

YUMI KATAYAMA
LAND
Recent Paintings

“Hot weather opens the skull of a city, exposing its white brain and its central nerves, which sizzle like the inside of an electric-light bulb.” ~ Truman Capote

Somewhere deep within Yumi Katayama's post-animist, post-Shinto, post-Buddhist, post-Japanese, post-Surrealist Limbic System there is an inner space, a sanctum, where things can be cuddly and warm, and where light can flood if she throws open the windows. It doesn't happen often. It can't. But when it does, she lights up, her art lights up, and the world around her lights up too.

Gold is not always involved in this fabulous illumination, but often it is. The ancient Egyptians believed it to be 'the skin of the gods' and specifically the skin of the sun god Ra. The Inca called it "the sweat of the sun". Most civilisations which sought to commune with the heavens have placed a special value on gold. The gorgeous glitter of its presence, the fact that it never tarnishes, its rarity, its preciousness, have endowed it with a beauty and an aura that transcends time and place.

Few of us, however, admire gold as brazenly or with the prickly insistence of Yumi Katayama. Once, in a brief excursion into jewellery creation, she made things from it: fashioning skull rings so heavy they weighed down your finger. It was worship of a sort, but also the projection of a world view. She was placing her trust in ancient preciousness, crossing her fingers in the presence of darkness. Shine a light on gold, and it feels salvational.

Much of the inspiration for the new collection of gold-obsessed, salvation-heavy paintings has come, again, from the old masters. In particular, it has come from the gold mosaics of Byzantium which survive in fragmented states in Greek and Italian churches. Like gold itself, the worshipped mosaics are survivors: indestructible, tough, eternal. With gold, there is always hope. Its glow creates its own light.

So that is one source of this outpouring. Another is the land and the burning it has had to survive in the climatic epoch of heat. Most of these paintings were created during a summer when the sun burned the fields to gold and fried your brain at night. It's the sun's story in all its Apollonian perversity. The solar light illuminates and shines and makes things grow. But it also kills and burns and demands sacrifices.

The new paintings vibrate between these two poles. From one angle, they celebrate gold, its beauty and its transformative glow. But step to the other side and the glow dims abruptly. Frenzies arise and spread. Black moods crowd in. One moment we appear to be celebrating the gorgeousness of a golden field, the next moment we are lamenting the fierceness of the heat that burned it. The screams are the screams of death. The earth has turned against us. The cosmos is determined to punish us.

But wait. Back in the world of the old masters there are balms and comforts to be found: memories of ancient solutions. The gold of the ancient mosaics cannot stop the burning or the ripping open of the skull at night. But it can pause the terror. It can distract. And perhaps distraction is all we can hope for.