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ART

Go with the flow from representational to abstract

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Shinpei Kusanagi's "The Ally", (2011) | Courtesy of Taka Ishii Gallery, Kyoto

For five years starting in 2007, Shinpei Kusanagi (b.1973) made monthly serialized paintings to accompany installments of Teru Miyamoto's novel "Mizu no Katachi" ("The Shape of Water") in the magazine *éclat*. Text and image had little to do with one another, though the small, standard format paintings (what the artist in fact refers to as "drawings") centered on views from Tokyo's Kiyosumi and Shirakawa districts.

"Where Water Comes Together With Other Water," which takes its title from a book of poems by Raymond Carver, is Taka Ishii Gallery, Kyoto's current show of 60 or so of these representational works, and the subsequent distillation of those experiences into abstraction. The narrative and connotative processual flows associated with the passage of water and Carver's poetry are found in the display of representational images, which have no titles and are meant to be viewed in the order that they are lined up — like the flow of a verse or of the rivers that course through the Kiyosumi and Shirakawa districts.

The small paintings evince an altogether Japanese aesthetic sensibility, with flowering morning glories recalling Edo Period Rinpa painting, snowed-over pine trees, irises, and cherry blossoms afloat the surface of a river. The artist wandered the Tokyo environs making small discoveries in the way tourists wander on the way to somewhere of significance, then spot something of interest along the way and take a picture. He then worked these discoveries into a series of paintings that offered ways of seeing and honing in on Tokyo's *shitamachi* ("downtown"), rather than on the more common focus of neon lights or urban sprawl. These works subsequently became the basis for the larger abstract paintings that draw away from realism. Conceived as a kind of ink painting or exercise in calligraphy (painted in one go and forgoing repainting), a

thin solution of paint was applied, giving the feeling of suffused ink meandering through porous paper, similar to a painting technique called *nijimi*, in which ink is deliberately allowed to soak in and spread. The flow is, of course, controlled, as are modern waterways, though there is always an element of chance in the painterly application.

"Nowhere Now Here" is composed of circular rings, dots and swathes of watery paint, and the title indicates the significance of a place insignificantly found. The painting is related to the earlier serialized representational imagery, its centered geometric notations being reproductions of the negative spaces between the supporting pylons of a river-spanning bridge found in the earlier works.

While Kusanagi's abstractions de-familiarize his earlier, carefully rendered imagery, they do in a sense still refer to specific landscapes held in memory — ones blurred, diffused and near washed away, though recovered to a degree in the publication of his exhibition-accompanying book, "Kiyosumi and Its Environs."

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