

RYO TOYONAGA

Drawings

2008-2009



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Essays by

Larry Kramer and Sheila Farr

April 16 – May 16, 2009

Charles Cowles Gallery

537 West 24th Street, New York, NY 10011

(212) 741-8999 www.cowlesgallery.com

WHEN RYO TOYONAGA IS ENGROSSED IN HIS WORK, he often dreams of a vast flood of water rising toward him, bright and inviting. It's a force he sees as both thrilling and terrifying: the font of creativity as well as the uncontrollable chaos of the unconscious mind. "You can't live without it," he says, "but it can also kill you."

Since the mid-1990s, Toyonaga has applied himself to tapping into that rush of subliminal imagery to create a group of ceramic sculptures. The forms he finds are often unsettlingly raw and visceral, like pods or shells crushed to reveal an ooze of tissue and bone. Mutations sprout with unwholesome energy from the turmoil of organic shapes, which also shows signs of human intervention. Somehow, though, the application of man-made spikes, stitching and valves does little to suppress the power of nature.

In 2008, Toyonaga set aside clay and turned to drawing. This show represents his first foray into two-dimensional work. The numbered series progresses in a sort of abstracted narrative, using the cryptic language of the psyche both to reveal and hide its message. Whenever Toyonaga begins to veer into clearly representational form, as in the landscape of #BW05—he immediately dives back to less defined place, as you see in the overall patterning of the next drawing, #BW06. The obsessive, fractal-like repetition of shapes echoes his sculptural vocabulary while setting up a natural connection of personal to collective experience.

Toyonaga tries to reach a level of deep—you might even say *cellular*—memory in his images, as though he is tapping into primordial events, removed from the specificity of time and place. "Sometimes I get very dark energy coming up," he says. "Sometimes I feel a kind of sadness. I don't like violence and destruction, but somewhat I'm attracted to it. I don't like war and am appalled at people killing each other, yet sometimes I feel attracted to it."

The awkwardly mutated creatures of Toyonaga's universe are trapped in their own theater of the absurd, like Gregor Samsa in Kafka's "Metamorphosis." With their funny little legs waving helplessly about, they embody psychic pain, partially armored with self-deprecating humor. It's easy to relate Toyonaga's imagery to the distorted human figures of Francis Bacon or the butchered carcasses painted by Chaim Soutine. But Toyonaga prefers to think of his work in terms of landscape and the can-

vases of old masters. He likes the complexity of Brueghel and Bosch compositions, with their extreme depictions of human character, and he keeps books of those artists' work at his small lower Manhattan studio. When it comes to inspiration, though, Toyonaga's greatest debt is to 20th century painter Philip Guston. Riveted by a show of Guston's late drawings at the Morgan Library, Toyonaga put aside clay and began to draw.

"Something happened to me after that," Toyonaga says. "I have no idea what Guston's late drawings are about. I guess he died not explaining it . . . I wish I could see ten more years of the drawings, because he does a lot of innovative stuff and he's always looking for something new."

Maybe what struck Toyonaga about Guston's images was their resonance with his own vocabulary of symbolic forms, organic and man-made. Where Guston heaps up pipe-like legs, plunks giant heads in barren landscapes and flips the soles of shoes face-to-face with us, Toyonaga builds an uneasy architecture of vertebrae, tentacles and vessels tamped down with pipes, screws, plates and valves. What should be hidden inside these organisms bursts onto the surface, tangled in a scrim of netting and camouflage.

Over the course of this series, Toyonaga's technique with Sumi, acrylic and charcoal has become more refined, the space more dimensional, even though he tries to keep his line looking a bit raw. He prizes the friction between the devastation in the images and the somewhat cartoonish appearance of the style: at times a weird marriage of medieval landscape and science fiction illustration.

Primarily a self-taught artist, Toyonaga gleaned his basic training in technique from public school in Japan, where visual art and music courses are considered essential to a solid education. After graduating from the National University of Shinshu with a major in psychology, Toyonaga moved to New York and began to work with clay at Greenwich House and Lively Earth Studio. From 1995 to 2003, he lived and worked at the remote RedKill studio in the Catskill Mountains.

Toyonaga insists he doesn't care much about materials and initially chose to work with clay because it was an inexpensive medium for sculpture. Yet his choices, conscious or not, add an appealing conceptual level to the work. There's a paradox in making images that join clay, which has to be fired to preserve its form, with beeswax, which becomes formless when heated. (In some sculptures,

Toyonaga adds the stained, intricately sculpted wax after the clay forms are fired.) The delicacy of the wax, and its violent red hue, reinforce the feeling of intense vulnerability, of exposed secrets.

In the drawings, too, Toyonaga pays minute attention to surface detail and even his choice of format supports the tone of the imagery. Near the end of the series, in #BW09 and #BW10, as the organisms sprout with fresh palm-like protuberances (the way saplings take root in a dead tree), Toyonaga shifts to a vertical format, suggesting a more positive, skyward motion and sense of renewal.

The exhibition ends at a point of momentary equilibrium, in the image of an island emerging from a placid sea. Amid a quaint infrastructure of plumbing and pressure relief vents in #BW11, some functioning order has taken hold. Wounds have mended to scars. Even so, Toyonaga doesn't see this moment of consciousness and repose as wholly positive. He finds something ominous in the flower-like growths and says "some kind of destruction is going on. Whether it's ending or starting, I don't know."

Sheila Farr

March 2009, Seattle