

HYPERALLERGIC

Using Animals to Talk About Historical Trauma

By drawing on Japanese folk stories and myths about animals, Gaku Tsutaja is able to construct imaginative, open-ended narratives about historical traumas.



John Yau October 26, 2019



Gaku Tsutaja, “The Long Game” (2019), Sumi ink on paper (all images courtesy the artist and Ulterior Gallery, NY, photos by Jason Mandella)

The first work I saw was “Nyukou–Shimeihyou (Tunnel Entrance Log: Worker’s Tokens)” (2017), a horizontal, windowed box mounted on the hallway wall leading to the gallery. Behind the box’s glass face were round black and white wooden tokens mounted on four rows of hooks. Each token depicted a close-up view of an animal’s face, many of them wearing glasses. The animals were star-nosed moles, beavers, and groundhogs — all industrious tunnel-digging and dam-building creatures.

Opposite “Nyukou–Shimeihyou (Tunnel Entrance Log: Worker’s Tokens)” was “The Three Wise Monkeys” (2019), a black, gray, and white wooden sign that showed three monkeys.

Superimposed over the monkeys were the words:

WHAT YOU SEE HERE WHAT YOU DO HERE WHEN YOU LEAVE HERE LET IT STAY HERE

The sign was topped by a cut-out shape on which was painted an eyeless parakeet in a striped Uncle Sam's outfit. Half-bird and half-man, the figure was rolling up his sleeves.

This was my introduction to the exhibition *Gaku Tsutaja: A Trip to the Moon* at the Shirley Fiterman Art Center at the Borough of Manhattan Community College (September 10-November 2, 2019). It was curated by Lisa Panzera, who is proving to be one of the best curators working in Manhattan, outshining many of her less inspired and more predictable contemporaries at other New York institutions. (I previously reviewed her exhibition *Double Portrait: Mimi Gross and Marcia Marcus* at the same venue.)



Installation view of *Gaku Tsutaja: A Trip to the Moon* at the Shirley Fiterman Art Center at the Borough of Manhattan Community College

On her website, Tsutaja has written that she began “working with animal protagonists as universal figures that do not represent any race or nationality.” She also stated that the reason many of them are “without eyes and sometimes without legs or bodies” originated with how she felt after moving from Japan to America in 2006: “The woman without eyes was myself — a woman who couldn’t act the right way in a foreign country.”

By developing a vocabulary of “animal protagonists,” Tsutaja has been able to deal with historical events (the dropping of the atom bomb on Hiroshima by the Enola Gay, the rebuilding of Japan after World War II, Japanese internment camps, and Fukushima, to name just four), and her own sense of displacement as a Japanese woman living in America for the past 13 years, without assigning blame or identifying as a victim. While her work has to do with identity, I would not call it identity driven, which means it doesn’t comfortably fit in with how museums and other cultural institutions claiming to be socially conscious are marketing it.

A masterful, polyvalent artist, Tsutaja works across mediums and traditions, including manga and documentary images. She makes sculptural objects, Sumi ink drawings and paintings, films, and recordings. The works are grouped into projects. Those in *A Trip to the Moon* come from the following projects: *World War II Club* (2019 – ongoing); *Beautiful Sky Golf Course* (2019); *Post-National Museum of Parakeet History* (2017 – ongoing); and *The Kingdom of Kitai* (2017). Creatures have populated each of her projects, either animals dressed in human clothes or human figures with animal heads. Many are eyeless or wear glasses.



Gaku Tsutaja, from the Target series (2019)

As an individual who was not an eyewitness to these events in Japanese and Japanese American history — from Pearl Harbor, the internment of Japanese Americans, and the dropping of nuclear bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki to the rebuilding of Japan after World War II and the nuclear catastrophe at Fukushima — how do you approach them, especially as they are part of your history and helped shaped you?

By drawing on Japanese folk stories and myths about animals, Tsutaja is able to construct imaginative, open-ended narratives about these events. As surrogates for human behavior, her animals are simultaneously remote and immediate, ranging from warm and cuddly to cold and alien. Whether or not the mice and cats in Art Spiegelman's graphic novel *Maus* inspired Tsutaja, her work shares something with his ironic anthropomorphic depictions. Tsutaja's anthropomorphic animals enable her to move closer to various historical events and look at them with a kind of innocence that allows her to place all kinds of disturbing information in front of the viewer. After all, these events did not happen in our world but in an alternative universe that parallels this one, which is certainly one way to look at history.



Gaku Tsutaja, from the Target series, detail (2019)

The more I looked at Tsutaja's work, the deeper I was pulled in. At times I felt both charmed and uncomfortable, an unlikely state that the artist could stir up quite easily and often by developing images that do not immediately reveal what they signify. What am I to make of six wooden shelves stacked in two sets of three, each lined with golf balls that have been altered and anthropomorphized to resemble the heads of sheep, some wearing wire-rimmed frames?

Above the golf balls are large unstretched, gessoed canvases (measuring around 48 by 63 inches) that Tsutaja has painted with Sumi ink. In "The Long Game" (2019), we see a group of men with their faces wrapped in cloth playing golf. The barracks in the distance clue us in that this is not a country club, but, as we learn, an internment camp in Missoula, Montana, where its Japanese prisoners have made what they call "Beautiful Sky Golf Course."

In the video projected on the wall adjacent to this installation, we see short sequences of anthropomorphized golf balls being wacked and disappearing into the darkness, interspersed with other images, including a headless man in a blue suit performing various actions, including taking off his jacket and sitting in a chair. The disappearing golf ball sequences are funny and horrifying.

When we see that the golf clubs Tsutaja has made have animal heads, we get a glimpse of how far she is willing to go to follow the logic of her anthropomorphizing approach. The worlds she creates are both strange and familiar.



Gaku Tsutaja, "Burns" (2018), Sumi ink on paper

Her Sumi ink on paper, "Burns" (2018), is a dark, close-up view of an arm covered with burns being held at the elbow and hand by another figure. The ink staining the paper in different shades of black and gray does not show us the person's suffering; this is underscored by the passivity of the image and the fact we do not see any faces. Is the person whose arm is being held even alive?

Disturbing, strange, compelling, masterful, imaginative, and wild — these are just some of the more obvious descriptions of Tsutaja's work. What I was most struck by was the range of feelings and states Tsutaja is able to attain in her work — from serious to offbeat, from raw to nuanced, and from funny to somber — seemingly without straining. Walking into the high-ceiling gallery where Tsutaja has installed her work, past the box of tokens and club sign, the viewer becomes an outsider, a witness, or perhaps a worker keen on rebuilding what the artist calls "the moon."

[Gaku Tsutaja: A Trip to the Moon continues at the Shirley Fiterman Art Center at the Borough of Manhattan Community College \(81 Barclay Street, Tribeca, Manhattan\) through November 2.](#)