

Gaku Tsutaja: A New Portrayal of Enola Gay



The Project to Dismantle the Enola Gay, 2018, Branches, Spanish moss, net, reeds, wire net, wood, paper clay, Indian ink, paper, canvas cloth, string, 85 x 70 x 87 inches / 215.9 x 177.8 x 220.98 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

By **JONATHAN GOODMAN** April, 2019

In mid-career, based in Queens, Japanese artist Gaku Tsutaja lives and works in a small studio in Elmhurst. She does a lot of work with black-and-white drawings, which often express an indirect narrative, usually historical and often troubling. Tsutaja studied art in Japan, receiving her BFA from Tokyo Zokei University in 1998. After taking her BFA degree, she received a fellowship from the Center for Contemporary Art (CCA Kaitakyushu), where she engaged in the studio program there for two years. Then, from 2000 to 2005, she was active in the artist's collective Gansomaeda, focusing on satirizing the Japanese art scene and making multimedia work. Since 2006 she has lived in New York, where she has concentrated on making solo work, including paintings, drawings, sculpture, video, performance, and installation. In 2018, she received her MFA from SUNY Purchase. Most recently as an artist, Tsutaja notes the image and role of the Enola Gay, the plane that dropped the atom bomb on Hiroshima in 1945.

One of the most striking pieces, made in 2018, is the artist's historical and symbolic sculpture of Enola Gay (now on view at the Smithsonian). The work, called *The Project to Dismantle the Enola Gay*, is understood to personify the object; the

artist refers to the plane itself as “she.” The sculpture is a complex construction with a top side and an underside that looks at both the history and the psychic underpinnings of the devastating event. To describe the work: an open yellow cage supports a miniature model of an airplane, while surrounding the periphery of the cage are a series of thin branches that rise above, from which hang thick nests. The nests are home to monk parakeets, an alien species in the United States, indicating Tsutaja’s life in New York as an immigrant artist.



Detail of The Project to Dismantle the Enola Gay. Courtesy of the artist.

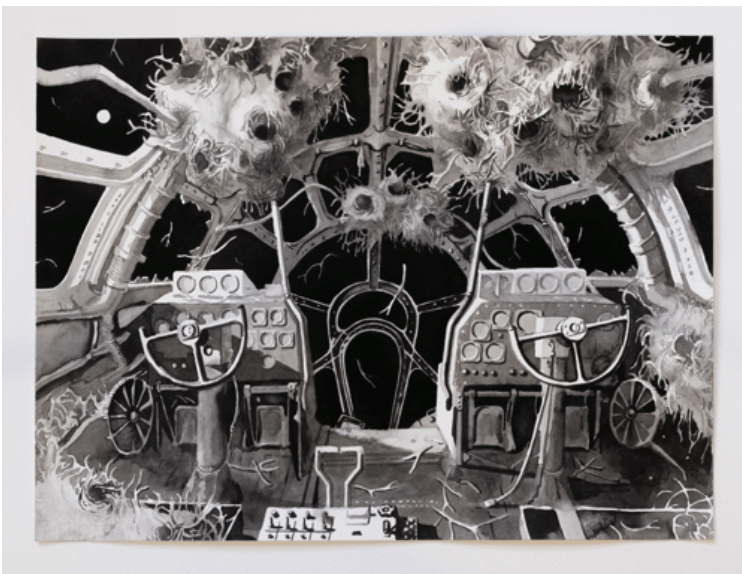
Underneath the platform, we see a large black spider taking up most of the space available. It symbolizes the aggression that produced the bombing; in fact, its placement on the underside of the table, and the long association of the spider with destructive energy, convey Tsutaja’s notion that the installation of the Enola Gay at a satellite space, an annex of the Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum in Virginia, did not do justice to the historical facts associated with the bombing and, as well, the effect of radiation on hibakusha (victims of nuclear disaster). Thus, the artist’s Enola Gay sculpture is an exercise in art as moral and political commentary, based on an actual event.

While the Enola Gay piece is central to understanding Tsutaja’s esthetic, the narrative sumi ink drawings are equally important. Highly detailed, often disturbing, and inevitably historical, the drawings convey a dark pessimism about the events that affected Japan in the 20th century--primarily the tragic circumstances of America’s use of the atom bomb in

Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The artist recently has finished 13 drawings based on images in the historical archives of the Manhattan Project in Los Alamos, New Mexico, where the bomb was developed; on the circumstances in Hiroshima, where the first bomb was dropped; and on the placing of the Enola Gay in the Andrews Air Force Base in Maryland, where it was parked outdoors and abandoned, slowly deteriorating from 1953 to 1960.



The First-Aid Tent Station, 2019, Sumi ink on paper, 11 x 15 inches / 27.9 x 38.1cm



Enola's Odyssey (2019), Sumi ink on paper, 11 x 15 inches

These drawings both document and starkly re-invent the visual circumstances surrounding events before, during, and after Hiroshima's bombing. Their stark black-and-white tonalities, coupled with their historical specificity, result in art that is both memorable and deeply moral in its memorial function. The work titled *Enola's Odyssey* (2019), an important display of the effects of time, shows the plane's cockpit at night (a small moon is evident through a window on the left). Plants have edged their way into the small space. The top of the space is cluttered with the communal nest of the monk parakeets; bugs, birds, and animals lived in the cockpit for years. The steering wheels and small circular dials seem antiquated, infusing the drawing with a documentary melancholy. Tsutaja records here the decay of the plane before the it was cleaned it up for display as an icon of victory later on.



Study with the Moon, 2019, Sumi ink, house paint, panel, media player, monitor, and speaker, 29 x 24 x 2 1/2 inches / 73.7 x 61.0 x 6.4 cm

Another small drawing (all of the works are 11 by 15 inches), called *Three Billion Dollar Project* (2019), presents a row of the front parts of the fuselage of the B-29 Boeing Superfortress--four-engine, propeller-powered heavy bombers, including the Enola Gay. The gray wash depicting the front part of the bombers accentuates a feeling close to a cold industrial despair. Humanoid parakeets in clean suits work on the planes; we see nothing of the birds' faces, so that the protagonists are generalized rather than specifically American--a decision by the artist, who wanted to expand the story to something larger than an American narrative. As a Japanese immigrant artist, Tsutaja is representing a point of view not found in the American version of events. This is important to remember generally of her work; Tsutaja is presenting an alternative to the atomic bomb attack Americans have read as militarily and morally necessary, but which is more complex than that.



Three Billion Dollar Project, 2019, Sumi ink on paper, 11 x 15 inches / 27.9 x 38.1cm

The First Aid Tent Station (2019), based on a photo taken in a hospital, illustrates the horrific effects of the atom bombing. We see the lower half of a man in black pants, holding chopsticks and a small white bowl, standing over something or someone--it is hard to tell, the forms are so distorted and jumbled, they are close to abstract. On the upper left, it looks like the viewer is seeing a skeletal face and body, but again, it is not easy to distinguish a person from the swarm of obscurely rendered forms in the drawing. What does come through is a sense of anarchic distress, played out by human anguish--even if we cannot see the head and torso of the man with the chopsticks, and even if the general scene is beyond recognition. Chaos, moral and visual, reigns.

In a 13-minute video, titled Study with the Moon (2019), the themes of the bombing are realized in a series of drawings in motion that show, among other scenes, the bombers in alignment and a lunar landscape with large insect-like creatures (called kumo in Japanese, a word meaning both "cloud" and "spider"--nouns indicative of the bomb's mushroom cloud appearance and destructive energies) crawling in the dust, along with monk parakeets circling a nest outside the small building serving as an entrance to the Los Alamos site. The video is moving, but even more important, it is contemporary in its energies--this is a new retelling of a major historical trauma.

We need, very much, a revised history of the atom bomb. We too easily pass it off as an inevitable military event when the situation is more complicated than that, and the suffering so large, that it needs to be told from more than one point of view. In her sculpture and drawings, Tsutaja is not so much revising the past as she is telling the truth. The skill of her drawings shows us that sumi ink work, despite its centuries of history, may be put to use in highly innovative ways, relating events in a contemporary fashion. Tsutaja shows us how the atom bomb is something more troubling than is understood in America, something causing a suffering we have not truly acknowledged. WM

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