



Hitoshi Fugo b. 1947, Japanese *Kami 21*, 2001, Gelatin silver print, printed in 2023, 21 3/8 × 16 7/8 in / 54.3 × 42.9 cm, Edition of 10 plus 2 artist's proofs

© Hitoshi Fugo, Courtesy: MIYAKO YOSHINAGA, New York

Hitoshi Fugo: KAMI at Miyako Yoshinaga Gallery

By Jonathan Goodman, May 3, 2024

Now in his late seventies, Hitoshi Fugo is showing a body of work conceived and created some time ago: a suite of eleven black-and-white images, taken from the total of 31 photos that make

up his project KAMI, which means paper and god in Japanese. The image group is presented in what is the last exhibition to take place at Miyako Yoshinaga's gallery on the Upper East Side. This is sad—Yoshinaga has done beautiful shows for decades at this space and her earlier gallery in Chelsea. Indeed, she began exactly 25 years ago, in May 1999. Since then she has put up more than 150 shows.

Yoshinaga's emphasis has been on photography, international work exhibited according to an Asian's perspective, and also the work of specifically Asian artists. Now Yoshinaga is leaving her public presence with KAMI, a beautiful show devoted to images of burnt paper. Fugo is a master photographer, whose images of a charred roll of paper, dating back to 2001—six years later he witnessed the aftermath of the Great Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake in 1995—and continuing even now, balance between abstraction and figuration in the most original way.

In around 1993, Fugo came across a partly burned, four-foot-high roll of paper, brought outside on the street from a fire in a printing company. By itself, the paper roll was a formidable object, and Fugo includes several pictures of the entire roll in the portfolio. The contrast between the black and white is evident throughout the group of images, whose aura is both tonally and thematically dark. Sometimes Fugo would isolate or deliberately arrange parts of the roll in order to create striking images. The burnt paper is itself highly dramatic, but Fugo's camera intensifies the imagery to the point where the photos' grim reality start to take on historical weight.

It is perhaps a jump to state that KAMI looks back at the devastations occurring in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, sites where the first two atom bombs were dropped. In that conflagration, trees were burnt to a cinder. In KAMI, only part of the roll approaches the condition of ash, but the implication of fire damage would be highly resonant for a Japanese audience, even now. The images chosen for the show were ordered randomly, although one had the sense that they were capable of an abstract narrative, meaningful as a visual rather than literary continuation of meaning.



Hitoshi Fugo b. 1947, Japanese, Kami 1, 2001

Gelatin silver print, printed in 2023, 21 3/8 × 16 7/8 in / 54.3 × 42.9 cm, Edition of 10 plus 2 artist's proofs

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Kami 1 (2001, printed in 2022), is a very good image to start with. It depicts the entire role of paper, badly burned at the top, the damage narrowing as it moves down nearly to the bottom of

the roll. It is almost as if we were regarding a stone column from Pompeii, permanently harmed by lava. Yet clearly the material is paper, and the burn marks create the dramatic urgency that would derive from a destructive event. In *Kami 25* (2001), the photo offers a view of individual leaves of paper, much like the edge of a book, But the leaves are slightly damaged, dark in their implication. Fugo's work *KAMI* becomes, again and again, a memorial—but to what we are not sure.

The circumstances surrounding the *KAMI* undertaking are idiosyncratic—they suggest much more than what we see. Fire is often, across cultures and time, a symbol of judgment, of transformation, of creativity. Fugo rejects the obvious meanings of his photos for something more clever, namely, the persistence of beauty, in part caused by the very damage the object has sustained. In art today, we look to the unfinished, the ruin, even the (deliberately) badly made. Yet Fugo is negotiating something else: a sublime originating from a process in which the inadvertent scarring of the paper is embraced. The mutilation becomes a metaphor of possible creativity, so that this diminutive holocaust, whose implications carry public weight, takes on a gravitas we did not first see.



Hitoshi Fugo b. 1947, Japanese, *Kami 7*, 2001, Gelatin silver print, printed in 2023, 21 3/8 × 16 7/8 in / 54.3 × 42.9 cm, Edition of 10 plus 2 artist's proofs

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In *Kami 7* (2001), the inner roll of paper, untouched by fire, stands pristine in the center of the image. Partially surrounding this seamless column are a set of broken-apart curled papers, which first embrace and then open up around the central roll. Scraps of burned paper are found on the

top of the roll, and scattered on the surface supporting the roll, mostly to the right. The chaos we experience, is intensified by the tight confines of the object's dimensions.



Hitoshi Fugo b. 1947, Japanese, Kami 15, 2023, Gelatin silver print, printed in 2023, 21 3/8 × 16 7/8 in / 54.3 × 42.9 cm, Edition of 10 plus 2 artist's proofs
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Kami 15 (2023, Fugo has rephotographed the paper roll quite recently) is so difficult to read as something actual it takes place more as a pure abstraction. Describing the image is close to impossible—it is as if the roll of paper has been photographed so that it appears to rise from lower left to upper right, with the center of the roll exhibiting sheaves of paper set tight against the other. The top part looks burned, contrasting with the undamaged part of the roll beneath it. Then, two horizontal cuts are made across the roll. These cuts cause a visual dissonance that complicates the photo's visual construction,

As a bridge to the end of this review, Kami 15 shows us that, seen from an unusual angle, the paper can seem like something very different from what it is. This is a project that has spanned decades, and Fugo's ongoing efforts have become enduring in his determination to find visual meaning in a castoff from a fire. The tension, or discord, between what we can and cannot recognize makes KAMI a considerable project, whose visual and thematic complexity stands out. To return to an earlier point: it may not be mistaken to see the burned paper as a facsimile of the greater fire visited on Japan at the end of the Second World War. But it is also true that this interpretation may be trying too hard to establish a tragic context. It is hard to say: the mysteries inherent to KAMI argue for as expansive an outlook as possible, in which conflicting readings can be entertained. So, the intimation is clear; art is meant to transform difficult events, as small as a printer's fire and as large as the atom bombs falling on Japan in 1945. Whether or not the artist consciously has bridged the two events in this project can be debated; the excellent of the photos cannot.



Jonathan Goodman has long written about the art scene of New York. His primary area of expertise lies in East Asian art, with a notable emphasis on fostering collaborations and deep engagements with Japanese artists.