

# JIRO TAKAMATSU: IMAGE AND ABSENCE

*I mean to free things from existing relations  
and turn them into subjects of new relations.*

(October 1962)<sup>1</sup>

A ghostly double image nearly fills the picture plane: overlapping shadows of a woman's head and shoulders, rendered in diffuse, feathery brushstrokes on an off-white canvas. The shadows are pale grey, darkening in the centre of the image where they overlap. This painting is one of a series of works depicting shadows by Jiro Takamatsu, one of the most significant and celebrated Japanese artists of his generation.

Born in 1936, Takamatsu studied painting at the Tokyo University of the Arts in the late 1950s and came of age as an artist in a time of rapid change and industrialisation as Japan moved from post-war austerity towards economic and commercial plenitude. A new democratic constitution was in place. Tokyo, which had been decimated by carpet bombing during World War II, was the subject of massive urban regeneration that peaked during preparations for the 1964 Tokyo Olympics. The mood of change was also evident in political protests sparked by the desire for new social structures to replace traditional ways of life.

This was the backdrop to a period of vibrant creative experimentation in the Japanese capital.<sup>2</sup> The late 1950s saw the burgeoning of han-geijutsu (literally anti-art), as artists moved beyond the traditional confines of painting and sculpture. In 1962, Takamatsu joined forces with his former classmate Natsuyuki Nakanishi and fellow artist Genpei Akasagawa to co-found Hi Red Center, a performance collective that staged provocative, politically charged events. In January 1964 in an action critiquing forms of security and regulation, they staged *Shelter Plan*, in which guests were invited to a room in the Imperial Hotel, located

opposite the Imperial Palace. There they were subjected to extensive, increasingly ridiculous bodily measurements for individualized bomb shelters. Nine months later, *Let's Participate in the HRC Campaign to Promote Cleanup and Orderliness of the Metropolitan Area!* saw Hi Red Center members in white jackets and masks scrubbing streets in the Ginza area of downtown Tokyo, in a pointed attack on the government's campaign to 'clean up' the capital prior to the Olympics.

Concurrent with his activity with Hi Red Center, Takamatsu was also making his own work, beginning to develop an artistic practice that would eventually expand to include distinctive bodies of work in painting, sculpture, installation, photography and printmaking, as well as a vast oeuvre of drawings. In 1964 he began making paintings of shadows: shadows of people, individually or in small groups; and shadows of objects, sometimes alone, sometimes arrayed in the manner of still lifes. The images are recognisable and universal, yet they are also uncanny and unsettling.

Takamatsu's shadows make us question our own relationship to the image—as viewers, standing in front of a *Shadow* painting, we are invited to put ourselves in the position of the absent object. The image on the canvas, which could at first glance appear to be a simple visual trick in the manner of *trompe-l'oeil* painting, becomes destabilizing and subversive. This experience, at once stimulating and disconcerting, is typical of how Takamatsu's work can affect the viewer, provoking questions and evoking something out of reach.

In his theoretical texts Takamatsu defined his practice as an

'Expanding World Project' and one of the key components of his thought was the pursuit of a state he described as 'absence'. In Takamatsu's terms 'absence' is antithetical to the quotidian world of 'existence'. In order to counter the inherently unfulfilling nature of reality, he asserted, it is the artist's role to create structures and devices to facilitate transcendence. 'Absence', in these terms, is a state of pure potentiality, a future that lies beyond the 'junkyard' of the present day. In the same year as his first *Shadow* paintings he wrote:

From within this giant junkyard where all things are corroding and crumbling, what will capture us, pull us up, flush us out, rescue us from our bloated languidity, will never be these things themselves. It can only and always be found in the faint light of the world to come, in possibility, or probability, indeterminacy, lack, and all the others that only 'are' in absence.<sup>3</sup>

In their evocation of invisible, nonexistent objects, Takamatsu's shadows offer a glimpse towards the ever-hovering presence of 'absence'.

It is also worth noting that in the context in which they were first made, less than two decades after the conclusion of the Pacific War, Takamatsu's detached shadows offer an unsettling reminder of the 'atomic shadows' produced in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Although he did not refer directly to atomic shadows in discussions of his work, Takamatsu would of course have been well aware of

these imprints on the surface of walls and roads, caused by the intense heat of the atomic blasts.

Takamatsu's explorations of shadows preoccupied him for many years and were not limited to paintings on board and canvas. In 1966 he created his first full-scale *Shadow* installation featuring walls and floors painted with shadows.<sup>4</sup> Four years later he moved from the depiction of shadows to the use of real shadows in three dimensions. For *Light and Shadow*, a simple, rectangular stainless steel plate is propped up against the wall. Behind it, out of view, an electric bulb emits light that spills out onto the surrounding walls and floor. Standing in front of the work, we can see light emanating from the sides of the plate, but not the source of the light; this recalls how, in the *Shadow* paintings, we can see shadows but not the objects casting the shadows.

By the time he made *Light and Shadow*, Takamatsu had also developed a body of work investigating perspectival forms. This focus helped usher in one of the signature trends in Japanese art of the 1960s, an emphasis on visual ambiguity and optical tricks.<sup>5</sup> The *Perspective* series began with drawings in which Takamatsu used gridlines to emphasise the illusory nature of depicting three dimensions in a two-dimensional picture plane. These investigations often include paradoxical spaces, as in a series of designs for book covers featuring ambiguous geometric shapes. One series of pencil drawings features a white diamond shape on a brown ground. The diamond is overlaid with a gridded pattern that creates an optical effect, making it appear that a cube is either receding into the picture plane or emerging out of it towards the viewer.



'Identification' at Tokyo Gallery, 1966

The optical illusions in these perspective studies highlight the artifice of pictorial space. Takamatsu extended his investigations of perspective in sculptures and installations in which three-dimensional objects are overlaid with gridlines in the manner of single-point perspective studies. The largest, most significant example of these works is *Perspective Dimension*, the multi-part installation Takamatsu made for his solo exhibition in the Japanese Pavilion at the 1968 Venice Biennale.

In addition to straight contours *Perspective Dimension* included curved structures and wavy grid lines, elements that hint at an elasticity or malleability of form. Takamatsu continued to play out themes and variations on straight and curved lines in a subsequent group of gouaches entitled *In the Form of Square*. Each work in this series features a black square bisected by horizontal lines, sometimes wavy, sometimes straight, sometimes a combination of both.

Other works on paper feature undulating vertical lines. The *Wave* drawings are related to *Pole of Wave*, a series of wooden sculptures that appear like individual ‘slices’ extracted from a wavy grid. These totemic sculptures are carved in rippled forms, with curves pulsing repeatedly across their surfaces. The title of the series emphasises the paradoxical: a pole is static and solid, whereas a wave is in constant, changing motion.

A similar contradiction is played out in Takamatsu’s *Slack of Net* works. These were designed as floor-based sculptures and as wall-hung reliefs. Pieces of string are tied in a grid form. The strings forming the outside edges of the square or rectangle are pulled taut, delineating an overall geometric design that is precise and

rigid. The strings used to demarcate the internal rows and columns of the grid, however, are longer and looser than the outside edges. They lie or fall in irregular patterns in a humorous play on Minimal form.

Like the *Perspective* works, *Slack of Net* and the related *Slack of Cloth*, composed of pieces of canvas sewn together to produce an irregular, billowing ‘sheet’, subvert the familiar visual structure of the grid to hint at a more complex, ‘absent’ inter-dimensionality. The *Slack* works date from the end of the 1960s, a period during which Takamatsu was a key figure in the development of the artistic trend known as Mono-ha. Literally translated as ‘School of Things’, Mono-ha developed separately but simultaneously with Arte Povera in Italy and Post-Minimalism in the United States. Like those movements, Mono-ha emphasised the materiality of objects and often featured the juxtaposition of natural and industrial materials. Mono-ha also had a strong theoretical component that privileged the relations between object and object and between object and viewer. Although not formally associated with Mono-ha, Takamatsu was close to its major protagonists, including artist and theorist Lee Ufan, with whom he struck up a lively published dialogue on contemporary art in the journal *Bijutsu Techno*, and Nobuo Sekine, who had been Takamatsu’s student at Tama Art University.

Takamatsu extended his focus on the singularity and complexity of quotidian materials in his *Oneness* series, made between 1969 and 1972. Each *Oneness* work used a single material, manipulated to demonstrate its inherent transformative capacity.

*Oneness of Paper*, for instance, features ripped up pieces of paper collaged in a ‘frame’ of the same paper. The different states of a singular material suggest the distinctiveness and mutability of identity.

In the early 1970s in works including the *Photograph of Photograph* series, Takamatsu shifted his ‘quest for absence’<sup>6</sup> to other strategies of image-making. For *Photograph of Photograph*, existing snapshots were re-photographed in a surrounding context, for instance lying on a table or pinned to a wall. One example depicts a photograph lying on a slatted wooden floor near the edge of what appears to be a balcony; the poles of metal railings are visible in the upper left corner of the image. The snapshot is printed on glossy paper, and glare reflected from its surface making it difficult to decipher what it depicts. The subject of the snapshot in the re-photographed image is literally ‘absent’, as elusive as a fading memory.

Takamatsu made a number of paintings and drawings featuring ‘nesting’ or embedded images, where pictures within pictures draw attention to the nature of representation. Paradoxically, nesting images have the potential to negate or cancel out each other. *Photograph of Photograph* operates in a similar way, fashioning ‘absence’ in the space where the image seems to turn its gaze back on the viewer. Like all of Takamatsu’s work, these strange, beguiling images hint at something beyond the limits of everyday perception.

Rachel Taylor

- 1 Jiro Takamatsu, ‘Writing in Fragments, Spiritual Quantam Theory 2’, first published in *Bijutsushi-hyo*, 1972, reproduced in *The Expanding World Project*, Suiseisha, Tokyo, 2003, pp.116–7, quoted in Ryoko Kamiyama, ‘From Reality to Relativity: The Works and Thoughts of Jiro Takamatsu in the 1960s and 1970s’, *Takamatsu Jiro: Universe of His Thought*, exhibition catalogue, Fuchu Art Museum 2004, p.195.
- 2 For more on the Tokyo art scene of this period and its historical context see Doryun Chong, ed., *Tokyo 1955–1970: A New Avant-Garde*, exhibition catalogue, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2012.
- 3 Jiro Takamatsu, ‘World-Expanding Project: An Essay on Being Absent’, *Kikan*, September 1964, quoted in Yuri Mitsuda, *Words and Things: Jiro Takamatsu and Japanese Art, 1961–72*, Daiwa Press Co., Ltd., Hiroshima, 2012, p.66.
- 4 *Identification*, a solo show staged at Tokyo Gallery, 4–23 July 1966. Takamatsu subsequently created other *Shadow* installations, most notably *Shadow’s Room*, 1974 commissioned for the headquarters of Fukuoka Sogo Bank (now Fukuoka City Bank). See Yoshiko Asami, ‘*Shadow’s Room* in The Fukuoka City Bank—History and Its Significance’, *Takamatsu Jiro: Universe of His Thought*, exhibition catalogue, Fuchu Art Museum 2004, pp.199–201.
- 5 This tendency was highlighted in seminal exhibitions including *Stolen Eye: Tricks & Vision*, curated by Junzo Ishiko and Yusuke Nakahara in April 1968 in spaces in two of the most important galleries in the capital, Tokyo Gallery and Muramatsu Gallery. See Mitsuda, *Words and Things*, pp.154–6.
- 6 *Quest for Absence* is the title of a critical essay by Takamatsu, posthumously published in book form in 2003 by Suiseisha, Tokyo.