

Art in America



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JIRO TAKAMATSU

Fergus McCaffrey

Jiro Takamatsu (1936-1998) was about as seminal as seminal gets in postwar Japanese art. He was one-third of the Tokyo-based Happenings group Hi Red Center, a progenitor of Japanese conceptual art, and a significant influence on Mono-ha artists. As a maker of paintings, sculptures, experimental writing and xerographic pieces, and conceptual photographs, Takamatsu embodied the catholic cross-mediality of the 1960s and '70s like few others. And as his mini-retrospective at Fergus McCaffrey suggested, he was also something of a prop and set designer for intellectualized play and theatricality in the white cube.

There were four vertical wood sculptures (all titled *The Pole of Wave* and dated 1969) that undulate when viewed from one angle and appear straight from another. There was a small blue cube with red perspective lines painted on it that give the odd impression that the cube is simultaneously opaque and transparent (*Cube 6 + 3*, 1968). There were two hanging grids of rope that sag in their lower registers due to subtle increases in the rope segments (*Slack of Net*, 1968-69, and *Slack of Net*, 1972). There were a concrete slab, a block of wood, a block of black granite, and red bricks whose tops had been chiseled out and refilled with the broken pieces, raising questions concerning wholeness and fragmentation (*Oneness of Concrete*, *Oneness of Wood*, and so on, all 1971). If a children's science museum were to hold an estate sale to divest itself of old exhibits, it might look a little like the McCaffrey installation.

Takamatsu's most iconic works are his shadow paintings. While he made full-scale murals within the series, the largest work at McCaffrey was the 7-by-9 1/2-foot *Shadow (Double Shadow of a Baby)*, 1969/1997, which portrays, in gray paint on a white ground, two intersecting silhouettes of a baby that suggest shadows cast by different light sources. More effective, for seeming less like the product of studio staging than like glimpses of everyday scenes, were the small shadow relief paintings, constructed out of white-painted wood panels with pieces of lumber attached to them into which metal hooks are inserted, the works simulating sections of residential walls with moldings. "Cast" onto the surfaces are the painted shadows of the hooks and the moldings, as well as those of absent objects that are implied to be hanging on the hooks: keys, hairbrush, clothes hanger.

What's strange about these reliefs is that you don't really feel anything to be missing. Thanks to the dissimulating power of indexical (or pseudo-indexical) signs, the absent objects seem palpable as invisible presences. Such ghosts speak to the limits of seeing Takamatsu's work as a challenge to "the prevailing orthodoxy of paintings purged of representation and sculptures that emphasized truth to materials and the anti-illusional," as the McCaffrey gallery statement claims, exaggerating the importance of the Greenberg-style formalism and Minimalist literalism in Japan. Takamatsu's optical illusions sometimes fail to transcend the



Jiro Takamatsu
Shadow of a Hanger,
1971, oil on wood,
25 3/4 by 21 1/2 inches;
At Fergus McCaffrey

academicism for which Op art has been criticized. Yet when his meta-visual experiments engage regions of the mind deeper than those assigned to visual processing, they open portals to realms of memory and fantasy refreshingly wider than those typically assigned to '60s art.

Takamatsu's shadow paintings, for example, could be related productively to playwright Terayama Shuji's sentimental, fun-house shadow films of the '70s. Meanwhile, his "Photograph of Photograph" series (1972-73) has a Tarkovsky-ian quality. For these black-and-white images, Takamatsu photographed photographs at such angles that the original image are obscured by glare and warping. The eight examples at McCaffrey show personal snapshots (a ski scene, a family portrait) photographed on various, often domestic-seeming surfaces and objects (tables, a balcony). Clearly these works extend Takamatsu's interest in (as critic Junzo Ishiko put it) "seeing the act of seeing" and suggest that images can never be separated from their material matrix. But the soft lighting, the private atmosphere, and the gentle simmer that cuts across all of them (one is even half-immersed in a developing tub) remind me of the many framed pictures, submerged mementos, and passages of water shown in Tarkovsky's films. Likewise, Takamatsu's images soak up and project back to us our own personal memories, as if we were in orbit around Solaris.

- Ryan Holmberg