

COLLECTOR DAILY

Yojiro Imasaka, Correspondence @Miyako Yoshinaga

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JTF (just the facts): A total of 37 toned black and white photographs, hung against white walls in the single room gallery space. 36 of the prints are hung unframed edge-to-edge in a single grid. Each is a toned gelatin silver print, made in 2020, sized 20×24 inches, and is unique (with an AP). Across the room, a larger work (mounted but unframed) hangs above the fireplace. It is also a toned gelatin silver print, made in 2020, sized 48×60 inches, and is unique (with an AP). This show is a benefit for COVID-19 medical workers, with a portion of the proceeds donated to Doctors Without Borders. (Installation shots below.)

Comments/Context: We don't yet know what the art of the COVID-19 pandemic period will look like. While we saw an initial flurry of photographs of the empty streets of lockdowns across the globe and of medical workers rising to the challenge, ultimately, when we reach the end of this chaotic time, there will be much more art to consider. This is because even during government imposed shutdowns and anxious times, artists never stop creating.

For many artists and photographers, the COVID-19 era will be a time of new constraints and reduced options. Maybe they can't travel, or work in the streets. Maybe they can't get to their studios, and have to work from home, amidst their families. Maybe they can't get access to the materials they are used to employing. But for most, these issues will simply change the parameters of the artistic problem solving they do every day. And so, they will make do with whatever they have, and find creative outlets and expressive avenues inside those limits.

In Yojiro Imasaka's case, when the pandemic hit, he was finishing up some large scale prints for upcoming art fairs, fairs which have since been postponed or canceled. Imasaka is best known for his large format toned landscapes, where the enveloping black and white details of dense jungles and forests are tinted in a range of monochrome colors. One of his recent works is an image of a mountain forest in Northern Japan, the scene filled edge to edge with flowing grasses, ferns, bushes, maple leaves, and other greenery. He toned the image a dark blue and created a tunnel effect with darkened edges, centering our attention on the swirling textures of the thick grasses.

When the lockdown went into effect in New York city (where Imasaka lives and works), a few things became clear immediately – there would be no traveling to make new images, no outside labs to make large scale prints, and no assistants to help out, for the foreseeable future. He had to work within himself, and the blue forest image became the starting point. Over the next weeks and months, Imasaka used that original negative and a handful of other variants made during the same trip to make a series of smaller prints in his darkroom, each one both an iteration on the

same subject matter and a reflection of his subtly changing moods. Thirty six of the more than fifty different images Imasaka made during that time are on view in this show, the prints displayed as one large wall filling grid.

Ansel Adams is famous for saying that a photographic negative is like a composer's musical score, and a print is an individual performance of that score, and this analogy is particularly apt in Imasaka's case. Between his own mood swings and the rumblings of the protests in the streets outside, Imasaka had his own emotional landscape to document, and the resulting prints sensitively range across a spectrum of nuanced observations.

The underlying black and white photographs for this series were made with a large format camera, so the detail from edge to edge is largely crisp and tactile, especially given the subject matter of the forest. Variant frames capture the small transformations that occur as stormy winds blow through the greenery, waving the grasses and shaking the tree branches. Seen in the grid display here, the variants offer small moments of change and soft blur, the surfaces in a constant state of almost imperceptible motion. By choosing to use multiple images instead of just one, Imasaka heightens the sense of shifting impermanence, the forest incrementally adapting and changing before our eyes, if we are willing to slow down and look closely.

Using a combination of varying light and color toning, Imasaka then alters the mood of the scenes. A few of the images stick with tonalities of grey, but range from light and bright to dark and shadowy, to the point of near blackness. Others bring in green tinting, but not the fresh vibrant yellow green of the leafy forest, but a more muted green, one that is quiet, understated, and gentle. Most of the images use blue as the toning color, creating scenes that sparkle with attention or drift into murky dimness. Several compositions vary the light across the frame, creating dark spots in the middle with light borders, or areas of lightness surrounded by cave-like edges. And still others find a harmony between exposure and toning that settles into deeper melancholy, the textures of the swirling grasses and trees taking on a pewter or gun metal blue emotional temperature. It seems that every day was different, the forest scene taking on a parade of alternate personalities.

At a superficial level, Imasaka's toned landscapes seem to travel some of the same artistic pathways as David Benjamin Sherry's, taking an underlying large format black and white landscape and then reinterpreting it (and its inherent allusions and histories) via toning. But these new images from Imasaka are much more inward looking than Sherry's, with more atmospheric subtleties and psychological undercurrents percolating in among the grasses. They feel more reverent and almost private, Imasaka's experiments rooted in the daily struggle presented by the pandemic.

Given the constraints of the lockdown, Imasaka's determination to get to work feels like an admirable instinct, and a cathartic one. By wrestling with his anxieties and fears in the darkroom, he's found a way to not only keep himself busy and burn off his creative energy, he's opened up new artistic areas to explore in his work, his iterative tonal reinterpretations bringing new layers of resonance to his landscapes. In a certain way, we're all going to be different when this pandemic ends, and the idea that we'll go back to the way we were before seems delusional. By channeling his artistic ideas into a new constrained flow, Imasaka has chosen to actively adapt, leading to works with an increased sense of personal tenderness.

Collector's POV: The works in this show are priced as follows. The large mounted print is \$10000, while the smaller unframed prints are \$1500 each. Imasaka's work has little secondary market history at this point, so gallery retail remains the best option for those collectors interested in following up.