

Iri and Toshi Maruki

***Hiroshima Panel #2: Fire* (1950)**

Ink, water colour, chalk on paper. 1.8m×7.2m



"PIKA!" The blue-white light of the flash
the explosion--
the force--
the heat wave--
Never in heaven or on earth
had humankind experienced this.

In an instant all burst into flames
and the ruins were ablaze.
The dead silence of the vast desert
broken.

Some fell senseless under fallen debris,
others desperately digging out.
All consumed by the crimson.

Glass shards pierced bellies,
arms and legs were lost.
People fell and were taken by the fire.

"Hurry! Get out, quick!"
someone shouted.
"I can't!" came the mother's cry
from beneath the heavy beams.
"Then, the child!" the other shouted.
"You must escape yourself!
My child will be die with me.
She would only be lost on the streets."
Helping hands were pushed away.

And mother and child were devoured
by swift flames of vermillion.

Scope of Works

Places affected by war or Participants in 2D or 3D; non-European specified artists

Subject¹

Fire, tumultuous and charged, memorializes the fateful moments immediately following the explosion of the first atomic bomb above Hiroshima. Flames, crimson like blood, lick bodies crammed into the picture plane with no sign of possible escape.

After the atomic bomb that led to the deaths of over 100,000 people exploded in Hiroshima on August 6, 1945, artists Iri and Toshi Maruki entered the destroyed city - Iri just three days after the blast, Toshi following her husband shortly thereafter. The pair had travelled there from Tokyo to join friends and family and found themselves surrounded by burned buildings and charred bodies, breathing air that smelled like death, with flies and maggots the only thriving forms of life. For weeks they remained in the levelled city, tending to the injured and cremating the dead. Three years later, they began painting the trauma they had witnessed — an effort that stretched over 32 years and yielded 15 large, folding panels of hellish scenes known as the Hiroshima Panels, each accompanied by a short poem explaining the subject depicted.

The panels showed close up the horror of the effects on a civilian population. The panels helped people understand the tragedy of war and contributed to efforts to establish a more peaceful world order.

Form and Style

- Standing nearly six feet tall, each work consists of eight joined panels forming a seamless scene in the style of a **traditional byōbu screen** that stretches 23-and-a-

¹ This is all adapted from Claire Voon "The Historic Painted Panels That Exposed the Hell of Hiroshima" November 30, 2015 [<https://hyperallergic.com/255344/the-historic-painted-panels-that-exposed-the-hell-of-hiroshima/>]; Yukinori Okamura, "Three unique aspects of the Hiroshima Panels", presentation at Boston University and at Pioneer works, transcript on the Maruki Gallery for the Hiroshima Panels website [<http://www.aya.or.jp/~marukimsn/english/2015ustour.html>]

half feet. Laid out in this monumental format, tragedy literally unfolds before viewers; the horrific events and aftermath of Hiroshima - and Nagasaki - are unflinchingly exposed.

- The memorable red flames in the second panel, "Fire," are used in traditional Eastern paintings of hell. You can see these flames in museums in Japan on **painted hand-scrolls called Emaki-mono** such as The Hungry Ghosts Scroll in Kyoto Museum.

Materials and Techniques

The Marukis' collaborative approach to painting:

- **Iri Maruki** used brush and ink on paper, the traditional *sumi-e*, or black-and-white ink wash materials of Japanese art. He was also interested in Western Avant Garde art and surrealism. Iri created abstract paintings often depicting water and clouds. They were experimental, something no one had tried before in Japan.
- **Toshi Maruki**, had studied oil painting at a women's art school. She travelled alone through Micronesia, following in the footsteps of Gauguin. Toshi was a good observer, skilled at figure painting and western-style illustrations. She had a unique style of strong, free lines. Here she used ink and watercolours instead of oil paint. Her lines capture the confusion and shock of the victims. Some people say the bodies remind them of Michelangelo's paintings.
- All their skills and interests seemed to be the opposite:
 - Eastern versus Western art forms.
 - Avant Garde versus traditional.
 - Japanese ink painting versus oil painting.
 - Abstract landscape versus figure painting.
- They ended up painting on paper. The couple works directly on top of each sheet of paper as it lays on the ground.
- After Toshi outlined figures with ink and chalk, Iri would splash India ink over them to muddle them; they would then repeat the process of painting and concealing, making the realities of war emerge from the layers of darkness.
- Iri sometimes found Toshi's sharp lines too explicitly descriptive, so he poured ink over the figures. He wanted to soften the lines.
 - Iri once said, "Paintings do not always need to be drawn. There is nothing wrong with letting ink flow across them." The Japanese ink Iri used was very watery, so it spread far across the paper. He believed that the unpredictable, nature of this style was part of its artistic value.
 - Iri's use of ink turned the canvas black. At first, Toshi was upset by this. A curious thing happened. Japanese ink dries very quickly. When the ink dried, the people she had painted seemed to float to the surface. She was surprised and impressed.



Political Context

- Japan surrendered and was occupied. When the occupation began, reporting on the damage done by the bombs or images of the victims were forbidden. Such imagery was rarely seen in the years following the bombing due to US censorship, and the Marukis became concerned that people would never really understand what happened.
- The couple initially intended to paint just one work, but when *hibakusha*² saw the completed painting and shared their personal experiences with the artists, the two resolved to create more, realizing that for many Japanese, the image was the first they had seen of the bombings.
- For their first 10 or so works, the Marukis focused on the desperation and anguish from the Japanese perspective but later, in a significant shift of perspective, showed their compatriots as aggressors, too, towards Koreans and American POWs.
- "The panels were always meant to be shown globally," Pioneer Works curator David Howe told Hyperallergic. "This was important to the Marukis because they considered the panels to have resonance beyond a specifically Japanese context, and they wanted them - particularly in later examples - to offer a multidimensional view of the catastrophes.
- In a world still not free of nuclear arms, the Hiroshima Panels remind of the risks that were once realized and the horrific consequences. Seventy years have gone by since the atomic bombs fell, but the Marukis' message is not yet just part of the past.

Art can show the truth.

It is a tool that can help us develop our imaginations.

It is a seed that can grow into a new world view.

The seed may be small, but it can be the beginning of everything.

² Hibakusha (被爆者) is the Japanese word for the surviving victims of the 1945 atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The word literally translates as "explosion-affected people" and is used to refer to people who were exposed to radiation from the bombings.