

glass

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COVER

Etsuko Ichikawa: A Dangerous Legacy



US \$11 | Canada \$12
Display until December 31, 2018



No 152. Fall 2018



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Echo at Satsop Film Still #01, 2013. A still from a short film shot at Satsop, an abandoned nuclear facility in southern Washington State. "Echo at Satsop" was part of Etsuko Ichikawa's response to the Fukushima nuclear disaster in her home country of Japan on March 11, 2011.

COURTESY: THE ARTIST AND SEAN FREGO



Atomic Echoes

Alarmed by the 2011 Fukushima nuclear disaster in her native Japan, Seattle-based artist **Etsuko Ichikawa** creates haunting multimedia works that alert us to the dangers of radioactive waste in Washington State.

BY VICTORIA JOSSLIN



Jomon Vitrified Vessel #01, 2017. A replica in kiln-cast uranium glass of an approximately 5,000-year-old Japanese national treasure, an earthenware vessel from the Jomon period (14,000 to 300 BCE). The cast uranium glass contains radioactive material that will take more than 100,000 years to be re-naturalized into the environment. H 13, W 14, D 14 in.

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What will happen to us if—or when—the nuclear waste stored at the Hanford Site, less than three hours east of Seattle by car, breaches its confines and reaches the Columbia River? Since we really don't want to think about this, let's look at something beautiful instead! "Fine," says Etsuko Ichikawa, and proceeds to make beautiful art that forces us to look at uncomfortable questions. "Beauty draws people in," she says.

Most recently, she drew us in by installing uranium-laced glass spheres placed in cutout holes in a board. UV light from below caused the uranium to glow—you couldn't look away. When she combines watercolor and pyrography—drawing by burning paper with graceful, fluid molten glass—you stare at still works that

seem to always be changing, like the fire and water that made them. She made a film, "Vitrified," a mysterious parable played out in flowing water, misty forests, and moving tides. The work is beautiful to look at, but it's not charming. It's based on the threat of irreversible contamination from radioactive nuclear waste.

Ichikawa's recent exhibition, also titled "Vitrified," in Seattle this spring at Winston Wächter Fine Art, demonstrated her ability to use aesthetic desire to sound a deadly alarm. She "vitrifies" craft, appetite, and fear, giving her work a compelling urgency.

On March 11, 2011, a 9.0-magnitude earthquake struck off the coast of Japan. The devastating tsunami that followed swept over the barrier walls protecting three nuclear reactors in Fukushima.

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The ensuing meltdown killed more than 500 people and released radioactive material into the sea. Appalled by the disaster, and worried about the possible long-term environmental consequences, Ichikawa considered what she, an artist, could do to help. "The Fukushima disaster was my first wake-up call, in terms of thinking about how and who I want to be as a person as well as an artist. I could keep making paintings or blowing glass, but why?"

Ichikawa, born in Tokyo, quickly came together with others to form Artists for Japan. With the support of KOBO Gallery in Seattle, they organized a fundraising sale in support of people in Fukushima. They raised more than \$100,000 in two days. At other events, she found herself marching in the streets. She had become an activist. Now, she looks for a way to unify her life as an artist and her life as an activist.

To draw attention to the disaster and its long aftermath, Ichikawa began the Himawari (Sunflower) Project. She learned that sunflowers absorb cesium, a dangerous element of nuclear waste, helping to purify water and soil, and that sunflowers were planted after the Chernobyl disaster. Her ongoing Himawari Project distributes hand-cast paper-pulp disks marked with the nuclear warning symbol. Once planted, the sunflower seeds inside the disks take root. Ironically, when grown in contaminated

ground, the plants absorb the nuclear waste and must be disposed of carefully.

Ichikawa continued to feel a gap between art and activism, studio work and marching. "I had thought that they had started to go in separate directions," she says and asked herself, "Which way am I going?"

By the summer of 2012, Ichikawa turned to film, working in a cooling tower in the abandoned Satsop nuclear facility in southern Washington. She responded immediately to the immense tower, nearly 500 feet tall, which is open at the top, with a perfect circle framing the sky and clouds. "When I visited Satsop for the first time," she writes, "I was inspired by the emotional juxtaposition between ethereality and fear that I experienced while being in the cooling tower. It is an amazing acoustic property where the sound created by simply clapping hands becomes an emotional experience."

In her video "Echo at Satsop" (2013), the artist and her crew make ample use of the emptiness, the minimal palette, the simplicity of form, and the extraordinary acoustics of the tower. Ichikawa's extensive use of slow motion creates an equivalency between spirally flowing water, the long echo of each clap, the resonance of small bells and simple instruments, and the fluid movement of the

Himawari Project, 2014. The Himawari Project is an ongoing environmental activity in which Ichikawa distributes sunflower-growing kits. Sunflowers absorb radioactive cesium from contaminated soil. With her kit, you can grow a sunflower from a seed embedded in the middle of the nuclear warning symbol.

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Vitrified 1818, 2018. Glass pyrograph and watercolor on paper. A new series combining glass pyrograph and watercolor, inspired by the process of making *Water Within*, a cast-glass installation in which the artist used a swirl of glass colors in solid clear glass. H 52, W 38 in.
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Vitrified Film Still #05, 2018. A still shot from a short film by Etsuko Ichikawa, which follows a character's encounter with a uranium orb in the deep forest that leads her to the ocean to release it. Responding to the 2011 Fukushima nuclear disaster, Ichikawa questions the impact of nuclear waste and the legacy it leaves for future generations. Filmed at Hoh Rain Forest and along Ruby Beach in Washington State.

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artist's white robes. The viewer shares the sense of enclosure and openness, and the sensory acuteness that makes every sound huge and distinct, every movement significant. Ichikawa adds that the seemingly endless echo of sound mirrors the seemingly endless echo of nuclear waste as it moves through the ocean. ("Echo at Satsop," less than five minutes long, can be seen in the video section on the artist's website, www.etsukoichikawa.com.)

"Echo at Satsop" drew immediate attention. In a *Seattle Times* review of Ichikawa's associated exhibition at Davidson Galleries, Michael Upchurch wrote about the film's "nightmare beauty." Irene Hofmann, of the nonprofit contemporary SITE Santa Fe, wrote that, "Ichikawa creates stunning visuals that evoke a haunting mix of fear and poetry."

The video led Ichikawa to a sudden discovery that changed the course of her work. One of her collectors saw "Echo at Satsop" and invited her to tour the Manhattan Project National Historical Site in Hanford, Washington, near the Columbia River. It was constructed during World War II as a plutonium production site, and plutonium from Reactor B was used in the Fat Man bomb, dropped on Nagasaki in 1945 and ultimately killing more than 60,000 people.

On the tour, Ichikawa learned that nuclear waste from Reactor B is stabilized by fusing it with glass paste and firing it in a huge

furnace. It is "vitrified," turned into glass. The tour guide gave her samples of the hard, black, shiny, almost faceted vitrified waste. Her path suddenly became clearer. There was a material that could bring her environmental concerns and her primary medium together—uranium glass.

For her 2016 residency at the Museum of Glass in Tacoma, Ichikawa drew on ancient forms from Japan's past: ancient tombs, Kofun-period megalithic mounds, and pottery vessels from the Jomon period, some of which date to 1450 BCE. The resulting installation consisted of a large, moss-covered "Kofun" mound surrounded by about 20 "Jomon" cast uranium-glass vessels, lit from below with ultraviolet light. The vessels are not dangerous to handle, but they are radioactive. Eerily radiant, they would guard any tomb perfectly.

In Ichikawa's 2018 exhibition, "Vitrified" serves as the title of the exhibition, her new body of work, and a new video. The exhibition consists of glass sculptures; works on paper that combine watercolor and pyrography (drawing on paper with molten glass); and a video. Together, they unify the artist's concerns as she intertwines narrative, beautiful objects, and distress. "This show," she says, "brings them together for the first time."

There are two installations of work in glass. In *Leaving a Legacy*, about 20 glass orbs, blown from uranium glass, rest in

holes in the table so that they can be lit from below by ultraviolet light. Spheres, usually paperweights, are one of the first basic lessons in glassmaking, Ichikawa explains. She prefers the word “orb” to “sphere,” though, seeing it as both more organic and as a symbol of power. The spiraling streams of uranium in the orbs produce a beautiful but unhealthy glow, reminding you of the winds and tides that circle the Earth or the movement of our own body fluids, all corrupted.

Water Within, her second glass installation, consists of mold-cast glass rather than blown glass. These works, too, include uranium, but much less than the orbs. The amount of glass in the combined pieces of *Water Within* has been calculated to equal the amount of water in the artist’s body, both by weight and by volume. Ichikawa sees it as a sort of self-portrait. “Each piece is a slice of myself,” she says. The swirls of uranium captured in the glass give you the sense that inside the glass surface, the elements are in constant movement. It’s not hard to connect our *imagining* movement in solid glass to our *thinking* about the movement of fluids in our bodies to our *knowing* about the actual results of the collapse of nuclear plants at Fukushima on Japan’s coast and the diffusion of cesium into the ocean.

Over 10 years ago, Ichikawa began drawing on paper by burning it with molten glass, calling it “pyrography.” Her riveting video, “2100° | 451°,” shows her at work, revealing the connection between her work as both a visual artist and a dancer. For the current exhibition, she combines fire and water, pyrography and watercolor, to produce a series of works on paper. It’s the easiest work in the show to get comfortable with—the pieces are lovely—and yet the light blue watercolors look like ocean maps; the pyrography leaves marks of burning. The message is there if you want to read it.

Ichikawa has continued to develop her work in film. If the other works in the exhibition were beautiful, I don’t know what to call Ichikawa’s video “Vitrified,” a moving landscape of forest, sky, and ocean. Like the quiet-spoken artist herself, the video is both gentle and unsparing. What you hear first is flowing water and what sounds like an exhaled breath. The camera reveals a small stream of water rippling over fine green plants. A woman’s voice speaks in Japanese (with English subtitles), meditating on “water ... beginning of all ... and end of all.” The camera then slowly rises over the mists and lush forests of Washington State’s Olympic Peninsula.

We follow an anonymous woman wearing a hazmat suit as she moves through the forest. The sound of breathing, we realize, is her breath as she inhales and exhales through her respirator. In the roots of a tree, she discovers a glowing orb, uranium suspended in glass, “something that won’t disappear in a million years.” “‘Take me to the sea, you said’ ... missing your mother.” The woman picks up the orb, and as she carries it, descending through the forest toward the ocean, we see that she is tiring. By the time she reaches the beach, she breaks into a stumbling run and collapses at the edge of the tide. The narrator’s words become increasingly

abstract as the camera continues to rise farther and farther up, and in the last 30 seconds we hear nothing but the sound of the water and see nothing but the veils of tides moving over the long shallow beach, the tides that move from Japan to the Pacific Coast of the United States.

All the work in her 2018 exhibition arises from Ichikawa’s attention to the ripple effect of nuclear waste in general and the ring of Fukushima cesium in particular as it expands throughout the world. She quietly forces her viewers to confront what we ultimately must understand: We create disasters that cannot be erased.

We already knew that lesson, if we were paying attention, from our personal histories. Ichikawa leads us to consider the disasters that damage the life of the Earth. While we can also acknowledge



Vitrified Film Still #08, 2018. A still shot from a short film in which a character finds a uranium orb in the deep forest that leads her to the ocean to release it. Responding to the 2011 Fukushima nuclear disaster, Ichikawa questions the impact of nuclear waste and the legacy it leaves for future generations. Filmed at Hoh Rain Forest and along Ruby Beach in Washington State.

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the ripple effects of goodwill in human populations, it is hard to imagine that same grace on a global scale.

We are privileged when we see an artist successfully translate concepts and emotions into art. Ichikawa has found a way to unify her commitment to art and action, a way to unify her mediums of glass, film, and work on paper, and a way to bring her fears, passions, skills, and cautious hopes together. ■

NOTE: Ichikawa buys uranium glass from a supplier in New Zealand. The National Radiation Laboratory of the Ministry of Health in New Zealand states that it is safe to handle uranium glass.

Contributing editor VICTORIA JOSSLIN recently published the novel *The Bookstore of Other Languages*.

