Koplos, Janet. “Shadows and Symbols.” *Art in America* (April 2003): 75-77.

REPORT FROM JAPAN

Shadows and Symbols

In the Tokyo region, midcareer retrospectives of Ryoji Ikeda, a printmaker, and Kazumi Nakamura, a painter, presented opposites and parallels.

BY JANET KOPLOS

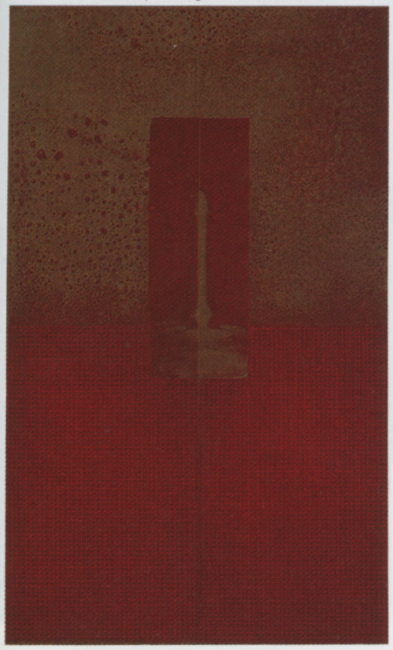
Ryoji Ikeda is a printmaker whose mostly earth-toned photo-based etchings have ranged from topical imagery, including figures, to forlorn and empty interiors. Kazumi Nakamura is a painter whose large-scale and high-color works focus on rectilinear patterns or gestural sweeps. On the surface, the two men might seem to have nothing in common.

But aside from being midcareer artists recently given retrospective exhibitions at museums in the far reaches of the Tokyo metropolitan region, they share a coincidental feature and a more significant one. Both, as it happens, are represented by Tokyo's Nantenshi Gallery, a player on the contemporary-art scene since 1960. Both also have worked out distinctive responses to tradition—which is not much of an issue in America but is a major dilemma in countries such as Japan, which have thousands of years of memorable art behind them.

Ryoji Ikeda: **Nobody Knows My Mind,** *1981, photo etching, etching, aquatint, drypoint and mezzotint, 23¼ by 35½ inches. All photos courtesy Nantenshi Gallery, Tokyo.*

Ikeda's graphic works are different in technique, subject and color from Japan's celebrated ukiyo-e prints. But they share with the earlier genre reproducibility and a relation to the real world—in this case, through the black-and-white photographs on which Ikeda bases his works. At the Museum of Modern Art, Kamakura (an hour south of Tokyo), he showed prints from 1977 to 2002, beginning with a series dedicated to Antoni Tàpies. Ikeda's earlier pieces repeatedly include obscured texts, horizontal divisions featuring a darker bottom section, and evocative, poetic titles such as *Drifting Ashore on Light*. He studied in London and has taught in Canada, and the texts are usually in English, but they are not meant to be read. They seem to float on the paper surface like embodiments of memory. His use of mirror images, in *Reborn Door* (1988) and *An Inside Frontier* (1990), for example, also suggests a compulsive mulling and reconsideration of places or events. But the emphasis on intangible thought is countered by Ikeda's superbly tender working of the surface, especially as expressed in his palpable blacks and the skinlike qualities he sometimes achieves with *chine collé*.

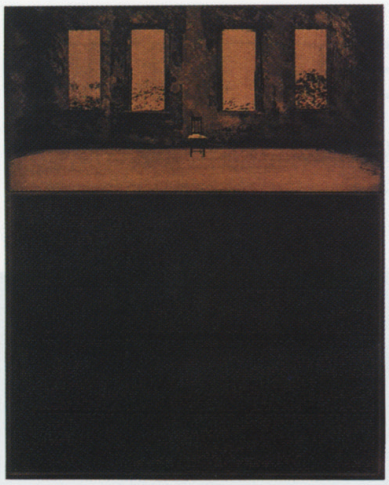
Ikeda: **Drifting Ashore on Light,** *1995, photo etching, etching, aquatint, drypoint and mezzotint, 22½ by 13½ inches.*



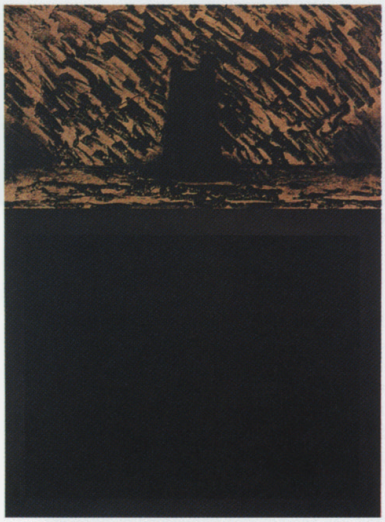
His “Atmosphere of Absence” series (1996) focuses on aged, decrepit interiors of uncertain purpose in which boards or cans are lined up before a wall. They might be facing a firing squad. Among his recent series included in the Kamakura show and presented concurrently at Nantenshi, many works incorporate loose hatching across the top that creates a fluttering sense of passage, upon which appear simple but abstracted and unidentifiable shapes.

Ikeda was born on the northern Japanese island of Hokkaido, on its northwest coast, facing Siberia. The climatic extremes and loneliness of that outpost, where he still maintains a summer studio, surely influence the empty expanses of many of his landscape fragments. But even more haunting are the somber depictions of unoccupied interiors for which he is best known. Their melancholy tone evokes abandoned industrial sites, wartime devastation and, perhaps, the current hard-to-avoid sense of bleakness after a decade of economic gloom. But the sepia tonalities also imply a gentler nostalgia for an architecture of materials softer than concrete and glass, and for an environment so low-lit that it influenced the national esthetic, as Junichiro Tanizaki famously noted in his 1933 book-length essay, *In Praise of Shadows*. Ikeda's works are rife with the shadows of structures and emotions.

At the Iwaki City Art Museum (two hours north of Tokyo Station by express train), Nakamura offered exceptional bookends to his exhibition of large paintings and small drawings: two sculptures that carried the earliest and latest



Ikeda: **Stratum of Locus,** ***2002,***
photo etching, etching, aquatint and drypoint, 27⅞ by 21⅞ inches.



Ikeda: **Wings of Time,** ***2002,***
photo etching, etching, aquatint and drypoint, 39¾ by 29 inches.

dates in the show. The first, *Kaikoma I* (1979), is like a very wide board that's been sliced into segments which fold or have been cut out and attached elsewhere. The bottom half of the piece is raw wood. The top is stained purplish and brown. The latest work, *Broken Hermitage (Iwaki Broken Hermitage)*, 2002, suggests a collapsible or collapsing accordion-fold architectural structure. The wood is raw and fresh. The entire configuration, which rises to more than 10 feet, is shifted off plumb by its composition and also by a single, irregular stone inserted under one corner of the sculpture.

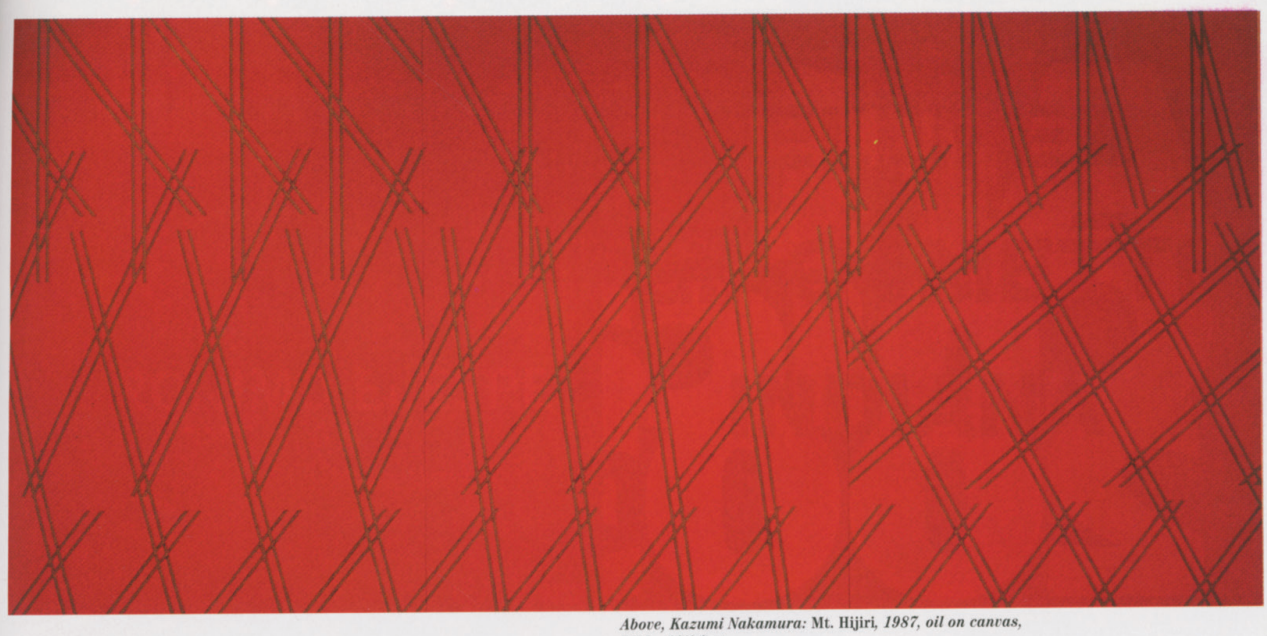
The elements being splayed, almost like an open hand of cards, echo one of the themes that recur in Nakamura's paintings: straight lines making grids or parallel diagonals. These suggest the patterns of roof tiles, lattices and other features of Japan's modular traditional architecture. The densest painted grid is *Hermitage I* (1986), in which black verticals of acrylic are seemingly interwoven with slightly narrower diagonals that rise to the right. The most spectacular of these pattern pieces is *Mt. Hijiri* (1987), a huge canvas more than 16 feet wide consisting of pairs of gold lines that make grids or Xs on a deep but brilliant orange (not far from Shinto vermilion). Despite the almost environmental scale, the patterns seem truncated, suggesting that the world this painting describes extends beyond the bounds of the viewer's vision.

Nakamura's other type of painting, in its motion and scale, will certainly remind Western viewers of Abstract Expressionism. However, he has named many such works after geographical features, especially mountains and pine forests, and a few of his early studies for these works included in the show made that source more apparent. The exhibition's curator, Akihiko Hirano, notes that meanings are more specific to Nakamura. His “Y form” paintings, such as *Mt. Kitaokusenjō* (1985), relate to the mulberry trees whose leaves fed the silkworms raised by his grandfather, and also recall grapevines and their supports from the same remembered place. This 13-foot-tall painting loomed over the high-ceilinged gallery, yet its narrow verticality—it is just 54 inches wide—recalled delicate hanging scrolls.

Four works in the “Saisourou” series (the title means both an aged person picking mulberries and an ancient form of court music) are more monumental in dimensions and gesture. *Saisourou 101* (2000) includes paint that piles up to a depth of nearly an inch (Hirano notes in his essay that the paintings “convey the overwhelming sense of existence of a tree via the application of many layers of paint” and “can be associated with the vigorous spirits possessed by trees”), and its sweeps are ferocious, phantasmagoric, cosmic; *102* is so event-filled that it almost looks like a slow-motion explosion. *Saisourou 104* (2000-01) is a turquoise and blue nebula through which comets sizzle, but it also includes bits of the double-line zigzag seen in the architectural paintings. The Japanese precedents for Nakamura's AbEx scale are the ancient court and temple screens and sliding-door paintings. His rushing brush and dancing spatters often speak of nothing so much as calligraphy, brought to contemporary painting's scale and color. □

“Ikeda Ryoji: Reveries of Time and Space” was presented at the Museum of Modern Art, Kamakura [July 20-Sept. 8, 2002]. It was accompanied by an 88-page catalogue in Japanese and English, with a foreword by Tadayasu Sakai and an essay by Hidebumi Hashi. “Ryoji Ikeda: Surface” was on view at Nantenshi Gallery, Tokyo [Aug. 26-Sept. 14, 2002] and was accompanied by a catalogue illustrating 15 prints. “Kazumi Nakamura” was shown at the Iwaki City Art Museum [Sept. 8-Oct. 27, 2002]. The 106-page catalogue in Japanese and English includes essays by Shinya Koizumi and Akihiko Hirano.

Both artists have worked out distinctive responses to tradition. That's not an issue in America but is a major dilemma in a place like Japan, which has thousands of years of memorable art behind it.



Above, Kazumi Nakamura: Mt. Hijiri, *1987, oil on canvas, 8½ by 17¾ feet.*

Above, Nakamura: Saisourou 104, *2000-01, acrylic on cotton, 11 by 9¾ feet.*

Left, Nakamura: Mt. Kitaokusenjō, *1985, oil on canvas, 13 by 4½ feet.*

Below, Nakamura: Broken Hermitage (Iwaki Broken Hermitage), *2002, wood, bolts, stone, 10¾ by 8½ by 13¾ feet. Photo Yoshitaka Uchida.*