

Hiroe Saeki Cosmogenesis

at Daiwa Foundation Japan House in London
7 November 2019 - 31 January 2020



Untitled 2019 (Detail) (HS261) / Pencil, graphite powder, acrylic ink, and gold leaf on paper / Diptych, 77 x 106 cm each

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With my drawings I am hoping to create a visual experience for the viewer. The co-existence of space and details within my drawing is so much about being present in the moment.

This quality is one that I am afraid gets lost in digital or printed images of my drawings, so I'm thrilled that you are here to interact with the work in-person.

The title of this exhibition, *Cosmogenesis*, means the origin or evolution of the universe. It also has the meaning of "no beginning nor ending."

This is the first time I've titled an exhibition, usually, I don't. But when the word "cosmogenesis" was suggested, I felt it was a perfect way to explain my work. I love the possibilities that this opens up. It's about something bigger than a linear narrative, like birth and death happening at the same time.

Nature is central to my work and so of course I'm concerned about what is happening to our world. I used to solely focus on the beauty of nature but I now feel I need to also focus on the fragility of that beauty and how it needs to be protected.

For instance, the largest work in this show, the diptych, was inspired by a massive storm we experienced in Berlin this spring. The power of the storm really captured my imagination, but it also made me more anxious about what is happening to our planet.

I believe that my body holds on to every experience I have in nature, the delight, the fear, the excitement, which I then release onto the paper.

This work also marks another shift in my approach. For over a decade I worked with one mechanical pencil to slowly build up the image with intensive details and a strict control of the compositions. Last year, I decided to force myself to relinquish some of this control and started to explore a new technique by graphite powder and water.

I'm constantly surprised by how a small sprinkle of graphite can create a new universe of previously unknown formations.

I now feel the drawings come from a more collaborative place between myself and the materials.

Artist Talk with Ito Ogawa

Tuesday 26 November 2019

Translated by Jason James and Yumiko Urae

Ito: I think what characterises your work is that nobody can understand it unless seeing it directly with their own eyes.
The first time I saw your work was at a group exhibition at Daimler Contemporary in Berlin in June last year. I was surprised and impressed by the fineness and delicacy of touch. Drawn only by hand, it is incredible. And I could never replicate your skill. Another amazing fact is that it is basically drawn with just one mechanical pencil. What kind of pencil do you normally use? When did you start using it?

Hiroe: This is my mechanical pencil. I don't remember exactly, but I have been using it since I was 13 or 14. It's not that I'm particularly a great fan of Snoopy, but I used it because it's easy to draw with, and eventually I realised I couldn't manage without it.
As I said earlier, I am experimenting with new techniques at the moment, and sometimes I use pencils with a finer wick, so I'm not as obsessed with this mechanical pencil as I used to be, but when I'm drawing important lines or finishing off a work, Snoopy makes his appearance. He has a certain presence, as though an important dignitary were making his appearance.

Ito: Could you tell me how you actually create your work using this mechanical pencil?

Hiroe: I'm often asked how I draw, so I'd like to take this opportunity to make the process clear. I briefly touched on the process of creating the works in this exhibition earlier, but:

1. I wet the paper and stretch it over a board.
2. Once the paper has dried I pour plenty of water on it.
3. I scatter graphite powder on the water.

That's when the story starts.

Sometimes it might represent mass migrations of animals or peoples, or it might be the beginning of life, or it might be the world after death.

A scene you've seen in the past, or a world you saw in a dream, or alternatively it may be a scene you will see in the future.

As the water moves and gradually dries, I watch this slow process intensely, hardly even blinking.

The movement is abstract, but at the same time, for me, I think it's like the feeling that I'm watching an extraordinarily realistic film.

4. When the water is completely dry, I draw in the fine details using the same technique I employed in my previous works.
5. I paint white acrylic ink over the whole surface of the work using a roller.

This is the first time I have used this technique, particularly for this exhibition, but the reason I have done it is that by making the surface of the works feel even more dreamlike than in my previous works, I wanted to approach a space of "nothingness", as though a door had been gently opened to a space in some other dimension.

When I experimented with this technique this time, I faced one disaster, when on one occasion I could not peel the finished work off the board, so I had to make the largest work twice, but I feel very glad that I didn't give up.

6. Then I pay attention to the overall balance and add and erase lines, and mess it all up a bit to complete it.

Ito: In your presentation, you explained that the theme of this exhibition is “Cosmogogenesis”. I imagine that that is deeply involved with life and death. Coincidentally, my latest book published last month in Japan, *Special Dinner at Lion*, has the theme of death as well.

Briefly, I will describe the content. The story is about a 33 year old female protagonist with a terminal illness, who spends the rest of her life at the Lion House *jps@ocean* on an Island in South Japan. At the hospice, there is a special tea time at 3 O'clock in the afternoon on Sundays. All the terminally ill patients can request a last dessert that they would like to taste before their death. And everyone else can share it.

I wanted Hiroe to read the book so I sent a copy from Tokyo to Berlin. Will you tell me what you thought about it, if you do not mind?

Hiroe: One day when I opened my mailbox I found a copy of your latest book inside, along with a lovely friendly letter from you. The next day, with a mixture of nervousness and excitement, I read the whole book at one go in my studio. When I got to the end, my tears were falling like a waterfall, and I was completely shattered. I had promised myself that this time I would definitely not cry when I read your book, so I was actually slightly annoyed with myself when I found myself crying!

The strongest feeling I remember is that even though we two have spent a great deal of time together over the last two years, you never spoke to me at all about the contents of the book, but were just beavering away steadily at this one work, so I felt respect, or rather even a sense of defeat at this strength of your character that I hadn't recognised before.

I was also surprised that in relation to what we hadn't talked together about, ultimately, even though on the surface we are using different methods, when you look underneath we are both tackling head-on the same sorts of themes. At the same time, I don't know if I should call it synchronicity, but I recognised that as I thought, there is a connection between us.

Ito: The reason why I wrote a story about death this time is that my mother had cancer and told me that she would not live much longer. For me, there are two types of death. One is my own and the other is the death of others. I had never been afraid of my death, but my mother told me on the phone that she was scared to die. I was rather surprised that she was in such a state. Then, I thought that most people have a fear of their own death. This experience made me create a story in which the reader becomes afraid of death. Unfortunately, my mother had passed away before the book was finished, but I think I can deliver the message through it nonetheless.

What do you think about your own death? What happens when you die, Hiroe?

Hiroe: I think that broadly speaking there are two types of people – those who think that when you die that's the end of it, and those who think that we will continue after we die. I'm in the second group, but first of all, where do we come from when we are born? And before even that, where on earth did this round planet we are standing on come from? We have to have a sense of awe at these wonders.

I imagine that after we die, there might remain a “feeling” like the one we have after going to a film or a concert, or after seeing a picture. That’s why I think it’s so important to treasure the “feeling” we have at this moment.

Ito: In fact, we were often talking about such things over a glass of wine in Berlin. Originally, we got know each other through a mutual friend in the early summer, two years ago.

Hiroe: Our mutual friend Miyuki was a hair stylist, living in Berlin, who was cutting our hair, and from some way back she was saying “Ito writes books; I really want to introduce you to her! I’m sure you’d get on!” Then when we did finally meet we became good friends almost straight away, didn’t we?

Ito: Miyuki told me that she would like to introduce me to someone one day. We first met at a wine festival. Then, we became very close. I remember I felt that you were a piece of my soul. The strange thing is that we all got interested in quantum mechanics, exchanged books about spiritualism, and often talked about life after death. We were aware that Miyuki had cancer several years ago but we just communicated in our usual manner. However, it recurred last winter and she went back to Japan and never returned. It was too late to survive. She died exactly today a year ago.

Hiroe: That period was a miracle, wasn’t it?
It was a time when I was going through a long slump in my work, and I was even thinking of giving up my artistic activities. For an artist, there is nothing harder than wanting to make work but being unable to do it. Really there were various things that came together, but I went to India and rediscovered the fundamental human desire to “be alive”, and the books that you and Miyuki lent me gave me back a feeling I was starting to forget, and anyway, everything happened with perfect timing, so for me it was a time of transformation.

Then this time, as a result of your schedule, we suddenly decided to change the date of this talk, which had been planned for January. We decided the schedule in a rush, but when we later realised it was exactly one year since Miyuki died, we both got goose-pimples.

So that’s when we decided to talk openly about these private things.

Ito: Did you learn anything from Miyuki’s death?

Hiroe: Along with the several other people who packed up her stuff at the end, the two of us were so sad. We were also upset that we had not been able to spot the symptoms in such a close friend. But at the same time I increasingly had the feeling that death is just a matter of being “on the other side of a single thin curtain”. At night, when I open my window, I suddenly wave and shout out “I’m fine too!”

Ito: I learnt the importance of living joyfully from her. We got together at my flat on the 3rd of March, Hinamatsuri, the Girls’ day. Every time we used to meet for dinner the time would fly and it would get late at night, so we decided to party at lunch time. We ate ‘Chirashi’ sushi, and it soon became dark. We decided to potter around and visit a friend of Miyuki’s shop. Do you remember?

Hiroe: Of course.

Ito: You said “It is so joyful!” and somehow, we all burst into laughter. For a while, we kept using our favorite word “joyful”. Being joyful and having fun every moment is of the utmost importance in life, and to be happy is our mission from the day we are born. I think that must have been a message from Miyuki. And even though the body no longer exists, it does not mean the person is totally no longer with us. I can feel she kept living on as energy – she certainly taught that to me. There is proof of Miyuki’s life both in Hiroe’s work and in mine.

Hiroe: By the way, this is about your books, but you often compare the process of writing a story to climbing a mountain, don’t you? While you are writing is it basically a tough feeling? Or is it fun?

Ito: Both, I guess. When everything is going well, I feel like I am honeymooning with a sweet lover, but when I get stuck, I feel that my life is dark and miserable, as if I’m really suffering from something like giving birth. However, basically, I do not remember all this. I write unconsciously and the story is completed at the end. How about you, Hiroe? At which moments do you feel joyful? Or when do you suffer?

Hiroe: I thought that probably you didn’t have much in the way of birth pangs, Ito. If we think about it dispassionately, that probably oughtn’t to be the case when we are giving birth to something...

Like you, I produce my works unconsciously.

If that’s not the case, I can’t draw, or maybe I should say that first I suffer from repeated extreme ups and downs. Sometimes I’m a genius, and at other times I think “if this is the best you can do you’d better just die”. But when I lose that sense of my own existence, and have given up, at last, the work itself starts to give me its own strength. Afterwards, all I have to do is follow it.

Ito: Actually, we go to the same ‘Seitai’ (manipulative body therapy) clinic, don’t we? For me, having acupuncture and massage there is like being in an oasis. Through writing, I get stiff shoulders. So I regularly go to the clinic and keep my body maintained, in order to be able to keep enjoying my work. You have a studio, right? How is your usual work day?

Hiroe: Like you, I’m using my body in my work, so I do yoga at my studio, and I also do a lot of meditation. At my studio basically I don’t look at art books, and I don’t read books. All I do there is meditate and work.

Ito: I have decided that writing work should only be done in the morning. I wake up at dawn, pray in front of Buddha, read the newspaper and drink tea. Then start writing. I stop when I get hungry. After having brunch, breakfast and lunch all together at about 11 o’clock, I do not write anymore in the afternoon. It is enough for me to concentrate two to three hours a day.

Hiroe: As soon as I get up in the morning I eat a large breakfast, make myself a packed lunch, do some quick yoga and meditation, and then get on the train and go to my studio.
I go to my studio as early as I can in the morning, and currently I am trying to finish working somehow or other by 6pm, but even so, sometimes I close my studio door but then open it again and end up going back to work.

In the evenings I read books. While I'm creating work I try not to meet too many people.
On the other hand, as soon as an exhibition has finished, for a while I forget all about it.

Ito: Me, too. When a story is completed and has left me, I try to forget about it. Otherwise, there is no space to start the next one.
In this case, even if there is a difference between writing stories and drawing pictures, we are rather similar.

By the way, you mentioned that you are inspired by nature. For me, nature is very important and a great teacher. No matter how hard we try, we can never reach the beauty that exists in nature, I think.

We visited a forest in Poland last summer, didn't we?

Hiroe: Yes, yes.
There is a book by a German forest manager called "The Hidden Life of Trees", and because we were deeply moved by this book, and truly realised that "trees are living beings", we wanted to go for ourselves to Europe's last primeval forest.

Ito: That was originally Miyuki's suggestion but her condition got worse, so we took a train from Berlin and changed to get on a bus. The forest was very, very sparkling and beautiful.

Hiroe: I think that if you look closely at nature it really contains a clear "answer" to every question.

Ito: Finally, please tell me what your next challenge is?

Hiroe: In my case, when plans for an exhibition are fixed I go and visit the exhibition space, and the inspiration I get from it has a major effect on the works I produce, so I am looking forward to discussions about my next exhibition.
I also decide the size of my pictures to suit the gallery space, so that they will have just the right balance, but I'd like to produce some more large-scale works. Also, that summer I did some pottery, and it was fascinating. I thought that I'd like to experiment with three-dimensional forms in pottery or glass.

Also, in terms of personal development, until now I have done my best to avoid talking about what I am thinking, so today I can celebrate the fact that I have achieved something I couldn't do before.
I would like to thank the Daiwa Foundation for giving me this opportunity and for all their help, and my great friend Ito, and everybody who has come to see my exhibition. Thank you to all of you.

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