

GAGOSIAN HYPERALLERGIC

Life-and-Death Paintings, From a Career Cut Short

“I’m strongly drawn to saintly artists. I mean people who believe that each brushstroke will save the world or will represent the suffering of humanity in the face of a sheep.”

Edward M. Gómez



Tetsuya Ishida, “Kiro” (“Return Journey,” 2003), acrylic and oil on canvas, 17.9 x 15 inches (private collection; photo: Michael Tropea Photography; courtesy of Wrightwood 659)

“Nostalgia isn’t what it used to be,” the French movie actress Simone Signoret quipped in the title of her 1975 memoir.

Apparently, nor is that wrenching old bugaboo of so much 20th-century art and literature: soul-crushing alienation. But it is still going strong.

In the early 21st-century digital age, its sources now include the terror of online bullying and identity theft, the nullification of truth by cynical politicians, unfathomable sexual abuse by religious leaders, endless war-making for profit, continuous economic uncertainty, and the ever-quickenening destruction of the planet, which undeniably threatens life itself.

With wifi-connected appliances linked into the so-called internet of things, forget about Big Brother — the washing machine and the water heater are eavesdropping on a homeowner’s every word. What is there about life today that doesn’t provoke a little existential angst?



Tetsuya Ishida, "Sōsaku" ("Search," 2001), acrylic on canvas, 44.1 x 63.8 inches (collection of The Dai-ichi Life Insurance Company Limited; photo: Michael Tropea Photography; courtesy of Wrightwood 659)

The artist Tetsuya Ishida (1973-2005) seemed to have instinctively understood the reverberating forces underlying such profound spiritual malaise. In his strange, unforgettable pictures, Ishida, who died in his early 30s after having enjoyed — if that is the right word — a professional career that lasted only about 10 years, explored the theme of contemporary alienation in Japanese society, combining a trenchant critique of what he observed with a masterful painting technique.

Now on view at Wrightwood 659, a new venue focusing on architecture and socially engaged art that opened in a residential neighborhood of Chicago last year, the exhibition *Tetsuya Ishida: Self-Portrait of Other* offers a broad, deep introduction to a body of work that is one of the most original to have emerged anywhere during the later decades of postmodernism. Organized by Manuel Borja-Villel and Teresa Velázquez, respectively the director and the head of exhibitions at the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía in Madrid, where it was first seen earlier this year, this survey of Ishida's art is one of the most engrossing presentations of contemporary painting to have been shown in the United States in many years.

"There's no creating anything original anymore," Ishida once told his close friend, the filmmaker Isamu Hirabayashi, who was a fellow student at Musashino Art University in Tokyo in the 1990s. Apparently, Ishida felt fatigued by the too-easy postmodernist appropriationist gestures and style-quoting pastiches he saw over and over again in the art of his time.

Nor was he fond of the creations of such international Japanese superstars as Takashi Murakami, which he dismissed as "all just a marketing ploy," or the older Yayoi Kusama, about whom he remarked, "That stuff about some psychological disability behind her offbeat behavior; it's all just an act." (Hirabayashi quotes his late friend in a reminiscence published in the exhibition's catalogue.)

In retrospect, such comments might have sounded churlish if they had been provoked by envy or insecurity. On the strength of the evidence of Ishida's talent and artistic intellect, however, he was in a secure position from which to have criticized what he did not like or, on the other hand, to have embraced, to his friend's bemusement, the colorful, charming pictures of the painter-illustrator Rokurō Taniuchi (1955-1981), who was known for his covers for Japanese culture magazines.



Tetsuya Ishida, "*Nenryō Hokyū no yō-na Shokuji*" ("Refuel Meal," 1996), acrylic on board, 57.3 x 81.1 inches (Shizuoka Prefectural Museum of Art; photo: Michael Tropea Photography; courtesy of Wrightwood 659)

Ishida also admired the work of Vincent Van Gogh and, in his choice of books, he favored Dostoyevsky's *The Idiot* and the novels of such Japanese modernists as Kōbō Abe and Osamu Dazai, the latter of whom was known for his numerous suicide attempts (he finally did kill himself, in 1948) and his brutally candid tales of debauchery and renegade antics.

Few biographical details about Ishida have been published. He was born and brought up in a coastal town in Shizuoka Prefecture, in south-central Japan. His father was a politician, and his mother was a homemaker; they were not pleased with their son's decision to go to art school and declined to help him financially during his university years.

With his friend Hirabayashi, Ishida founded a company to produce art- and film-related projects, but with the economic downturn of the 1990s in the aftermath of the big bust that abruptly ended Japan's long-running, postwar boom, the young partners' enterprise became more of a conventional graphic-design studio, which Ishida eventually left in order to concentrate on his painting.

The collapse of Japan's "bubble economy," which was largely fueled by wildly speculative real-estate deals, led to a "lost decade" of stagnation and uncertainty. With it came "Where-did-we-go-wrong?" soul-searching throughout Japan, whose industries' legendary promise of lifetime employment faded; layoffs and bleak prospects for university graduates like Ishida prevailed.

In chilling paintings like "*Nenryō Hokyū no yō-na Shokuji*" ("Refuel Meal," 1996, acrylic on board), Ishida nailed the anonymity and anomie of the life of the typical Japanese sarariman (salaryman), or corporate office worker, whose mission in life is to meet sales quotas, pledge fidelity to his employer, and, if necessary, labor to the point of *karōshi* (death from overwork). Much of Japan's postwar "economic miracle" was delivered on the backs of such nameless organization men. Ishida's picture shows a row of men in suits seated at a lunch counter, where servers use gasoline-pump nozzles to inject food-fuel directly into their mouths.



Tetsuya Ishida, “Shūjin” (“Prisoner,” 1999), acrylic on board, 40.5 x 57.3 inches (private collection; photo: Michael Tropea Photography; courtesy of Wrightwood 659)

In “*Shūjin*” (“Prisoner,” 1999, acrylic on board), a young boy’s Brobdingnagian body fuses with an ordinary school building, its big head sticking out of one end of the structure to observe other children performing well-regimented calisthenics on the playground. Ishida certainly knew where the soul-crushing began in the society that had shaped him.

In a telephone interview, exhibition co-curator Teresa Velázquez noted, “Ishida’s work made a big impact when it was shown here in Spain. Given the economic forces people here have faced in recent years — the crisis of advanced capitalism — the audience here got his message: the sense of trauma that comes from living in a world whose forces we don’t comprehend and that we can’t control.”

Most of Ishida’s images feature anonymous Everyman figures whose faces, some observers have pointed out, resemble the artist’s own. Three of them eerily pop up from under the pavement at a crosswalk in “*Kōkyōbutsu*” (“Public Property,” 1999, acrylic on canvas), while in “*Kyūka-chū*” (“On Holiday,” 1999, acrylic on board), an infant pushes its own baby stroller, in which Daddy’s big lump of a head rides solo, like a soccer ball, its eyes gazing aimlessly into the distance. The message here, in case it isn’t obvious enough: the still-unformed, vulnerable child is the father of the angst-ridden man.

Ishida left some clues to the thoughts and feelings that informed his peculiar images. In a 1996 notebook entry, he wrote, “I’m strongly drawn to saintly artists. I mean people who believe that each brushstroke will save the world or will represent the suffering of humanity in the face of a sheep. They make me aware that I’m just a philistine.” He also became interested in outsider art, whose creators, he felt, embodied a kind of authenticity to which he could not measure up.



Tetsuya Ishida, "Kyūka-chū" ("On Holiday," 1999), acrylic on board, 18 x 21 inches (private collection; photo: Michael Tropea Photography; courtesy of Wrightwood 6)

Handsomely installed in Wrightwood 659's ample, unencumbered galleries — located in a former, red-brick apartment building from the late 1920s that was gut-renovated by the Japanese starchitect Tadao Andō — the 70 Ishida pictures on view represent about a third of the artist's total known production of paintings.

When I recently visited the exhibition, I watched as a middle-aged white woman turned to her younger female friend and remarked, "There is such despair in this work."

Despair — or unmistakable, unsettling truth? There is nothing polemical about Ishida's art. Its poetry is unhesitatingly candid, its emotion raw, like that of Osamu Dazai's prose. His images, in their oddness, exude the radical air that wafts through such iconic Japanese modernist works of the immediate postwar period as those of Tetsumi Kudō (mixed-media creations evoking wartime destruction in the nuclear age), On Kawara (whose "Bathroom" drawings (1953-54) featured peg-like, naked humans in disorienting, tiled rooms), and Shūsaku Arakawa (whose early sculptures featured corpse-like cement blobs placed in elegant, fabric-lined, coffin-like boxes).

Unlike some such works, though, Ishida's images never flirt with the grotesque; they have often been referred to as "surreal," but they could easily be described as a kind of bizarre, reportorial history painting, too, for they are certainly vivid documents of the spirit of their time.



Tetsuya Ishida, "Kōkyōbutsu" ("Public Property," 1999), acrylic on canvas, 17.9 x 20.9 inches (collection of SCAI The Bathhouse, Tokyo; photo: Michael Tropea Photography; courtesy of Wrightwood 659)

Ishida died in 2005 when he was struck by a passing train at a railroad crossing; some have said his death was a suicide. It cut short the evolution of some of the most distinctive recent art to have been created anywhere in the industrialized world.

Based on the writings he left behind, perhaps it comes as no surprise that Ishida appears to have been nothing if not keenly self-aware. In one of his notebooks from the mid-1990s, he wrote, "When I think about what to paint, I close my eyes and imagine myself from birth to death. But what then appears is human beings, the pain and anguish of society, its anxiety and loneliness, things that go far beyond me."