

RAW REVIEWS

EXHIBITIONS

LUCID DREAMING: NEW DRAWINGS BY M'ONMA

Cavin-Morris Gallery, New York

January 9 – March 22, 2014

Now in his early sixties, M'onma is a self-taught Japanese artist based in Tokyo. A maker of meticulously rendered images in ink and coloured pencil on paper, he is a reclusive man who in the past worked as a graphic designer and now serves as an art-therapy facilitator. M'onma started making drawings at an early age. One day, when he was in his twenties, he was overcome by the feeling of a power he has referred to as "The Entity." (The exhibition's title referred to the phenomenon of a dream in which one is aware that one is dreaming).

Recognising what he encountered back then as a divine force, M'onma has regarded his creations as visual records of his "Entity"-provoked, dream-like experiences. In fact, for nearly two decades after that moment of heightened spiritual awareness he made no art at all; only in recent years has he devoted himself to making the remarkable drawings that were the focus of this, his first-ever solo exhibition.

In M'onma's dense compositions, a filigree of fine lines creates multiple layers of overlapping, random patterns. In them appear recognisable or partly discernible faces of clowns and phantom-like deities; half-human, half-animal figures; crosses; and stylised Japanese written characters. Sometimes shapes or textures reminiscent of those of knotty wood or strange tree growths emerge out of the murk of M'onma's dreamscapes, only to recede again as a viewer's eyes land upon still other elements in the artist's slowly churning stews of mysterious forms and drippy, ectoplasmic lines.

The art-historical affinities of M'onma's work are diverse. Among other self-taught artists known for similarly fine-line, densely packed compositions, his art brings to mind the drawings of Madge Gill, Edmund Monsiel and Johann Garber. M'onma's work also evokes the spirit of so-called automatic writing, which intrigued early twentieth-century surrealists.

The discovery of M'onma's work comes as the self-taught/outsider art field in Japan is still taking off. Given this gallery's well-known interest in finely crafted

contemporary and self-taught artists' works, as well as indigenous-culture art forms, its efforts to situate M'onma's drawings in a broader context of art history offers an appropriate art-appreciation model at a time when self-taught/outsider art has become more visible than ever in the international art market.

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