

Introduction

Fire/Fire calls out like a warning, but perhaps too late. The title is derived from the Great Fire of Meireki, which destroyed more than half of the Japanese capital city of Edo, leading to a redistribution of political power and the establishment of the Edo period. Coinciding with the rebuilding of the city of Edo after the Great Fire, the ukiyo-e woodblock print emerged in the mid-seventeenth century. The subsequent institution of Tokugawa rule and the fruition of the Edo period prompted a reorganization of class structure in urban Japanese society. This was also the period in which Japan ceased trade with Western nations as a means of avoiding colonization. The seclusion of the nation brought increased urbanization and mercantile activity linking production in rural areas with the city's growing population. With the heightened financial power of the merchant and artisan classes came a rise in the demand for art and entertainment. Ukiyo-e prints depicted scenes of life in the so-called Floating World of Edo—a pleasure district of the city designed to entertain and subsequently moderate the growing power of the merchant and artisan classes. The prints were developed as a form of image made available through mass-production to a growing metropolitan society. Reflecting both changes in social structures and technical advancements in production, the complex history of the ukiyo-e print was transformed throughout the Edo and Meiji periods. Increasing contact with the West and mounting trepidation over the effects of industrialization were characteristic of the latter period. This wariness shifted the focus of the ukiyo-e print away from depictions of pleasure and contemporary life toward representations of the natural world and traditional folklore.

To accompany contemporary works produced by Marina Roy and Abbas Akhavan in *Fire/Fire*, four ukiyo-e and a book of prints were chosen from the collections of John O'Brian and Paul de Guzman. The prints selected are from the Meiji period and were created by Tsukioka Yoshitoshi (1839–1892) and Kawanabe Kyōsai (1831–1889). Yoshitoshi's *Moon Seen Through Fire*, from the series *100 Phases of the Moon* (1886), speaks to the exhibition's title. *Moon of Kintoki Mountain*, from the same series and *Oniwaka Observing the Great Carp* (1890) from *Thirty-Six Ghosts*, both depict the mythic 'golden boy' who grew up in the wilderness developing superhuman strength to later become a famous



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warrior. *Fox-woman Leaving Her Child*, also from *Thirty-Six Ghosts*, depicts the story of a fox that became a woman to live with a nobleman who rescued her from hunters; she later had to leave the nobleman and the child she bore after they discovered her true identity. In another room, Kyōsai's folded book, *Album of 100 Ghosts, Vol. 1* (1881) contains his unique depictions of the fantastic ghosts and spirits that inhabited Japanese folklore.

One Hundred Years Later, the title of Roy's video animation and installation, evokes the strange power of the number 100. Perhaps due to its fullness, perhaps due to the fact that so few humans see as many years, the concept of one hundred is perhaps more manageable—yet still monumental—to the human mind when compared with the thousands of years witnessed by the earth. According to Japanese folklore, after one hundred years household objects and animals are said to become *yokai* (living, self-aware objects). The prints included in *Fire/Fire* depict some of these spirit animals, ghosts, and folk representations of the relationship between humans and the environment. The stories Yoshitoshi and Kyōsai illustrate attest to living in pre-industrialized times in a land inhabited by animated spirits. Both artists sought to preserve their culture through the practice of ukiyo-e and their prints conjure the unease felt by many as industrialization and Westernization threatened their connection with the natural world.

Scarcely more than one hundred years since Yoshitoshi and Kyōsai made their prints, the proliferation of industrialization and Western ideology has taken its toll on the natural world. Contamination of the ocean threatens life on the planet as a whole and human-made catastrophes contribute ever-increasing levels of toxicity. Roy's animation and installation performs the process of becoming *yokai*; here within this increasingly abject space landscapes come alive with spirits, speaking to the drastic transformation of the relation between humans and nature in the space of one hundred years. Roy's creatures and spirits enact troubling scenarios—un-guarded *namazu* (catfish) generate earthquakes, phallus-headed humans cause oil spills, while others engage in elaborate displays of farting wars. Removed from their habitat and contained within aquariums, live catfish and salmon inhabit the space of the gallery, exemplifying the vulnerability of the ocean and all of the life in it.

The vulnerability of spaces and the concept of one hundred years are also intrinsic to Akhavan's installation for *Fire/Fire*, which coincided with the building housing Centre A reaching its centennial year of existence. Thus the process of awakening the spirits of aged objects is echoed in Akhavan's intervention on the floor of the gallery, entitled *Claim*. Dis-orienting the gallery

convention of lateral viewing, cracks in the concrete floor are lined with gold. Like seismic ruptures they remind us that, despite our constructions, the ground is always in motion. While exposing weaknesses in the building's structure, his gesture simultaneously adds value through the application of the precious metal referencing questions of land ownership and the mining industry through the title of the work. It harkens back to the building's past role as a bank and, as the building was for sale at the time of the exhibition, intuits its future contribution to the ongoing gentrification of Vancouver's downtown eastside and skyrocketing real estate prices.

Created from wood, like the matrix of the ukiyo-e print, Akhavan's *Study for a Landscape* is a further foreboding of the building's destiny. Blocking the view into the gallery, plywood boarding suggests an abandoned space from the outside, perhaps in the aftermath of a natural disaster like a hurricane or the destruction caused by humans rioting. The piece brings attention to the dichotomies of interior and exterior spaces and how these both define and limit perceptions of the environment and our place in it. Its companion piece, *Bird for a Landscape*, emits the songs of bird species native to the lower mainland, audible only when viewers move away from the area near the speaker—the sounds ungraspable, deterritorialized by the city itself.

Maxina Roy *The Legend of Saint Julian* (2012)

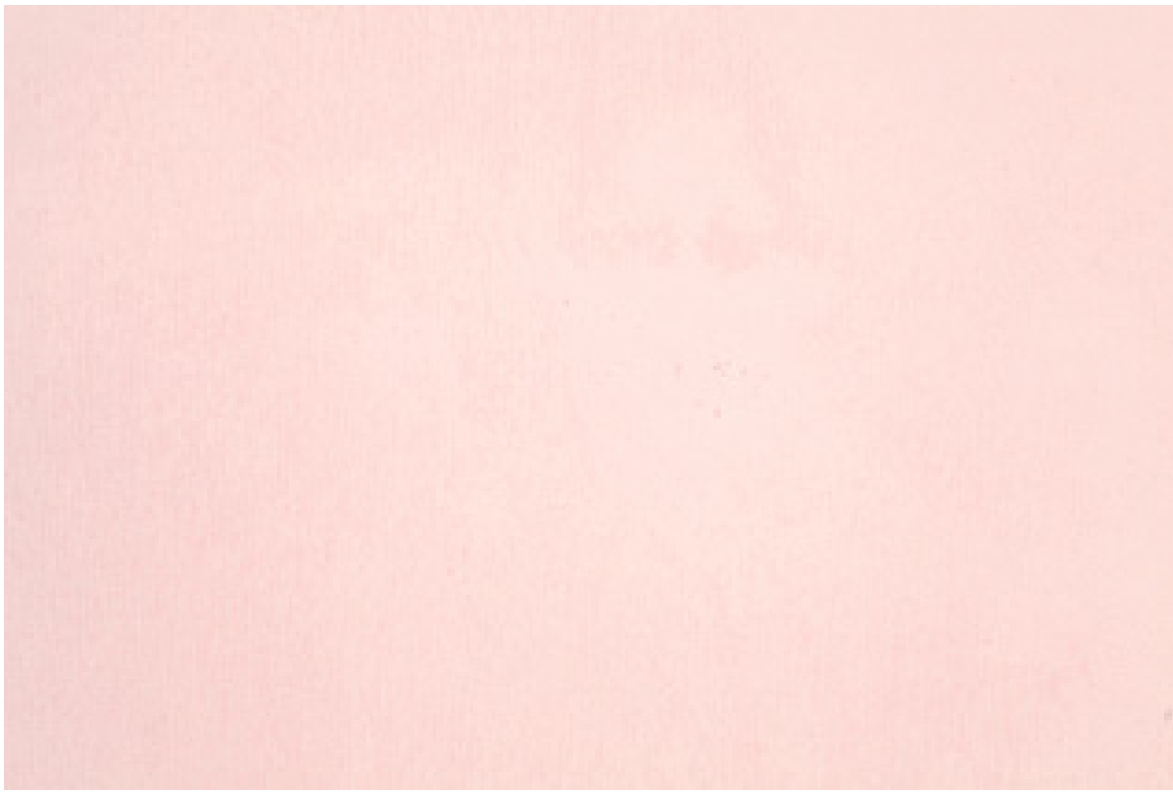


that piques each with the presence of power and of consent in the other party... I am equally balked by antagonism and by compliance... Better be a nettle in the side of your friend than his echo... Let there be an alliance of two large, formidable natures, mutually beheld, mutually feared, before yet they recognize the deep identity, which beneath these disparities unites them.¹⁴

Creative friendships are an alchemical interaction that produces something singularly unimaginable with the incorporation of two mutually variegated yet simultaneously imbricated dispositions. A strong will coupled with a commitment to maintain a friendship are necessary when rivalry and self-interest mingle with admiration and wonder. As Emerson noted: "I do not wish to treat friendships daintily, but with roughest courage."¹⁵ Artistic friendships are often informed by differences that generate productive critique which in turn lead to closeness, trust, and the deepening of a mutual bond.

In fact philosopher Avital Ronell in her discussion of Friedrich Nietzsche describes this relation of antagonism as an energized separateness that calls for relentless distance. Accordingly, a good friendship requires a degree of disidentification in that the very attractiveness of the friend is found in her distinctness.¹⁶ This disidentification enables us to see our friend as a worthy adversary, sharing both thought and argument. In *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche suggests that there may be duration to friendship—friendships begin and end all the time—which changes character. I offer the extended quote here as an anchor for this trajectory of thought:

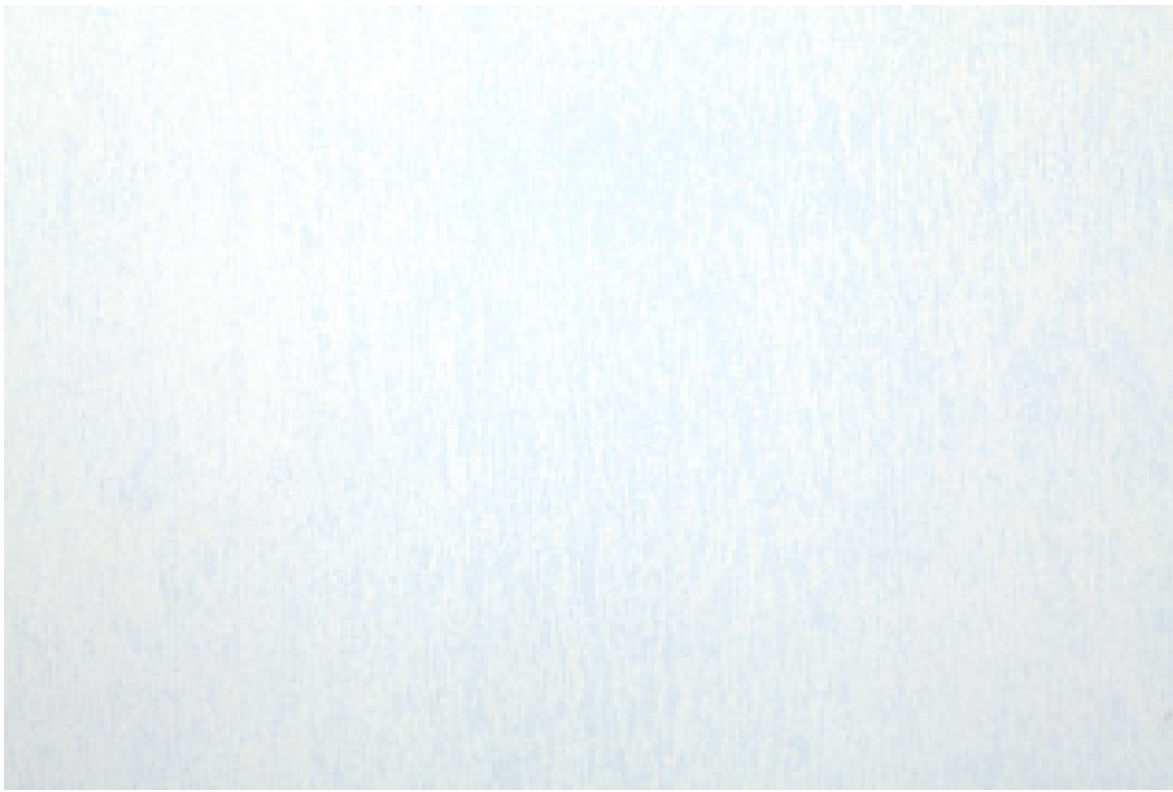
We were friends and have become estranged. But this was right, and we do not want to conceal and obscure it from ourselves as if we had reason to feel ashamed. We are two ships each of which has its goal and course; our paths may cross and we may celebrate a feast together, as we did—and then the good ships rested so quietly in one harbor and one sunshine that it may have looked as if they had reached their goal and as if they had one goal. But then the almighty force of our tasks drove us apart again into different seas and sunny zones, and perhaps we shall never see one another again,—perhaps we shall meet again but fail to recognize each other: our exposure to different seas and suns has changed us! That we have to become estranged is the law above us: by the same token we should also become more venerable for each other! And thus the memory of our former friendship should become more sacred! There is probably a



Abbas Akhavan XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX (2012)



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The unattainable voices of the birds in *Bird for a Landscape*, absent as one leaves Centre A, are recalled when viewing the companion exhibition installed at Malaspina Printmakers. The works exhibited there continue the examination of human-animal relationships, while condensing the focus of the pieces on how language informs and perhaps strains these relations. It is often said that language is the gulf that separates humans from animals, yet this distinction is by no means conclusive. According to John Berger:

What distinguished man from animals was the human capacity for symbolic thought, the capacity which was inseparable from the development of language in which words were not mere signals, but signifiers of something other than themselves. Yet the first symbols were animals. What distinguished men from animals was born of their relationship with them.

Considered together, the works created by Akhavan and Roy examine language with respect to the human-animal relationship, exhibited as they are alongside ukiyo-e depicting human-animal interactions. Prior to the Westernization and industrialization of Japan, the nation's folklore and legends told of beings that shifted between human, animal, and ghostly form. Many of these stories were rooted in the animism—the belief that the underlying spirit of the universe resided in animals, humans, and natural forms—that pervaded the indigenous Shinto belief system. Yoshitoshi's *Moon of Kintoko Mountain* depicts the story of Oniwaka. In this print he is seen observing a monkey and a hare fighting; while they wrestle Oniwaka appears at peace, immersed in watching. The print represents peaceful cohabitation and creates an unsettling contrast with the visions of violence evoked in the pieces shown by Akhavan and Roy at Malaspina Printmakers.

Akhavan's woodblock prints are a distillation of the material essence of the ukiyo-e. The prints, uncut and monochrome, move toward contemporary forms of minimalist art. However, through their titling they are activated and transformed, contaminating the presumptions of *purity* that so often accompany minimalist discourse. The titles, such as *Bucking Bronco* and *Donkey Punch*, are drawn from slang terms for sex acts, most of them brutally rough or derogatory to one of the partners. The pieces seem to question simultaneously the strange play of language, and how we might regard the animal references to describe human cruelty or intimacy in considering these acts. However, without knowledge of the titles' hidden meanings the works also maintain a double life as elegant pastel prints with playfully incongruous animal-based titles. Meanwhile the process of printing itself lends a sense



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