

# New Paintings by Hideyuki Nagasawa

Kazuhiro Yamamoto

“The hasty removal of all distances brings no nearness.”

——Martin Heidegger, Bremer Lectures, 1949<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

At the Musée Marmottan Monet in Paris, there is a bench placed at something of a distance from but directly facing Claude Monet’s painting ‘Impression, Sunrise’. After scrutinizing the painter’s brushwork and the texture of the pigments, we can sit on the bench and be present in the moment when the painting begins to ripple and sway. This bench is not a place to rest; it functions as a visual aid to studying the painting, by drawing attention to the visitor’s gaze and the physical distance that separates the visitor from the painting. This essay attempts to decipher, to read and understand a group of new paintings by Nagasawa Hideyuki. These works also critically and dynamically examine the relationship between gaze and the physical distance that separates image from observer, drawing attention to how distance affects the relation between the material image formed by the pigments and canvas, and the perceived image constructed by the gaze.<sup>2</sup>

## 1. New Paintings: Critically Sublating Photograph and Cinema

First, let me describe the process by which the material image becomes the perceived image.

In these new works, the entire picture plane is covered with clusters of short, equally thick brushstrokes. Nagasawa explains, in the essay he contributed to the exhibition catalogue, “As paint is applied, the image underneath is erased.”<sup>3</sup> But while dense, those brushstrokes are not continuous. The image in the background can still be glimpsed in the gaps between them. What we see in the foreground are rhythmical clusters of brushstrokes subtly different from the flowing painterly brushstrokes typical of Nagasawa in the 1980s. We are struck by his paradoxical approach of revealing how the image is perceived while concealing the original, which had been painted on the canvas, in the background.<sup>4</sup> Looking more closely we realize that an earlier Nagasawa applied those brushstrokes mechanically, while rotating the canvas 90 degrees at a time. Here, however, we see a superbly controlled

mingling of juxtaposed colors combined with a distinctive, highly tactile texture in the picture plane, a combination only possible in a superbly organic painting. Nagasawa states, “Completely irrespective of the drawing beneath, I apply the paint at random.”<sup>5</sup> These mature works are a constellation of strictly controlled brushwork, the antithesis of the mechanical placement of his brushwork in his earlier work, and mesh-like gaps.

The wonder we feel in the presence of Nagasawa’s double-layer paintings is not the comfortable certainty we feel when approaching a painting with a conventional “natural” attitude. We are, instead, compelled to acknowledge shortcuts to physical movement, the essential bodily shift as we examine the painting. Nagasawa’s paintings resist the everyday approach in which we recognize a painting of an apple as representing an apple or a portrait as depicting a person. Paintings with which we are comfortable when seen in this conventional “natural” way are not outstanding paintings. Great paintings require a different approach. They force us to bracket our natural attitude and explore them phenomenologically. Nagasawa’s new paintings drive home this lesson and demand that we adjust our gaze accordingly. Experimental and provocative, they compel us to bracket, to suspend our judgment, our everyday ignoring of what is not self-evident.

Do we remember the brushwork of Édouard Manet or Jackson Pollock? Even if we recall a particular slice of some particular work in which we recognize the image, we find it difficult to recall how the artist wielded his brush. We retain an overall impression of the work but the details fade in memory. It is difficult to recall the characteristics of the brushwork. Reproductions in exhibition catalogues and art books almost never include enlargements in which the brushwork is visible. What we see is only part of what we are trying to understand.

The use of short brushstrokes of almost identical

thickness is a feature found throughout Nagasawa's oeuvre. The base color is brown, blue or orange, but complimentary colors may be added for intermittent color fields with controlled levels of saturation. The effect is like the fading of colors when a photograph is converted to print. This is not the result of lightness and darkness of the primary colors but of radical changes in the ratios of complimentary colors. For example, moving asymptotically from the center of a color wheel to near its perimeter, various independent hues are mixed without settling into the areas of the primary colors. A membrane is formed on the painting that simulates, with the mingling of colors and brushwork, the passage of time over which a photograph ultimately fades as the silver halide oxidizes. The resulting membrane is in the foreground. Thus, while Nagasawa says that he hides the original image, the scattered brush strokes become a painterly membrane with parity with the background image; they cover the foreground with a translucent veil.

If we describe systematically, layer by layer, what we see, we discover that the short, almost equally thick brushstrokes in the foreground are combined with the carefully controlled colors to reveal as well as cover the background. In contrast to that physical reality, those strokes appear to magnify the image in the background, causing the distance between the original and the viewer's gaze to be realized at an extreme magnification not perceivable with the naked eye. Thus, the closer to the painting we move our bodies to try to see what lies behind the clusters of brushstrokes, the closer we grow to the figurative image depicted behind them. Like the grains of silver halide dancing as they drift in a sea of gelatin in a photograph, this technique generates an irony of estranging us from the texture of the pigments in the background. As we examine these paintings, not just our way of gazing at the painting but our entire bodies move unconsciously in a way that repeatedly mimics the action of a zoom lens.

This movement of the physical body is required to establish the proper distance from the work. As the body moves, the gaze pulsates. It may, then, be useful at this point to consider what Gilles Deleuze

has to say about Bergson's "false movement" when describing the distinctive features of cinema not found in other media.

You cannot reconstruct movement with positions in space or instants in time: that is, with immobile sections [coupes].<sup>6</sup>

Deleuze considers the possibility that cinema makes this impossibility possible but then reaches his famous conclusion that cinema is a classic example of "false movement." This is precisely the effect produced by Nagasawa's paintings: paintings that connect motionless slices of the picture plane. Henri Bergson saw cinema as depicting false movement and not a way to capture movement itself. But as we stand before one of Nagasawa's paintings, our bodies are compelled to move. What Nagasawa's new paintings do is force us to shift our bodies and thus change our gaze in a way that cinema, seen from the fixed positions to which our seats confine us, does not. Cinema depicts movement by sequentially linking still images. Nagasawa's paintings compel us to move.

## **2. Paradoxical View**

The Musée Marmottan Monet and other museums around the world, or, rather, their galleries, are ordinarily structured in the same way, to control how visitors circulate and view the works on display. The flow may be from right to left or left to right, but virtually all museums using a special exhibition format and hoping for large numbers of visitors treat our bodies in the same way. We are compelled to see all of the paintings from the same distance, moving as if riding on a conveyor belt.

When viewing art is liberated from this modern, conveyor-belt approach, it becomes possible to ask the question, what is the proper distance from which to view a work of art? Ordinarily we stand at a distance from which we can see a painting as a whole. We position our bodies as if we were cameras set up to take a picture. If, however, we are not stuck in that position, we can move closer to examine details of the picture plane. We are no longer content to see the whole. We

want to confirm the texture of the physical image itself. We move back and forth, stepping closer to examine details, stepping back to take in the whole. What makes this movement significant is that the image when we gaze at the whole and the details we see when focused on parts of the physical image are not the same. When we step back to experience the whole, the details of the physical image disappear. Conversely, when we move in to examine details, we lose sight of the image as a whole. The result is a paradox. Limited space makes it impossible to develop this idea fully here, but this concern with the relation between the physical details of the image is found in photography as well as in painting. In contrast, concern for the physical details is nearly totally absent in the case of cinema.

This paradoxical view determines the significance of paintings in which we appreciate the physical image and the perceived image as separate layers. Until now, however, there have been no paintings that challenged this paradoxical view by using feedback from the painting itself. Nagasawa has discovered this paradoxical view in painting, photography and cinema, but especially in his painting has shown it to be a continuing problem for Modernist painting. While searching for the difference between photography and film, he has produced works that suggest a solution in the paintings themselves.<sup>7</sup> One is apt to see the paradoxical view as simply a shift in perspective. In these paintings, however, he reveals an antinomy in the way in which we appreciate paintings, embodied in the relation between the gaze and physical distance and movement in relation to the material image.

He also inverts an illusion. Ordinarily, when we stand before an outstanding painting, we negate our own existence. This makes possible the illusion that a three-dimensional space is reproduced in a painting. It is a kind of commonsense that this illusion determines the value of a painting. However, as we lose ourselves in Nagasawa's paintings, we discover a critique of the notion that the observer disappears. Why? As we lose ourselves in these paintings, our eyes never stop moving. We feel our bodies breathing, our hearts beating. Instead of seeing losing oneself as the top of a perceptual pyramid, we find that there is no still

point at the pyramid's top. We are reminded that the perceptual pyramid itself is an artifact of motion. The distance between the painter and his work at the time a painting is created remains a mystery to the observer, and observers expect the freedom to determine for themselves the distance from which they examine works of art. We are called upon, however, to position ourselves at a proper distance from a painting from which to appreciate how brushwork and textures create the forms we see. This demand does not apply to photography or cinema. The distance between camera and subject replaces the distance between the observer and the photograph or movie. This relation does not change when a photo is enlarged. The distance established by backward or forward movement as the photo is taken becomes a substitute for the observer's distance from the wall on which a painting is hung. The viewer who sits in a chair to watch a movie must rely on the camera's simulation of movement toward or away from its subject. These phenomena become clear when we compare them to what we see in the tendencies of Modernist painting revealed by Nagasawa's new works.

### **3. Expanded Concept of Painting** — **The Phenomenological Relation Between Material and Perceived Image**

The concept that "The theme of the work (the painting) is the painting itself," announced by Nagasawa in 1983, is perfectly clear. Nagasawa's paintings would thereafter be "paintings of paintings."<sup>8</sup> In other words, Nagasawa positioned himself as a painting fundamentalist for whom the theme pursued in his paintings would be the close phenomenological relation between material and perceived images. A strict fundamentalist, Nagasawa would, however, disrupt the easy fundamentalism that regards the relation between pigment and canvas as fixed. His fundamentalism would continue in the tradition of the work of Donald Judd, Robert Smithson, and Jackson Pollock. Their paintings, however, were intended to be appropriate for a time and an environment in which painting had to abandon the material image composed of pigment and canvas. In contrast, Nagasawa would insist on retaining pigment and canvas. In this respect his work differed

from that of Judd and Smithson. While keeping pigment and canvas as the material image, he would explore an environment in which painting, photography and cinema co-exist and expand the range of imaging as a whole. To say that a painting is a painting does not assert an objective reality. It is not enough to say that a painting is a painting for the simple, material reason that pigments are applied to a canvas. To assert that a painting is a painting is to assert a distinctive feature, something extraordinary. Nagasawa observed that representation in a two-dimensional plane is not specific to painting. This feature is shared with photography and cinema, or, in other words, all forms of imaging. Thus, in making this statement, he was intensifying his self criticism. It hardly needs saying that painting, photography and cinema are different media, but as media evolve, they mutually criticize each other.

In this sense, Nagasawa's paintings mark a regression from the debates over advances in media and a search for advances in painting revived by Gerhard Richter and Sigmar Polke; they are paintings that cause the evolution of painting from a different point. We might call them a type of "meta-modern" painting. Because there are already Richter and Polke's approaches making reference to photographic and film techniques, it is possible or even natural to see Nagasawa as adopting a similar approach. But in fact his method and praxis differ from theirs.

Let us now look at both similarities and differences. What these artists have in common is a refusal to abandon pigment and canvas as their basic medium. During the process by which Richter and Polke added photography and cinema to their repertoires, we see them taking features from these evolving media and using them regressively as feedback to refresh their painting. In contrast, Nagasawa incorporates in his paintings his critical reflections on photography and cinema. Through differences in use of time, physical distance and motion, he aims to establish his critical distance from Modernist painting. In demanding movement from the observer, he is strikingly different from Richter and Polke, who retain the traditional distance between observer and work of art.

There are also similarities and differences in these artists' use of mechanical reproduction. These are not in the mechanical chain of command of creating paintings the same size as the original photographs while moving from visual to manual reproduction. Like Richter, Nagasawa uses both eye and hand to enlarge small photographs on large canvases. We can also see similarities to Polke's use of the copier's enlargement function in his meticulous reproduction of the grain in projected slides. In Nagasawa's work, however, neither of these tendencies is simply added to the painting. Instead, Nagasawa adds differences in magnification as a way to create a layered image. Unlike techniques borrowed from photography and film, his approach is only possible in painting. Simultaneous viewing of images at different levels of magnification is not possible in photography or cinema. Changes in magnification in Nagasawa's paintings are not the same as the changes produced using the zoom functions of optical devices. They directly involve our bodies. These paintings are not simply a type of image. They represent Nagasawa's attempt to make painting a genre that rises above the usual categories: painting, photography, and film.<sup>9</sup>

#### **4. Paradoxical View Redux**

##### **— Overlapping Micro and Macro Perspectives**

When we stand before one of Nagasawa's new works, an inescapable dilemma is posed: the simultaneous combination of the macro perspective in the painting that depicts a mechanically enlarged photograph and the micro perspective created by the clusters of short, equally thick brushstrokes, confronts the confusion ordinarily created by this combination in conventional paintings. The closer we approach conventional paintings, the more clearly we see the texture of the pigments. Then, when distance is restored, the shapes of figures seen from a distance reappear. In contrast, in Nagasawa's new paintings, brushstrokes are overlaid on systematically enlarged details. Care has been taken to ensure that we don't have to move closer to see these details. Instead we feel a compulsion emanating directly from the paintings that evokes movement and energy in the body that supports the visual experience.

Then, as we look more closely at the image in the background, we discover that instead of painterly brush strokes, we are looking at painting that deliberately mimics the smooth surface of a photographic emulsion. Without getting closer we do not realize that the gaps in the systematic web of brushstrokes reveal a painting of a photograph. Then, when we draw closer still, we realize that the photographically smooth manner in which the painting is painted is not of the same character as the pigments and textures of the brushstrokes. While the foreground is painterly, the background suggests the smooth texture of paintings by artists who were impatiently awaiting the photograph, just before its birth. It is as if photograph and painting co-exist in different layers. In this respect, Nagasawa's paintings manifestly resemble Richter's paintings of photographs and abstract paintings. But even in Richter's juxtaposition of the two, we do not see this layered effect.

There are two ways to think about Nagasawa's paintings. One is to say he uses clusters of painterly brushstrokes in combination with a photographic texture, thus emphasizing the contrast between micro and macro. The base layer reveals that there is nothing present but pigments and canvas. This is absolutely the distinctive feature of Nagasawa's work: it simultaneously establishes both enlargement and reduction in the same picture plane. The brushwork in the forms that compose the enlarged photograph reproduced in the background is not blended with the systematic brushstrokes whose clusters cover the foreground. Thus, what is physically a single object is perceived as two layers. The two layers are represented by the contrast between photographically smooth and painterly rough brushwork. This contrast makes it possible to see the two layers, front covering back, simultaneously. The difference between the two layers is not the same as that achieved directly by enlarging an image with a copier or seeing the subject through a microscope. It is not that photograph and painting coexist within the same image. The layers disappear when they are seen together as 'that painting over there.' Nagasawa is not, however, reproducing images produced by optical devices, the copiers and

microscopes found in today's imaging environment. Instead, his paintings evoke a visceral feeling of movement in our bodies, a dynamism that evokes the effects of magnification achieved using these devices. The layer drawn with pitiless clarity on the two-dimensional plane imposed by the photograph, and the clustered brush strokes enlarged to the maximum extent using the naked eye, unassisted by optical devices, in a complex dual-layered structure in which the exposed and the concealed are combined in a single plane, reject the possibility of observers finding stable positions for their bodies. What Nagasawa's paintings achieve is the combination of the emotion captured in a photograph with its antithesis, a supremely formal, dry visualization of phenomenological paradox. Nagasawa wants to recapture the freedom of gaze distinctive to the artistic imagery in three different types of art: painting, photography and cinema. This absolutely would not be the experience of sitting in a comfortable chair. Rather, it is what the gaze carried out by the freely moving physical body can capture at the end of its own search.

### **Conclusion**

When we imagine paintings by Nagasawa, we are reminded of the original film, enlarged, projected on the photographic print. Here we could say that the film is still inside the projector and is projected on an imagined screen. The perspective is that of the projector's lamp. Here is another instance of Descartes' homunculus. This state of affairs is that characteristic of painting in Heidegger's "age of the world picture." That is, the painting, it is true, lacks the reality of the photograph or the cinematic film. Film imposes an objective filter, a closed and close relationship between the maker and whatever the subject may be. At the same time, confronting the two screen surfaces, of the image printed on paper and the image projected on the movie screen, provides another dimension in critique of the image. Film is exposed to and tempered by the confrontational critique of image and editing because the final product is itself visualized. Film is always the critical other with respect to the image. Nagasawa layers film, the object other that painting

lacks, with clusters of almost identical short, broad brushstrokes as a painting added on top of the original painting. Film becomes the criterion for critical evaluation of the image prior to its completion. Nagasawa fuses the physical and perceived image in a way that allows each to critique the other. He brings the critical character possessed by photography and cinema to painting. Nagasawa's new paintings bring the critical other to painting.

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Kazuhiro Yamamoto, Senior Curator, Tochigi Prefectural Museum of Fine Art

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1. Martin Heidegger, Gesamtausgabe III. Abteilung: Unveröffentlichte Abhandlungen Band 79 Bremer und Freiburger Vorträge (Klostermann, Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1994).
2. This essay examines the phenomenological relationship between the physical object and the subject of which we are conscious. "Material image" refers to the material aspect on which the image is produced is thus called the material image and "perceived image" to the immaterial aspect produced as an image.
3. "Ghosts of the Future —Hideyuki Nagasawa—" exhibition catalogue (Tokyo: Musashino Art University Museum&Library, 2017), p. 8.
4. See note 2, above.
5. "Ghosts of the Future —Hideyuki Nagasawa—" exhibition catalogue (Tokyo: Musashino Art University Museum&Library, 2017), p. 8.
6. Gilles Deleuze, *Cinéma 1. L'Image-Mouvement*. (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1983), p. 4.
7. Carl Linnaeus introduced the concepts of genus and species in his biological taxonomy. Following him, we might describe the image genus as consisting of the painting species, the photograph species, and the cinema species.
8. "19th Artists To-day: Internalized Structures" exhibition catalogue, curated by Hayami Takashi (Yokohama: Yokohama Civic Art Gallery, 1983), p. 40.
9. See note 5, above.