



Floating Worlds

PROFILE With roots in traditional Japanese printmaking, the collaged prints of **Takuji Hamanaka** reveal shimmering interior states. April Vollmer writes from New York

Takuji Hamanaka is a profoundly original artist-printmaker who trained in traditional Japanese woodblock printing (*mokuhanga*) at the Adachi Institute of Woodcut Prints in Tokyo from 1986 to 1989 and then worked as a freelance master printer. Planning a short trip to New York in 1991, he brought along his portfolio and looked for a job where his skill might be useful. His travel plans changed when he met Jo Watanabe, one of the few print publishers in New York who understood the possibilities of mokuhanga. Jo hired Takuji to print for such artists as Sol Lewitt and they worked together for several years. Takuji eventually established his own studio in Brooklyn to focus on his own creative work. His work was recognized with a New York Foundation for the Arts grant for printmaking in 2011 and a residency at the MacDowell Colony in 2013. In addition to exhibiting he teaches mokuhanga at the Manhattan Graphics Center, the Center for Book Arts and other locations, as well as privately in his studio.

Takuji has developed his own personal method of making prints far removed from the classical technique he learned in Japan for reproducing ukiyo-e prints. The Adachi studio is well known for its masterful reproductive printmaking, creating accurate copies of Edo period prints by such masters as Hiroshige, Hokusai and Utamaro, employing the same techniques and materials that were used over a hundred years ago. Craftsmen who work in the old-style collaborative *hanmoto* shops often spend 30 or 40 years doing the same carving and printing tasks and achieve an extraordinary level of skill. Takuji spent ‘only’ three years training with Adachi before deciding

he wanted more flexibility to pursue his own work. He has retained the precision and sensitivity to materials of traditional Japanese printing, but he no longer produces editions of his own prints. Instead, he has developed a collage system, cutting and pasting layers of printed paper in abstract patterns that suggest fluctuating interior states.

Ukiyo-e translates as ‘images of the floating world,’ and is a style of the Japanese Edo period (1603–1867) rather than a technique. The name refers to Buddhist ideas about the ephemeral character of everyday life in contrast to the world of religious transcendence. *Mokuhanga*, meaning simply ‘woodcut prints’ is the Japanese term that encompasses the tradition of ukiyo-e prints as well as contemporary woodcut prints. It can mean oil-based or water-based woodcut, but the default technique in Japan before the adoption of Western printmaking methods was water-based and printed with a hand-held baren.

Takuji relies on the inherent character of various types of *washi*, Japanese paper, to create variable, drifting collage patterns. An understanding of washi is helpful in appreciating his refined use of materials. Washi is made from the inner bark of trees: the three primary fibres are *kozo*, *mitsumata* and *gampi*. Each fibre can be used to make a diversity of papers. Gampi fibre is short and lustrous, with a glossy sheen; it makes paper that is thin but strong. Kozo from paper mulberry has a long, strong fibre that is most appropriate for woodcut because it is absorbent and dimensionally stable when damp. Printing mokuhanga on kozo washi is particularly satisfying because the colour penetrates the paper, leaving the fine surface clearly visible, lending the finished prints a tactile presence.

In a series of work made with thin, translucent gampi paper Takuji uses quadrangles of thin, natural gampi like mosaic tesserae, pasting them down in layers on a dark background of heavy kozo paper. In the undulating surface of *Northern Wall*, geometric cut paper shapes delineate impossible orthogonals that make space stretch and recede. In *Let Down* the gampi grid appears woven, suggesting basket weave or fabric seen through a distorted lens; the feeling of dizzying space is visceral. The gampi paper has no colour, but the underlying printed

colour glows through the multiple layers of pasted paper. The more densely layered areas become increasingly opaque and silvery against the dark background and the immateriality of the thin paper gives the work a sense of mystery.

In other gampi collages Takuji carefully cuts grids and allows the geometry of the originally flat sheet to twist slightly as he pastes it down, creating an illusion of warped three-dimensional space. He takes this to extremes in *Distorted Web*, where his meticulously cut gampi lattice is laid down on a bright blue background, suggesting a strange map projection of a melting globe. Shifting and spiralling, these collage works play with a grid that is based in New York minimalism of the 1970s and 80s, but suggests an indeterminate space that is more organic. Controlled and compressed, with a slightly obsessive undertone, this work is far from the crazy installations of Yayoi Kusama, yet it shares an insistence on the creation of a distinctively personal and enigmatic space.

In another series of works, Takuji collages pieces of kozo printed with gradated colour to construct grid patterns of glowing colour areas. *Bokashi* is the Japanese word meaning gradation printing and is one of the techniques used effectively in ukiyo-e prints to create a feeling of depth, for example in the skies of landscape prints. In the fall of 2016 Takuji was awarded a six-week residency at the Kala Art Institute in Berkeley, California, where he printed an enormous number of small bokashi prints with flawless gradation on high-quality kozo paper. He cut these prints into small triangles to glue to a backing sheet, creating fields of radiating spots. *Lights from Yesteryear* is a more subtle colour version of *Five Years*, both prints adhere to a layout system that is just outside easy comprehension. The titles are a clue to Takuji’s underlying ambition to distort time as well as space, making transcendent work that challenges our assumptions about where and who we are. He reverses the colour brightness in *Water Flowers*, where the ‘flowers’ on his uneven grid glow with dark centres from a light background. Like the gampi collages, these prints evoke an ambiguous space that is seductive but uneasy, with

radiating areas of colour that move forward and back. These prints bring together Takuji’s trained sensitivity to materials, his understanding of contemporary art, and his commitment to developing a personal idiom. He proceeds with absolute assurance, and seems to lose himself in the shallow space he has created, working endless hours to make work that illuminates an ever-changing interior space with astonishing clarity.

Takuji is an important figure in the reevaluation of mokuhanga as an adaptable medium for contemporary expression. He is one of the few teachers in the United States who studied at a traditional Japanese studio. His colleague, Yasu Shibata, also trained in Japan and living in New York, is a master printer at Pace Editions. Both artists participated in the 2015 exhibition *New York Mokuhanga* at Kentler International Drawing Space, Brooklyn, an exhibition that brought attention to the possibilities of mokuhanga in contemporary art.

After many years of persistent work, Takuji Hamanaka is gaining recognition for his distinctive, precise hand-crafted collages, which are contemporary in feeling but nevertheless rooted in traditional mokuhanga practice. Using the tools and materials of Japan he creates printmaker’s collages that bridge New York and Tokyo, conceptual art and ukiyo-e, demonstrating the relevance of careful craftsmanship in the contemporary art world.

Further information
www.takujihamanaka.com

Takuji Hamanaka’s work can be seen at Owen James Gallery in Greenpoint, Brooklyn.
www.owenjames.com

April Vollmer is the author of *Japanese Woodblock Print Workshop*, released by Watson-Guptill in August 2015, and reviewed in *Printmaking Today*, summer 2016. See: www.aprilvollmer.com

Images

All images courtesy of Takuji Hamanaka
Northern Wall (2009) Woodblock print, collage with gampi paper; 711 x 558 mm
Distorted Web (2015) Woodblock print, collage with gampi paper; 812 x 635 mm
Whirlwind (2015) Woodblock print, collage with gampi paper; 812 x 635 mm
Five Years (2016) Woodblock print, collage with bokashi on kozo paper; 812 x 635 mm