



Tomoyo Ihaya
EYES WATER FIRE

Tomoyo Ihaya: Eyes, Water, Fire

By Robin Laurence

Tomoyo Ihaya is a dedicated traveller. During the past decade and a half, she has made extended journeys to India from her home base in Vancouver. She has also installed exhibitions, attended workshops, or taken up residencies in Mexico, Thailand, France, and Japan, and has spent a couple of summers making art in a small studio in Norfolk, England. Her semi-nomadic existence is driven not by the touristic craving to consume the exotic but by the social and spiritual impulse to connect, identify, and understand, and the creative need to register these experiences in a meaningful way. Many of her drawings, mixed-media installations, and video works are her responses to peoples, cultures, and events to which she feels deeply bound. They are also a form of political protest, registering her dismay at the plight of persecuted minorities and her sympathy for refugees fleeing war, terror, and ethnic violence.

Ihaya's most powerful connection has been to India, which she has visited some sixteen times since 2005. She is a committed practitioner of Tibetan Buddhism, also known as compassionate Buddhism, and her first trip to South Asia was made with her Vancouver-based meditation group. Initially she was drawn to Ladakh, a remote and sparsely populated region in the north of India, often referred to as "Little Tibet" because of its ethnic, cultural, and religious ties to that disputed place.¹ Ihaya has also spent long periods of time in Tibetan settlements in the Himalayan region.

The series, "Drawings from Dharamsala," was initiated in Puri, an Indian city on the Bay of Bengal, where Ihaya had taken up an artist's residency in early 2012. She was alone in a cyber café there when she saw a report with a photo of a Tibetan monk who had self-immolated in protest of the Chinese government's occupation of his country and its oppression of Tibetan culture and religion.² The only way Ihaya could process the pain and the horror of this individual's drastic protest was to return to her room and draw a figure enveloped in red and white, the red symbolizing fire and the white, the desire for peace and purification. Following this event, Ihaya felt compelled to travel to Dharamsala, the home of the Dalai Lama and the seat of the Tibetan government in exile. During the six months in total she spent there, she produced more than 70 drawings, each again in response to another self-immolation. At the same time, she researched the lives of the Tibetan martyrs and took part in community vigils and memorials. Whether exhibited in galleries or posted on her website, the drawings are a way of expressing her personal grief and anguish over the horrific deaths of her co-religionists as well as a means of memorializing them and communicating their cause and their sacrifice to the wider world.



Ihaya's mixed-media installation expands her art-making beyond the fixed dimensions of the prints and drawings with which she has long been identified. *Eyes, Water, Fire* utilizes layering and repetition to suggest the complexity of the narratives she is trying to convey while also allowing the possibility of folding new ideas and experiences into each site-specific iteration. Although originating with the situation of Tibetans refugees, the symbolism of this work may be universalized to depict millions of refugees worldwide, including Syrians escaping war in their homeland and minority Rohingya Muslims fleeing persecution and violence by the Buddhist majority in Myanmar. Blue legs suggest forced migrations and long journeys, over snowy mountains and across wide seas. Red flames declare resistance and dignity. Eyes, large and small, are multivalent, signifying, among other things, the act of witness, windows to the mind, and vessels filled with and shedding tears. Using incense sticks, Ihaya burns tiny holes in her drawings of eyes as an act of prayer or meditation; the light that shines through these holes symbolizes hope.

Similar images and symbols appear in Ihaya's video, also titled *Eyes, Water, Fire*. Here, the simplicity of her hand-drawn forms and stop-motion techniques – the spectral opposite of high-tech, digitally rendered animation -- accords with the simplicity of prayer, and the repetition of symbols again suggests meditation. The work alludes to the occupation of Tibet, the erasure of traditional life ways, the pollution of important river systems, and, again, self-immolation protests. The wonder of Ihaya's simple forms and apparently guileless repetition is that they communicate emotional power, social complexity, and spiritual depth.

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¹ Parts of this essay previously appeared in the form of articles by the author in *The Georgia Straight*.

² Self-immolating protesters have included not only Buddhist monks and nuns but also Tibetan men, women and teenagers from every walk of life.

Robin Laurence is an independent writer, critic and curator based in Vancouver. She is the award-winning visual arts critic for *The Georgia Straight* and has long been a contributing editor of *Canadian Art* and *Border Crossings* magazines.

Tomoyo Ihaya Eyes Water Fire

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ODD Gallery

TOMOYO IHAYA was born and raised in Tsu City, Mie, Japan, and has been a resident of Canada since 2000. After studying studio arts at universities across Canada, Ihaya completed her MFA at the University of Alberta in 2002.

An interest in diverse cultures and a strong belief that art and one's life should be intertwined have led Ihaya to travel and produce artwork through international artist-in-residency programs in India, Mexico, Thailand, the United States and Canada. She has exhibited locally, nationally and internationally since 1998 and is a recipient of numerous project grants and awards for artists.

Since 2005, Tomoyo Ihaya has spent an extensive amount of time in India on independent art research and, during this time, she has become close to Tibetan communities in exile through her studies in Tibetan Buddhism. Since the winter of 2011, she has been working on a series of drawings about Tibetans who have self-immolated in response to the Chinese occupation of Tibet. The drawings are a form of mourning and prayer for the victims, and the result of her close relationships with Tibetan friends and families over the years.

When she is not in India, Tomoyo Ihaya lives in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada, where she teaches and makes art.

ARTIST STATEMENT

After many years of traveling and living abroad, particularly in India (sixteen visits since 2005), I have grown increasingly sensitive to people who have been forced to migrate. I have heard many stories of the loss of lives in struggle against suppression, lost homelands, escapes, and life in exile. There are many young and old friends with whom I have shared time together, who are refugees. Each of them possesses a story of hardship within his/her heart. They have not seen their families for many years. Some elder friends have passed away in the foreign land they escaped to, far from their native land. All these stories I have heard have made me think about what it is to be born and live. As a person who was born in a stable country (Japan) and who now lives in a stable country (Canada), my level of resonance/synchronization with these people and their journeys may not be able to reach the true depth of their despair. However, I do feel pain and I feel compelled to draw when I see the images and hear the stories of thousands of people escaping en masse over mountains, across great plains and oceans by any means possible. These works are the result of my direct and indirect experiences with people whom I have come to know.

Images: Tomoyo Ihaya, *For Lobsang Lozin*, mixed media on paper, 8.25 x 7.5", 2012 (front)

Tomoyohaya, *Refuge*, lift print, silk screen gouache on kozo paper, 29.75 x 56.5, 2015

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