HYPERALLERGIC

Painting Disaster From a Distance

Motohide Takami's images locate the exact distance at which you can contemplate tragedy yet remain untouched by its damage.

Louis Bury October 26, 2019

Motohide Takami, "Fire on Another Shore (White)" (2019), oil and chalk on panel, 23.6 x 23.6 x 1.8 inches, all photos: Adam Reich

Fuzzy tufts of blue-white flame emanate from the roof of a bright white house. The flames create a halo of light around the house on an otherwise shadowy canvas, Motohide Takami's "Fire on Another Shore (White)" (2019). This spotlight effect, along with the fact that the house and its surrounding trees have been painted from miniature models, makes the nighttime scene feel staged, as though its every compositional element were a prop in the fire's drama. The ground's horizontal bands of blue, green, and brown — used to differentiate the foreground river, mid-

ground shore, and background sky — are also generic. They could be any river, any shore, any sky, just as the painting's faceless house and cookie-cutter trees lack cultural specificity.

Almost half the paintings in the Japanese artist's beguiling New York City debut, *Fires on Another Shore*, at SEIZAN Gallery, depict a version of this scene. In each, a plume of flame burns atop a house or a car that sits, impassive, on the far shore of a body of water. As critic Shannon Anderson's catalogue essay explains, the exhibition's titular conceit plays on a Japanese expression that refers to "the human tendency to remain a passive bystander to terrible circumstances," what Takami describes, in an interview, as the "human disinterest" that exists in Japanese society. While this is specific to Japanese culture, US viewers will have little difficulty recognizing elements of our own culture in Takami's allegories of indifference.

Motohide Takami, "FIRE.P" (2013), oil and chalk on panel, 51.2 x 76.4 x 1.5 inches

The fire paintings' vantage points beckon aloofness. The burning objects are close enough so as not to appear remote, but not so close as to appear threatening. It's the exact distance at which you can contemplate tragedy's spectacle yet remain untouched by its damage. The foregrounds' moat-like bodies of water reinforce this sense of distance between spectator and conflagration, which partly accounts for why the two fire paintings without bodies of water are less convincing ("Burning House" and "Fire," both 2019). But the majority succeed in unique and uncomfortable ways.

What's uncomfortable about Takami's depictions of disaster is how comfortable they make the viewer feel. The paintings' calm brushwork and dollhouse-miniature scale create a mood so placid that even the burning objects appear unperturbed by the flames that lick them. The human figure's absence from these fire scenes likewise encourages contemplative detachment over urgent empathy. "Wherever people feel safe," wrote Susan Sontag in *Regarding the Pain of Others*, "they will be indifferent." In his fire paintings, Takami's aesthetic choices elicit precisely such a safe feeling.

The exhibition's other works operate from a similar, if not greater, remove. Two paintings depict an overdetermined Japanese symbol — a pagoda; a photograph of the Imperial Family — sitting on a glacier's shore. Their compositions are similar to the fire paintings but their grisaille coloration and Arctic environs lend them an even more remote feel. Two paintings depict heavy-duty machinery — a crane truck and a rocketship — with stark, clinical precision; the paintings' dispassionate numerical titles — "20110322" (2016); "19670423" (2018) — reference the dates on which those machines were involved in historical catastrophe (respectively, the Great East Japan Earthquake and Tsunami of 2011 and the April 28, 1967, death of Soviet cosmonaut Colonel Vladimir Komarov, the first in-flight space death). Two other paintings depict a lone, semi-nude woman, whose back faces the viewer, near a shoreline. Tinged with swampy colors, the paintings have a creepy, voyeuristic mood.

Ambiguity pervades Takami's studies in detachment. It's always clear where the viewer stands in relation to the subject matter, but never quite clear how we ought to feel about both the subject and our own stance toward it. Viewing *Fires on Another Shore* feels a bit like wondering why drivers rubberneck, then rubbernecking yourself when driving past an accident: you know that your action is inconsiderate, if not imprudent, but in the moment it feels irresistible. Takami's exhibition enacts, rather than critiques, this human tendency, using painting's safe, mimetic distance to evoke its latent danger.

Motohide Takami: Fires on Another Shore *continues at Seizan Gallery (521 W 26th Street) until Nov. 2*
