through the repetition and transformation of these elements, Toyonoaga reveals in mimec, overlapping complexity. The work is in constant motion. The eye dances across the page, spurred on by the artist’s obsessive, restless line.

In a number of these drawings, Toyonoaga depicts his creatures as victims in massive scenes of torture, with axes and swords discarded among the splattered carcasses. Human involvement—in allusion—the creature themselves could not wield the weapons, as they have no hands—but for the only human present are those standing in front of the drawings. In one particularly brutal work, Unidentified-BIFUS plate 3, drawn in 1988, but two part of this exhibition, a dismembered cabin stands in the distance, separated from the tortured creatures by exvesses and cliffs. In this structure a reference to the secluded studio the artist abandoned when he ceased working with clay. In these works, Toyonoaga explores one of his central themes, the symbiotic relationship of creation and destruction. But materials are sacrificed to make a work of art, even the artistic ideal itself can fail victim to the violence of creation. An artist’s confrontation with the blank page or empty canvas can be terrifying.

That the drawings are in black and white offers the viewer a cognitive distance from which to observe and digest the scenes. When Toyonoaga began making paintings in 2005, he started working within this limited color palette. The earliest painting in this exhibition, Unidentified-BIFUS plate 2, is a four-decker in black and white. It includes elements common in Toyonoaga’s landscapes: a calm dark sea, distant mountains, stationary mounds of organic and mechanical material, and barren ground covered with leafless trees and webs of paper. In the bottom left, the same dismembered cabin seen in Unidentified-BIFUS. A rustic workstation’s table dominates the foreground, situated so the viewer has the sensation of standing at its very edge. Two cylindrical glass beakers are arranged on the table and in small elements. Their tetrahedrons are ghostly, exploring the air above. Sharp metal affixing tools have been placed next to the beakers. Are they about to be used or have they just been laid aside? The uncertainty sustains the scene’s palpable dramatic tension. In the self-portrait in alabaster, Toyonoaga applies a classic table before the three-dimensional world through the mythical portal of the canvas.

In 2010, Toyonoaga began employing color in his paintings, ushering in a period of prolific artistic growth. While his works in black and white could hardly be described as restrained, color brought a variety of new, ornamental elements to his art. Now at the glimmering reds and greens, his creatures’ quivering flesh, parchment, and moose ivories elicit even more visceral reactions. The earliest color painting in this exhibition, Unidentified-C17 (plate 4), depicts one of Toyonoaga’s creatures placed in a wide table before two parallel windows. It is rare for Toyonoaga to set a scene indoors, and this is among his most alluring, serene images. The creature is a red glistening mound of flesh rising from the table. Its body is composed with inky purple matter and crossed with small pipes, roots, black metallic plants, and two varieties of scapets that occasionally white, curving, smoking. Eight large translucent porthole windows cut into the mounding mass. Three on the left side, while the right side, with two on the right side, and two in the middle face away from each other. The small metal spouts scattered across the creature’s body echo the red phallics in the way a corpo de balle mirrors the movements of principal dancers. The creature seems animated by inner desire, but what is the object of its yearning? The landscape visible through the windows is barren, underscoring nature’s ambivalence to passion.

M-measuring 27 by feet, unidentified-C17 (plate 6) is a monumental exploration of the relationship between the creative impulse and society. Here we encounter a large cluster of high-rise buildings, both rectangular and curved, set on a hill overlooking cliffs and sea. The evening sky is a deep, luminous red and the horizon glows with white light. The buildings are poised together, forming a desire urban expanse in an otherwise desolate landscape. Flats after floor of dark, empty windows line the buildings. The repetition of these windows rises almost to the point of with their intricate, unrelenting, encompassing the.
Opposite, who are or were the inhabitants of this place? From the spaces between the buildings with twigs of the red phyllisium from Undated-C4 (plate 4). Now grown intense, they dwarf the cityscape. Further comparisons reveals that Undated-C4 and Undated-C7 offer different perspectives of the same setting. Both works share the same barns, landscape, red sky, and glowing horizons. The arched windows of Undated-C4 are an architectural feature of a number of the buildings in Undated-C7. And then of course, there are the phyllisiums. All but domesticated in the earlier work, they now press against the buildings, threatening to burst the walls. Depictions of wall in direct contact with hard and sharp objects are found throughout Toyogawa’s art, dating back to the earliest sculptures. One of his recurrent subjects is a city whose flesh is held within a crumbling carapace. (Examples in the recent exhibition include, Undated-C17 [plate 8], Undated-C17 [plate 56], and Undated-C17 [plate 87].) Toyogawa’s unflinching confrontation with thisearing inscription invigorates his work. The jagged edges of the carapace impel the flesh it is meant to protect, our inner desire press against the societal structure delineated by city walls and the sculptor’s ship tools shape with clay in the very act of artistic creation.

In some of Toyogawa’s recent paintings, his creatures have sprouted speedy legs and even wear shoes. There is a richness about his new anatomy. Legs appear in odd or even numbers, but never less than three per creature. Knees skitter, feet pointing at odd angles; they have a fertility, untamed aspect. Their shoes have faces, but where are the hands to tie them? From time to time, a shoe ends up on the wrong foot, also, one of the perks of getting dressed without arms, hands, or head. When the artist showed me the first of his shoe paintings, Undated-C18 (plate 18), the creature was slung with a satchel containing two rolled manuscripts. "It’s bringing me a message," he explained, wryly. "And what is it?" I asked. He smiled and shrugged. "I don’t know."

When Toyogawa first exhibited his drawings in 2009, I expected they would fill in the missing narratives surrounding his sculptures. Yet the more we look through the window of his paintings, the more we realize we will never see. Like an iceberg—or the unknowns—what is visible only indicates the richness of what remains hidden.
**BIOGRAPHY**

Ryo Topuyama was born in Matsuyama, Japan. He attended the National University of Shikoku, Japan, receiving a B.A. degree in psychology. After moving to New York City in 1983, Topuyama developed a vocabulary of humorous, disjointed, and often inappropriate statements, which appeared in various forms, including books, television, and his own exhibitions. His work often references the issues of the modern world and society, while maintaining a humorous and satirical tone.

**EXHIBITIONS**

Solo shows:

- **Dreaming 2000-2010, Charles Cowles Gallery, NYC, April 2009**
- **Mythopedia: The Vilcek Foundation Gallery, New York, March 2009**
- **Scrapwood in Clay, Mixed and Mixed Media, Charles Cowles Gallery, NYC, May 2006**
- **Clay Art Center Gallery, Port Chester, NY, 1997**

Group shows:

- **Renewing Landscape, Sidney Maltin Gallery, Baruch College, NYC, February-March 2013**
  - As in 20, Fifty and Previous Gifts in Honor of The Contemporary Museum’s 50th Anniversary, The Contemporary Museum, Honolulu, Hawaii, November 2005
  - (permanent collection)
- **Other ideas, Charles Cowles Gallery, NYC, July 2006**
  - *Cavin-Morris Gallery, NYC, October 2007*
- **Summer Group, Charles Cowles Gallery, NYC, July 2007**
  - *New, Tien, Sibij, Boundary Arts Center, Rochester, NY, October 2005*
  - *New Criteria, Creative Arts Workshop, New Haven CT, 1995 (honorable mention)*
- **Ananta Gallery, NYC, 1990**
  - *Two-person show, Greenhouse House, NYC, 1987*

**CATALOGUE OF THE EXHIBITION**

**Ryo Topuyama**

1. **Dreaming, 2009**
   - **Collection of the artist**
   - *Plate 1*

2. **Umbrella: C, 2010-11**
   - Acrylic on canvas, 60 x 48**
   - *Collection of the artist*
   - *Plate 2*

3. **Ryo Topuyama**
   - **Umbrella: C, 2011**
   - *Collection of the artist*
   - *Plate 3*

4. **Ryo Topuyama**
   - **Umbrella: C, 2011**
   - *Collection of the artist*
   - *Plate 4*

5. **Ryo Topuyama**
   - **Umbrella: C, 2012**
   - *Collection of the artist*
   - *Plate 5*

6. **Ryo Topuyama**
   - **Umbrella: C, 2012**
   - *Collection of the artist*
   - *Plate 6*

7. **Ryo Topuyama**
   - **Umbrella: C, 2013**
   - *Collection of the artist*
   - *Plate 7*

8. **Ryo Topuyama**
   - **Umbrella: C, 2013**
   - *Collection of the artist*
   - *Plate 8*

9. **Ryo Topuyama**
   - **Umbrella: C, 2013**
   - *Collection of the artist*
   - *Plate 9*

10. **Ryo Topuyama**
    - **Umbrella: C, 2013**
    - *Collection of the artist*
    - *Plate 10*

11. **Ryo Topuyama**
    - **Umbrella: C, 2013**
    - *Collection of the artist*
    - *Plate 11*

12. **Ryo Topuyama**
    - **Umbrella: C, 2013**
    - *Collection of the artist*
    - *Plate 12*

13. **Ryo Topuyama**
    - **Umbrella: C, 2013**
    - *Collection of the artist*
    - *Plate 13*

14. **Ryo Topuyama**
    - **Umbrella: C, 2013**
    - *Collection of the artist*
    - *Plate 14*

15. **Ryo Topuyama**
    - **Umbrella: C, 2013**
    - *Collection of the artist*
    - *Plate 15*