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ART REVIEWS

Three Art Gallery Shows to See Right Now

Gaku Tsutaja

Through Aug. 9. Ulterior Gallery, 172 Attorney Street, Manhattan; 917-472-7784, ulteriorgallery.com.

An installation view of Gaku Tsutaja's "Spider's Thread: This Landscape" (2020). Gaku Tsutaja and Ulterior Gallery, New York

It's hard to clearly see the diptych that forms the heart of Gaku Tsutaja's exhibition at Ulterior Gallery. I don't mean that physically — the gallery is open, or you can view the virtual tour on its website, as I did — but perceptually. The two paintings, "Spider's Thread: This Landscape" and "Spider's Thread: That Story" (both 2020), are bursting with imagery, including an ominous plane; plumes of smoke; the wavy lines of Sanzu-no-Kawa, a mythological river that the dead must cross to reach the afterlife; and anthropomorphized animals riding horses through the sky. Such elements swarm the black-and-white canvases so that your eye barely knows where to land.

Ms. Tsutaja's exhibition, titled "Spider's Thread," grew out of her research on the Manhattan Project and the American atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, 75 years ago in August. One of the paintings represents the perspective of Japan, the artist's home country, the other, the view from the United States, where she lives now. In both, time and space seem to have collapsed into a pair of nightmarish flashbacks.

The work isn't overtly didactic, though; Ms. Tsutaja uses surrealism to turn history into a kind of myth. This is especially evident in the show's online component: a daily drawing by the artist posted on social media. Scrolling through these smaller works from the beginning recalls reading a comic book. The grand narrative of the "Spider's Thread" unravels bit by bit into something more legible but no less haunting and profound.

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