

## **Etsuko Ichikawa Surprises at BAM**

Judith van Praag

Visitors to Etsuko Ichikawa's solo exhibition at the Bellevue Art Museum are in for a triple treat: A meditative video, a triptych in the Atrium, and an intimate installation.

You may recall earlier work by the Tokyo-born artist, a nest of thin bend glass tubing, filling a dead end hallway at the Bemis Building in Sodo Quarter. Or an airy installation of floating ornaments, hovering over transparent glass domes filled with mysterious objects in a Belltown gallery. But the past few years she has become known for her pyrographs: burned impressions made on heavy-duty watercolor paper by a hot molten glass "brush".

Ichikawa came to this special medium by accident. While assisting a Japanese artist at Pilchuck Glass School she accidentally dropped a "hot bit" (a molten glob of glass), off the "punty" (glassblower's pipe) onto the concrete. Enthralled by the image left on the floor, she had an "Aha! Moment" which resulted in years of trying out her newfound medium.

What's visible in the video is an extension of the meditative state in which Ichikawa works. You don't see her, but you do see the molten glass being manipulated. The hot bit and streaks resemble melted sugar on a marble slate as they solidify during the artist's process. The glass "caramel" chars and scorches the surface, leaving a charcoal image drawn by the nature of fire itself.

In "Walk with Mist" Ichikawa expresses her fascination with the way that sunlight can cut through an opening in the sky, through a dense fog, or a crack in the earth's surface, to light bubbles under a waterfall, or shed light on the floor of a cave. By lighting the pyrographic backdrop to her "waterfall and air bubble pool" from behind, she returns the heat of the medium with which the imagery was created. The effect is amazing.

The triptych "Traces of the Molten State" is the first work by Ichikawa that you see upon entering BAM. Seeing it again upon leaving, reinforces the idea that Etsuko Ichikawa has arrived at a new point in her career. Until now, she exhibited her banners horizontally, presenting the pyrographs the way they were created. The molten glass dropped, drizzled and dragged; liquid fire manipulated along the length of the paper. Seeing the triptych, it's impossible not to notice a resemblance to traditional Japanese paintings. However, the way that this landscape is created is highly original. Exactly in that lies Ichikawa's strength as a unique international artist, acknowledging and honoring her Japanese heritage.

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