

The (Un)Bearable Heaviness of Being: Tadashi Moriyama and the Art of Excess

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New York-based Japanese artist Tadashi Moriyama revels in the act of creating densely-knit parallel universes that both nod to the physical realities of life in the here and now while also envisioning potential futures where man and machine meld into one, a realm where technology overtakes us, or perhaps makes us whole. His colorful drawings and paintings can be bright and cheery in certain works that seem to celebrate the many facets of life in major urban Meccas, where rainbow washes and circular blocks of packed housing might reference the artist's native Japan with its much discussed urban density with its ever-present neon signs and mass consumerism leanings. In others, however, a darker, perhaps even menacing, color palette of blues and blacks nod to the stresses, worries and evils that life in contemporary society often brings to the table, while also foreshadowing darker days ahead, as the natural world continues to lose out to that of the technological and automated.

Moriyama's early works are often devoid of people, but several of his recent drawings included in this show begin to introduce a human element to the artist's imagined built environment. These new figures in the work are not idealistic or realistic representations of mankind, for they might better be explained as individuals in distress or in need. Whether floating face-down in a pool as in *Total Amnesiac* or clearly melding with technology as in *Blue*, where a spectral blue man hovers Godzilla-like over a cityscape and seems to be fully blended with not only the environment, but with the symbolic iPhone-like device that he holds, Moriyama is making nods to the current state of uncertainty that affects all parts of the globe today, a world mired in financial turmoil, natural disaster and unbridled warfare. Looked at in this vein, Moriyama's work draws parallels with the early and often unseen work in the artist On Kawara's "Bathroom Series" of 1953-54. These gory drawings and paintings depict multiple human forms set within the white-tiled walls of an otherwise pristine bathroom in various stages of being butchered and maimed. Body parts and blood are readily apparent in excess, and these human forms become receptacles of meaning that no doubt stood for Kawara's reading of Japan's own uncertainty at the time the works were made in the immediate Post-War period when Japan was still languishing in economic crisis and social instability. A painting from the following year, 1955, titled *Black Soldier*, shows two human legs in long perspective plummeting down a cement tunnel into an abyss below. Moriyama masters this same feeling of social angst and powerlessness in his work today, and like the now-exalted On Kawara, critiques the lived realities of his day.

In drawing parallels with Kawara, it might also be useful to discuss Tadashi Moriyama's work in comparison with South African artist William Kentridge as well, as certain parallels seem readily apparent in both artists' works. Like the lauded Kentridge, Moriyama also makes animated films as part of his art-making process that act as narrative stories which address certain aspects of society that both artists feel are necessary to bring to light. Kentridge, of course, critiques notions of racism and greed in his native South Africa through stories built around two fictional characters who inhabit a world that periodically crumbles—both physically and philosophically—around them. Although stylistically much different from Kentridge's constantly reworked charcoal drawings that form the foundation of his films, Moriyama's animations build on the social critique aspects of Kentridge's work in their close examination of structural collapse in the face of changing societal trends and mores. Moriyama seems to urge us to question the benefits of technology, making us wonder if it is a vehicle to Utopia, or perhaps more likely, a road to self-destruction. As the body grows ever more close to the machine, will it lose its own independence and become nothing more than a single part of the overarching system that powers the world along? Much like the Hollywood film, "The Matrix," in which humans are both controlled by—and provide nourishment to—the computer-based system that dominates the world, Tadashi Moriyama's drawings and paintings portray a skewed social system where individual powers are lost to that of the ruling elite—whether that be man or machine. Today, we might all feel powerless in the face of

collapsing economic markets, war and natural disaster. Tomorrow, we may be even less able to steer our destiny as machines and computers grow ever closer to our hearts and brains. Whether this plays out in reality or not, Tadashi Moriyama prepares us for it, and his wonderfully excessive and dense futurescapes allow us to prepare for the inevitable in a most thought-provoking and aesthetically delightful way.

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