



MEETING GOJIRA

A CONVERSATION WITH CRAIG NAGASAWA

Craig Nagasawa's grandparents came to the US from Japan in the early 1900s. One grandfather was an agricultural worker. The other worked in the Kennecott copper mine in Utah. It turned out that neither family was interned because they lived inland. Nagasawa's parents lived in Salt Lake City in an area of a few square blocks—"Japantown"—where they had a fish market. It was like "a big, extended family." All the land was owned by the Mormon Church and, in 1968, the Japanese community was fractured under redevelopment. Craig was twelve years old, the eldest of four siblings. Their displacement, as Nagasawa reflects, "basically destroyed the center of cultural life in Salt Lake for the entire Japanese community."

His parents responded to being displaced by opening a Japanese restaurant, and

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later he learned to cook. In his high school there was only one other Japanese family. Perhaps I shouldn’t have been surprised to learn that Nagasawa discovered skiing early on. The following interview consists of three conversations. The second took place three days after the first, and the third, seven months later. It was fascinating to participate in the unfolding that took place in the process. (Gojira is used throughout in place of Godzilla.)

Craig Nagasawa: I started skiing when I was six. I mean, in Salt Lake you could ski! I discovered this almost by accident. One day I was with my grandfather. We went into a war surplus store and walked by this huge row of old wooden army surplus skis and, for some reason, I was transfixed. My grandfather says, “Do you want a pair?”

In the winter the streets were covered with snow, and every once in a while I’d take these things out. The bindings wouldn’t work because I was a little kid.

So, I’d figure out ways to tie them onto my feet and I’d go scooting around the backyard. As I grew older, I figured out that you could take a bus from my little area to go skiing. It was very inexpensive in those days, especially for a kid. So I’d take the bus and go skiing all day. I was working at the restaurant all the time, and it was my escape ticket. I got obsessed with this.

works: When you’d ski was it with friends?

Craig: There’d be friends, but most of the time my mom dropped me off at six in the morning for the bus, and I’d just go skiing all day by myself. I’d graduated to actual kid skis, but I only had hiking boots. When I’d clamp the binding down, my boots would go like this [makes a cupped shape]. So, I skied around with my feet being cupped in half all day long. But I didn’t care. I think I was just naturally athletic. Even in those days, in gym class, I could stand and do flips and stuff, and everybody would be astounded, like, “*Where did you learn that?*”

I’d ski all day, but I’d still have to come back and go to work. That was tough. Eventually, I heard about a group of junior ski racers. They’d meet Saturday and Sunday. I was about ten, and ski racing became like my sole reason for living.

works: Did you have regular ski boots by then?

Craig: Yes. Eventually.

works: What was it like for you when you had the real ski equipment?

Craig: You would think that it would be a night-and-day difference, but it didn’t seem like that big of a deal. What I do remember is the first day of going to train with these eighteen and nineteen-year-olds. I was ten or eleven and remember just standing there in awe, and even being slightly terrified. I mean, *they were going fast.*

From that day on, I was skiing all the time. Gradually I was skiing more competitively. Then I got recruited by the University of Utah. That’s how I got to college. My father was, of course, against this, and I’d tell him I was going to get a ski scholarship!”

He would look at me in disbelief, “Do you realize how many people get a ski scholarship? One out of ten thousand!” When I did, he was shocked.

Once I started into the NCAA skiing, we'd start training in the middle of summer and ski every day. I skied on the team for three years. Then I discovered I had some other interests I wanted to pursue. That's when art-making kind of took over.

works: Did you inherit any of the art traditions in Japan?

Craig: No. But I did inherit certain kinds of aesthetics. At the fish market, most of the stuff was imported from Japan. I remember packages arriving and opening them and thinking how amazingly different even the coloration was, and how they packaged things.

works: So you really took that in.

Craig: Yeah. Yeah, yeah. And to this day, there's a smell—because they mostly packed stuff in rice straw. Whenever I catch a whiff of that—like any Japanese room that has tatamis—it has that same smell, and it instantly reminds me of opening those boxes from Japan. Of course, it was a big occasion when a shipment arrived. It was like Christmas. I remember being given a Panasonic AM radio, and the styling was incredible. They actually had an amazing confluence of aesthetics.

works: Japan has a very powerful design sensibility, as far as I can see.

Craig: That's what I'm describing. But it wasn't until I was out of grad school that I started thinking about all these simple things from Japan I'd grown up with. Then I suddenly realized, "Now, wait a minute. I can actually put these into my work and change my relationship to them." Right?

works: Well, starting from there, can you say something about that journey back to owning these qualities from your own culture?

Craig: Well by then I was seriously interested in making art. I'd gone to grad school. I'd been making minimal color field paintings at UC Davis. So, there was a confluence of things. For instance, I started thinking about *who am I?* What of my experiences are going to go into my work? Let's see—I graduated from Davis in '84 and I decided to stay in the Bay Area. And after graduating, I thought, "Okay. I can do whatever

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I want!" I was doing carpentry things. I had a studio and was living with Irene (Pijoan) in Rodeo. I'd worked for Roy De Forest before, doing all the stretchers and frames and stuff.

works: This is fascinating, but part of me is still back on skiing. What was your high point?

Craig: Well, there were two. We were skiing the college circuit, NCAA, and one year the University of Utah placed third in the whole country. Downhill wasn't my best event. I was on the first team in slalom, and there was giant slalom. These were my best events—I mean, I won races. I had top threes, top tens. Then some of us switched to the pro-tour. We traveled with a loose bunch of people and actually made money. We'd win races. I did the pro-racing tour for two years and made enough money to go to school.

works: That must have been pretty heady.



B. AND J.J. GO SKIING, 2016, HAND-GROUND MINERALS AND INK ON SILK AND JAPANESE PAPER, 30" X 40"

Craig: It was. But it was a lot of work. Every day you'd be out there training, and you'd be on the road the whole winter.

works: Were there mystical moments for you?

Craig: Always. With all of your technical training and facility, you're not actually trying to figure it out anymore. I'd stand at the top of a hill most people would be terrified of and whatever I wanted to do, I could do—even the unexpected stuff. The body just naturally could do it after so many years. Sometimes things happened where I felt like I was escaping gravity, basically.

I just thought of something [we look at a Gojira in one of his paintings]. He doesn't have his skis on, but you see, the Gojiras are always in these balancing acts, and they're actually a reconstruction of how we had to stand on skis. So, to me, they're fairly accurate.

works: I can feel it. So what do you think it means that in a lot of your recent paintings you have these Gojiras on skis? Have you pondered this?

Craig: Of course. A few years ago, I tried to make some works just using myself as the ski racer. But it was so tied up with stuff around the image of who I am, that when I started using Gojira, it became a way for me to re-channel all of that without having to explain myself. Right? People don't have to think about who I am. It's one step removed, so it freed me to be able to make narratives that I somehow couldn't put together before.

works: Do you think, in some way, that painting comes from the unconscious?

Craig: Definitely. I mean, these ultimate freedom-

type things have to do with letting everything go. And when those moments happen, it's a different consciousness. With skiing, there's the danger, and this focused concentration that's *incredible*. You have to be completely present and focused, and that presence and focus goes right into art-making. To me, they're the same.

When I concentrate on a painting, I feel like everything is put right to that moment when I'm making the work. I don't necessarily have to figure it out, so to speak. People used to ask me, "How could you go from being a ski racer to making art?" To me, it was the same thing, because you focused and trained every day.

I go to my studio every day, and it's the same thing—really concentrating in the moment. And when it finally works, the consciousness stuff falls off and there's this other thing taking its place. That feeling is the same as that moment of freedom in skiing when one has escaped gravity.

works: I mean, these moments—it's hard to find the words. It's like magic.

Craig: Right. And this is why I make paintings. There's a concentration in those things that, hopefully, gets communicated. Here's another way I think about it. There are parts of my paintings that don't have recognizable things in them. There's the primary pattern, like just spots of color. And as the painting progresses, there's a journey that eventually turns into an image. But I don't want the painting to let go of that earlier primary state. I'm always trying to have both at the same level. That primary pattern is like undoing how we've been taught to see.

works: I see. So there are decisions about how far to let it turn into something we can grasp directly.

Craig: Right. And I often push it too far. If the image takes over, then this deeper energy or sensation gets buried.



works: That's tricky, isn't it?

Craig: Yes. But it's a privilege watching it happen when it works. That's the magic.

works: Agnes Martin called it "a moment of perfection." At that moment everything is in order, life is good, but then it disappears.

Craig: And the next day you start over. It reminds me of these stories in Zen Buddhism, like the archer practicing over and over again. Then suddenly, he lets loose a shot—without really knowing how—and it's perfect. Then the teacher will say, "Go home, before you get proud of that."

works: Do you have a relationship with Zen?

Craig: Not directly. But I did do Vipassana meditation for a while with Jack Kornfield before they had a center at Spirit Rock. I'd do these two-week meditations. Those were very important and incredible things to me. I don't regularly do that anymore. I tried to move some of that concentration into just making my work.

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works: Getting back to the Gojira. Do you think it represents something in yourself, like a shadow side?

Craig: Sure. Gojira was born of a nuclear blast. My intent isn’t to write politics into my paintings, but I know these issues are there. There’s another thing, called *yokai* in Japanese—some are deities coming from Shinto Buddhism and some are more like folklore. I could be a yokai right now. They can inhabit you. There’s a certain kind of Japanese folklore that believes *everything* is inhabited by these spirits.

When I started looking at Gojira, it was this monster. The interesting thing is that I could use the monster as having humanitarian impulses. I mean, the Gojiras in my paintings aren’t really terrifying. I try to think of a folklore monster as a rebel that can deliver information that’s not all just negative or scary. Sometimes the fear part snaps us into taking a look at what we have to look at. The original idea is that, if we were in the monsters’ shoes, they were scaring us to wake us up. So, that’s how I’ve always thought of it.

works: What would you like us to wake up to?

Craig: Wake up for an instant just to be present. Wake up just to see, to be aware of what you’re thinking about when you’re looking at the painting—just what’s going on with you right now. If we look at Tibetan Buddhist thangka paintings, there are these very fierce figures. They’ve got fangs; they’ve got ten heads. I think, yes, they could be read as scary, but to me they’re using this fierceness to show you that you have to be fierce and strong to be present. I mean, there’s a certain concentration and commitment required, an obsessive or fierce commitment to see that through.

works: This doesn’t happen just because you’ve taken a summer session or a weekend seminar.

Craig: Right.

works: Somebody might say, “Well, he painted those Gojiras, and I can’t help but wonder if they represent something in him. Like, “What’s going on with him? Or what does he want us to see?”

Craig: Well, I’ve been through a lot with people who have passed away, and even my wife [Irene Pijoan]. So, maybe the monster aspect could also be considered like, this is really scary because this is death. This thing can eat you. And another way of waking up is when somebody dies. Right? And that also affects huge waves of people who knew that person.

We regard somebody dying as this terrible, sad thing. But we could go back to this idea that it wakes you up. I had to reframe my life and really think about what things meant to me. In relationship to that, my work became much more concentrated afterwards. I was done messing around. People were dying in my life, and so I wanted the work to have some equivalence to life and death, in a way.

Artists talk about a death aspect in their work, and it gets all romanticized in certain ways. Gojira is a slightly a comical figure—in the movies, it was bad sci-fi. So, I can think about loss and death by using that image without it getting imbued with this huge romanticized heaviness that we think of as death.

works: Right.

Craig: Remember when I showed you that painting

where there was a kind of river with a figure down there on the bottom, and there was this very floral landscape in the back? [yes] Gojira was not there. For a number of summers, after facing all this loss, my daughter and I would just hit the road. We'd camp, we'd go fly-fishing, we'd go hiking. With images of walking down the river, everything's like perfect, beautiful. You can't ask for much more.

Then you come around the corner and everything stops. It's a moment of astonishment somehow, which could be considered being scared. Right? But it's also a waking up. So, in the same way, suddenly this creature appears.

works: With this description of taking off and walking with your daughter—this was after the death of Irene. Right?

Craig: Yes. All of this is after. There were two ways I dealt with a lot of loss, and it wasn't just Irene. Roy De Forest was a good friend of mine, and I had two cousins who suddenly passed away. Suddenly, a lot of people I was close to died. Part of the way I've always negotiated these losses is to be in the environment. Part of that goes all the way back to ski racing. These kinds of things, they're elemental. Southern Utah is largely what we would call wilderness areas. I could get some gas money and just drive out there. So, even growing up, that was a certain kind of salvation for me. So, when I was facing all of this, I just thought, "Okay. I just need to get out of here. What can I do?" My daughter was going to be out of school, so we had the whole summer. Right away, I said, "Let's hit the road." Our trips were all around the western US.

works: It must have been good for your daughter.

Craig: It was really good for both of us. I remember finally escaping the I-80 corridor out there in the middle of nowhere and getting out of the truck and just going, "Here it is." The pressure of everything we'd been living through was gone. My daughter had a recognition of that, too, somehow. A lot of the floral patterns and landscape—these kinds of elements that appear in the work—come from certain kinds of places. There are these unseen things out there. We don't see the wind, per se. We see the leaves moving, or the way it stirs across the river.

My first trip to Japan, I think I was 30 years old.

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That's 31 years ago. It was a self-constructed trip. I traveled by myself and went mostly into the small country villages all over the place. I went to the big city centers, too—Kyoto and all of that. One of the things I took away was that, in fact, there is a lot of Japanese in me that was forgotten or not acknowledged. Yet, I wasn't contemporary Japanese. Japanese people would look at me because what I'd absorbed was from 1940 or something. My vernacular was dated. So there was a kind of amusing quality to that as well.

I went to Kyoto, and seeing some of those full fifteen-panel screens of Japanese painting, I just thought, "Those are masterpieces of the world!" So, that was a sudden awakening: "Wait a minute! There's even a bigger world than Western European art history!"—which I'd studied intensely.

When I saw those, I thought, "Okay. There's my life work!" When I came back I tried to figure out how those paintings were done. I tried for two years, but there was no information and I let it go. Then later, I found a lot of information in Western museums with Asian holdings, and in conservation journals—technical information. And since I was already a painter, I was fast on the uptake. Basically, I spent a year doing stuff and throwing it away. It was trial and error.





BUDDHA COWBOY IMMIGRANT, 1994, WATERCOLOR ON PAPER, 19" X 29"

works: That's fascinating. And your year of experimenting was when?

Craig: I started experimenting with it when my daughter was born, 1993, but nothing came to fruition for years. I was still making my own oil paintings and had a couple of shows of landscape-oriented work at Ruthie's [Braunstein/Quay Gallery, SF]. It took a long time for this traditional method to make it into my work, but once it did, it was no holds barred. I was finding rocks, buying rocks from China, breaking them and grinding them for pigments. In a way, it's a reaction against the speed of everything going on.

[second interview, three days later]

works: Tell me more about this traditional method. How many years have you been working this way?

Craig: Eight to ten. Fifteen hundred years ago Chinese paintings were already being done this way. The pigments are made from various kinds of crystallized

minerals, basically rocks. Then this carried into Japan where paintings were made this way pretty much until World War II. It also went into Tibet with their thangka paintings, and even into Egypt. Egyptian tombs are painted in a similar way.

works: Can you say more about that?

Craig: So, pigments are made from stones. One of them is malachite, a copper-based green; it's slightly soft and easy to grind. It was used as make-up in Egypt. They had these green eyes they would put on. Then, in China, it was the main green used for thousands of years. And that green is also in Japan. Then a relative of that green is azurite, which is more scarce. It's still being mined in China. It's a blue, crystallized stone that's fairly soft, so you can process it by hand fairly easily. Red was cinnabar, which actually contains toxic mercury. I use it sometimes, but I don't process it.

The pigments are ground out of stone and some-

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times dirt. I mean, there’s all these pigments that are just dirt. For instance, from Umbria in Italy you get burnt umber and raw umber; they’re just veins in the dirt. And southern France has yellow ochres. That’s why they’re so inexpensive; there are whole mountains of them.

I break the minerals down and bind them with hide glue. Hide glue is pretty much the oldest glue known to mankind. Native Americans used it. All these different cultures and civilizations used hide glue. It lasts forever. Its biggest vulnerability is moisture. So, a lot of those Egyptian wall paintings are completely intact—and the same with early Chinese and Japanese paintings that are thousands of years old.

works: Say again what prompted you to move back to this ancient, tedious method?

Craig: Well, I first noticed it when I was making oil paintings. The commercial paints are all ground the same. Like everything else that’s standardized, we lose the extreme ends of it. On one of my early trips to Europe, I remember looking at a Velazquez painting and going, “I don’t understand how this was made.” It had a certain translucency and luminosity, for instance. And partially, it was because they were grinding their own pigments. For different colors, some would be ground coarse, some would be really fine.

When I made this discovery that the fine and the coarse ends of the materials were missing, it was like somebody suddenly gave me about eight more notes to the scale, you know? It was just a technical thing originally, and then it became a kind of a Japanese cultural identity for me, in a sense, because that was how they painted.

works: Having been back to Japan, did you discover things you’ve inherited that you didn’t know about?

Craig: Well, I discovered, first of all, that I wasn’t really fully Japanese, but there was a visual aesthetic from Japan I’d absorbed. That was reinforced. Their graphics are beautiful. I mean, Japan has some of the most outrageous packaging. You get a bento for lunch, and the way it’s put together is just as important as the food inside, in a way. So being in Japan was just a reinforcement of something I’d absorbed as a kid.

works: In other words, you had a feeling both for US popular culture and something Japanese.

Craig: Exactly. There’s a color sense in Japan that’s much different than our color sense here, and it was markedly different in the 60s. What we had here were primary colors—red, yellow, blue—and there it was all mixed colors, secondary.

works: Did your parents have any artwork?

Craig: Very, very little. The house I grew up in the 50s had these linoleum floors with these square patterns with this weird yellowish color. Then there was another one with kind of a splash pattern. It was like looking at clouds. I’d find an image, and then a couple of days later, I’d go back and see if I could find it again. I really remember this patterning and this search for images.

works: It's fascinating that, as a kid, there would be images you'd find and then actually want to go back and find them again.

Craig: Right. Almost like reassuring myself that, in fact, I'd seen them.

works: It's intriguing because these are actually deep things from childhood.

Craig: Right. That's why a lot of times, in the paintings, there's a kind of patterning. The representation dissolves into a pattern, I've noticed. A lot of times, what I'm trying to look at is how to balance those two things and not lose one over the other. So, this experience of not-quite-knowing still exists. Right? It depends on the painting, because if I bring a lot of resolution to an image, then that kind of disappears, right? A flower is suddenly a flower, and a Gojira is a Gojira.

works: Right. This is an interesting painting behind you right now.

Craig: That's what we're talking about, in a way.

works: It has the floor background, and in the foreground there's this super-American icon. Then, coming over the tops of the mountains, we see two Gojiras skiing our way. It encapsulates something related to everything that you're saying.

Craig: I agree. I agree.

works: The way you've painted the mountains—and I haven't studied this—it's easy for me to think it's very Asian somehow.

Craig: And it may be. If you think about Japanese painting, they're very pattern oriented. Japanese wood-block printing is like patterns, and Western artists were so drawn to that. People like van Gogh were crazy over the use of flattened out shapes and patterns. So, this looks like a big orange blob at first. Then at second glance, "Uh, no. Wait a minute. There's like some snow on a hill." But they're just marks that kind of fuse when you back up. So, there's always this place in the painting where the atmosphere of the painting is slightly dissolving, kind of moving. Your eye can't grab onto something and say, "This is a rock," because it keeps

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turning into little dots of paint. Right? It insists on its pattern, in a sense. So, this painting is more a summary of what we've been talking about as opposed to some of my other ones.

works: What have your reflections been since we talked a couple of days ago?

Craig: We came to this question: What does the Gojira represent? I already explained about the yokai and this spirit level in Japanese culture, and an alter-ego aspect as well. But what really struck me after you left, was something I hadn't thought about—that basically, to me, it's a symbol of Japan, a perspective directly from my generation. I grew up after the war and Gojira was a creation that came out of Japan after the war, borne of a nuclear blast.

works: Right.

Craig: So I suddenly realized that, "Wait a minute, in this bigger picture of things, Gojira is the part of me that's just including Japan in my work without having to go through all of the politics." A lot of times in the narratives, Gojira is not a fearsome monster to me. It's both a kind of an unknown character, with some ter-



SKI RACER, 2018, MEZZOTINT, CHINECOLLÉ, COPPER LEAF, GAMPI, A.P., IMAGE 8" X 10"

rifying aspect, because part of me doesn't know what Japan is since I grew up here. Part is also that there's a benevolent character; there's a humanity in some of these Gojiras; they're involved in doing things like going out on dates, or going skiing, or doing these bizarre adventures—and that all just kind of came flooding in after we spoke the other day.

works: I can easily see the Gojiras as figures of the unconscious, and part of that could be a sort of wrestling with—or investigating, or trying to integrate—what Japan is for you.

Craig: Or what is Japanese? Yeah, in my identity, both intellectually, and then kind of in my own story. I haven't been using the Gojira image itself for that long—five or six years at the most.

works: It's very interesting to consider the possibility that making art can be a way of investigating the unknown in oneself.

Craig: Exactly. I've always thought of art as looking at the unknown somehow. Because otherwise, why do it? I mean that's built into how I work. Basically, I'm looking to discover something I didn't know about—but *looking* for it, not *thinking* through it, which is much different. I mean, it's not that I don't think. But if I'm *thinking* through it, the thinking is rhetorical or kind of polemic: here's one side and here's the other side—or here's the middle, and the inside, and the outside. But painting has the possibility of going somewhere else that doesn't include all of that.

works: There's something flat about ordinary thought.

Craig: Yeah. It's this or that.

works: It flattens life out; and life is so much richer than just thoughts.

Craig: Yes. So, that's where just working in the studio—putting something up there, changing it, moving it around... I have three or four things going on; there's always one, big, main painting. But a lot of times, I have to work it out as I'm going, and, as we saw the other day, some things disappear, completely change. The way I'm now working makes it much more difficult to make major changes. It has to go slowly into some other thing, and for want of a better word, the ghost of the previous painting always stays there. To me, that's really interesting, although a lot of times where it came from just disappears.

works: Listening to you as you bring to life this process, I realize there's also the problem of needing to make money. It's truly problematic, because the real meanings have no equivalence in terms of money.

Craig: Right, I agree. That's why I've spent a lot of time making a kind of system by which I can work. Because I teach, I can pay my rent. I don't have this extreme pressure. There's always this two-prong thing, because as an artist, you should be showing and selling with equal success. But the other part for me is that it's an everyday practice, or adventure—and I know how to respect that. I guard it. I'm mostly here by myself. I actually have a talk about this with my students, because that part is taken for granted. "Oh, you went to your studio and concentrated on your work all day." Great. But nobody really knows what that means, except for another artist. I have a certain privilege because I can just go to my studio and be by myself, and go into those areas of whatever it is, working on work. It's just every day, you know? So, when something good happens, I respect myself and the work for what happened, but then I'll go home and have a cup of coffee.

works: And that's very good, I think.

Craig: I think we touched on this briefly before. If you get prideful somehow, it turns into this whole ego thing and, all of a sudden, you're not there anymore. Then you're on the money side again.

Part of what I thought about after our first conversation is what I meant by this of idea of surrendering. I talk about this with my students a lot, too. There's this idea that, as an artist, your job is to put your ego into your painting and push it at everybody else, that a good painting is "full of you" somehow.

But the art I like is made when the artist actually has gotten out of the way. At some point doing a painting, it literally feels like *I'm the one stopping it* with my decisions, and *my* aesthetic—and all that stuff about, "I'm the artist and I'm in control." At some point, in a given painting, I can arrive at a place where I realize that in order to go on, I have to give up something I started with. It could be an idea, it could just be a feeling of something and, if I can let that happen, the painting has a chance to find something unexpected.

works: I think it's a central thing. There's a lot of pressure, especially among young artists, to "brand yourself."

Craig: Right. I think it's kind of a commercial, false idea, and it exists. In order to continue to let the work expand and find itself, at some point that ego-thing has to be guarded against. I'm not saying that, as an artist, I don't have some understanding of how the work turns into a commodity. But in the one-on-one making part, when I'm here, that other stuff is not here. We talked about the word "fierce" the other day, remember? So, this is where the fierce has to come in—the fierce quality of trying to keep that stuff at bay, and be respectful of these other processes.

works: That's making me think of the Gojiras again. You said Gojira just came into your paintings maybe five years ago. How did that happen?

Craig: It was instant. See that little toy over there? [a Gojira] A cousin gave it to me, thinking, "Oh, you might be interested in this." It was wrapped like a present. I opened this thing and was like, "Wow! I'm going to the studio with this!" I just set it on the table and started painting.

Instantly, I knew this touched on whole bunch of parallel narratives—all the stuff I'd been thinking about, but couldn't figure out how to approach without being self-conscious. How could I include a figurative reference without it being a particular person, per se? I wanted the painting to have the possibility of em-

“We came to the question of what Gojira represents. And I already explained about the yokai and this spirit level in Japanese culture—and an alter-ego aspect, as well. But what really struck me after you left, was something I had not thought about—that basically, to me, it’s a symbol of Japan, a perspective directly from my generation.”

bodying all these other things. So, suddenly there was this mass-oriented audience toy. It didn’t have this personal baggage with it. There was this immediate recognition. I remember telling somebody, “I’m going to make some Gojira paintings.”

They just said, “Ha, ha. That’s pretty funny.” And now, many years later...

works: It particularly fascinates me how there’s a function of intelligence that instantly recognizes something, like you said. These moments are on another level. But I appreciate that Zen attitude: *it is what it is*, and don’t get hung up on it, right?

Craig: Right. And that’s what was great. It was just a toy, but already had this built in. “Okay, I can get all involved in this, but it’s still just a toy.”

works: Yet, for you, it was a doorway into a deep...

Craig: Yes. And of course, I’m still finding out what

that door is. Like, even from our discussion the other day, suddenly I’m thinking of this another way. So I might instantly know, “Okay. There’s something that’s really great about this.” But I still reserve judgment until I actually go there and start making the paintings, because my way of finding out is by making the paintings.

And that’s what happened when I started grinding my own pigments and experimenting. All of a sudden, there was this feeling like, “Wait a minute. There’s a whole world I can work with here that I’ve never even seen before!”

I was thinking the other day that even with the narratives in the paintings—they’re just loose-knit, and you could group them in various ways. Often people are engaged in some kind of activity, like people are in boats, people are flying back and forth, they’re skiing, they’re doing all of these things. They’re on adventures, right?

So, the narrative is an adventure; it’s like a comic book. There’s an adventure going on. Now, I don’t try to make it clear what that adventure is, but the thing is, going on an adventure—for anybody—*what does that mean?* If we decide to go on a car trip, we get ready for it. Right? We gather our materials. We study some maps or think about where we’re going to go. We actually spend a lot of effort getting ready for an adventure. Then we head out, and there’s a sense of freedom. Hopefully, we’ve let go of things. So, there’s this possibility. It goes back to this idea of a door that’s opened.

The adventure is looking for this door, in a way. But it takes effort. It didn’t just happen by itself. That same idea goes into the making of the painting. It’s *that I know there’s an adventure happening*.

That’s why I make the paintings. But it’s also a lot of work. So, I have to get ready for it. I have to grind my pigments, and do all of this stuff. Then finally, I go on the adventure. Some adventures are greater than others.

I think a lot of viewers don’t want to put the effort in to go on the adventure. They just want to look, and the painting is supposed to do all the work for you. The difference between entertainment and an adventure, for me, is that even the viewer has to meet the thing partway or it’s not going to take them anywhere. I think there are always the doors to the unknown. But in order to get to those doors, there’s a fairly intense amount of work.

works: That's worth underlining. If we're interested in hidden treasure, we have to start doing some work.

Craig: Yeah. Get your pick out. Start digging.

works: Right. When I first saw your Gojira paintings, I liked them immediately. But then I thought, "Okay. These are fun, but what's Craig actually up to?" I've looked at them now for a few years, and then suddenly, I had the feeling that, "Okay. It's time to go talk with Craig."

Craig: Right. But also, that time allowed me to get to where I am now, too, so I could even talk about it.

works: Yes. And earlier we talked about some of what the scary monster part might be about.

Craig: Well, and another part of the unknown is that it can hurt you, harm you, eat you. It represents a possibility of dying, and dying is going on the ultimate adventure. Going on a small adventure is like a preparation for that, in a way, because you open the doors of not knowing what's going to happen.

works: There's also something about dream imagery where a scary thing can appear. It can represent fears I'm having about something coming up in my actual life. But this same thing might be a door. If I can meet it, it may open up to a very positive thing.

Craig: I agree. Absolutely. Going through those losses changed my work a lot, obviously. As you say, stepping through those places as they happened was completely terrifying. There was a period where I was in an altered state for three or four years. But I actually worked with that; I looked at it so closely that it wasn't as scary anymore. What that also translated into was that my work had to get much deeper. So, if we come back to the adventure of all of this, it's like the adventure suddenly got really intense. And as long as I could just be open to what was going on, I saw how that just went right into the work.

*[The following exchange is from seven months later.
I'm seeing his new Gojira paintings]*

works: Wow. Now the Gojiros have human faces on them. What's going there?

Craig: I think I've always thought of them as humans,

"I don't try to make it clear what that adventure is, the thing is, going on an adventure—for anybody—*what does that mean?* If we decide to go on a car trip, we get ready for it. Right? We gather our materials. We study some maps or think about where we're going to go. We actually spend a lot of effort getting ready for an adventure. Then we head out, and there's a sense of freedom. Hopefully, we've let go of things. So, there's this possibility. It goes back to this idea of a door that's opened."

but I just hadn't gotten there yet. It just dawned on me that the ideal would be to combine the Gojira with the human face. It just came to me, somehow. These are the first tries, and there were a number of things I identified right after I started doing them. One was that I could create a narrative that's broader, and maybe I can also talk about the humanness of the paintings in a way I felt I couldn't get to before. The other paintings I stand completely behind. It's just some other place that it's going.



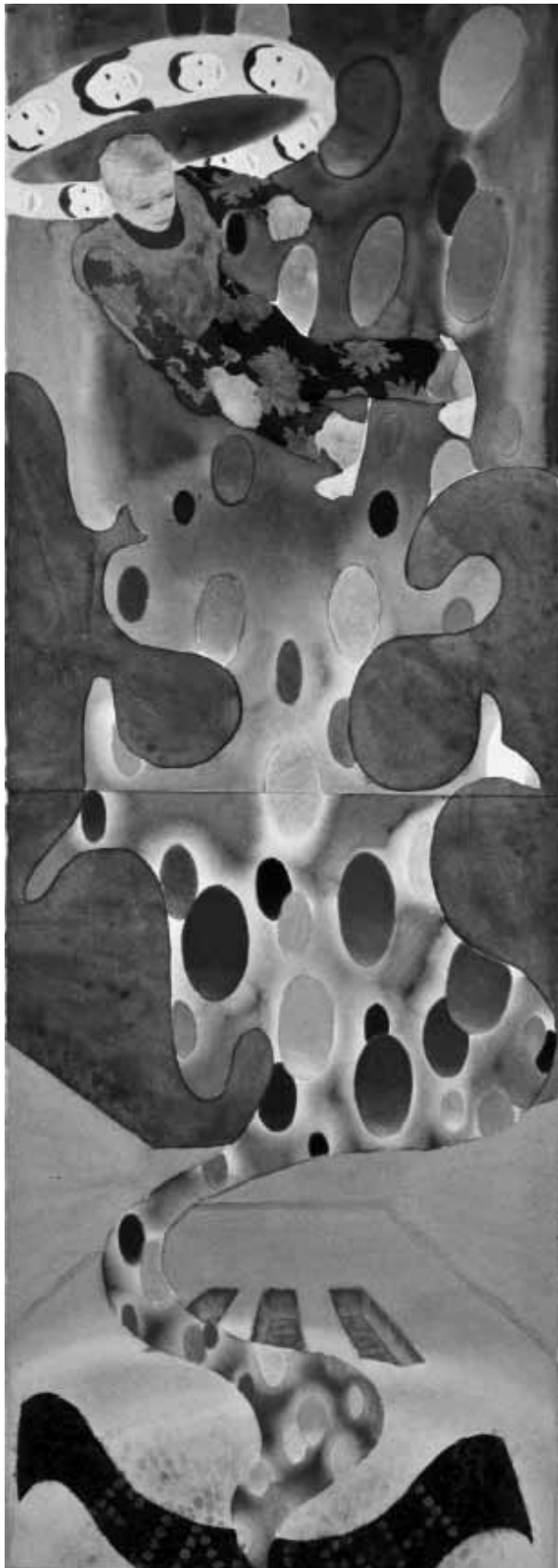
CAVE FALLS DELIVERY, 2018, SUMI-INK ON CANVAS, 26 3/4" X 33"

works: And you're feeling happy with these.

Craig: [laughs] Yes, but I think everybody is always happy with their latest things. After the first one, I knew it was going to work. I seized upon that right away. Also I'd just returned from another road trip with my daughter. We 4-wheel-drive camped from Canada to the bottom of Wyoming on the backside of the Tetons. She had just graduated from college and this is what she wanted to do.

So we thought about this terrain where we hadn't been. It's the western side of the Continental Divide. This side is all a series of dirt roads and these great flyfishing rivers. Once you're in there, you virtually see nobody for days. We drove all the way down on the back side of Yellowstone. There are actually dirt road entrances into the park, and we crossed into its southeastern corner. We were in there for a couple of weeks, hiking and flyfishing.

My interest in these really raw places that are semi-



untouched is their feeling of timelessness. Time stretches on in a different way, so I thought a lot about these things while we were out there. What if there was a way to bring the feeling of that landscape into the narratives I was already working on? In the previous paintings, the narrative is more about a heightened adventure rather than the interactions of the actual figures and the Gojiras. While I was out there with my daughter, I started thinking, "Are there ways I could make the narrative still ambiguous but related to what I was feeling there?"

When I came back, I took most of the color out because it has the possibility of making the images too romanticized. I wanted a narrative "planted on two feet." [laughs] And since I was starting with this new change, I wanted to strip it down to see what the possibilities were.

works: To get closer to what the essence of the image is.

Craig: I think so. It wasn't that intentional. I just felt I needed to see this in black and white. But after I made the first one, I realized there was some elemental thing that could come through that way that had been missing.

works: It's hard not to think it comes back to questions around Asian-American identities.

Craig: Before, the Gojiras were already a symbol of Japanese-American identity, in a way. And having the faces takes me a step closer to talking about it more specifically. Then there's also a gender issue. Gojira always was portrayed as a non-gendered figure. So I just started thinking about those issues. How could I bring it even closer to what I was really thinking about? I can't get off the hook as easily, because Gojira is already an entertaining figure. Almost whatever I do, people will be entertained, but I may not be getting to some of what I was trying to say.

works: Is this an ongoing journey?

Craig: [laughs] Definitely! I was thinking about this when I got back. I'd never, in my wildest imagination, have thought I'd have arrived at this point when I was 10 years old, or even 18 years old. I've taught at the university [UCB] now for twenty-five years. The life of making these paintings, and being in this realm, is amazing to me. It's a privilege; it's a way to ask questions every time I start a painting. ♦

ONE LIFE, 1997, WATERCOLOR AND PASTEL ON PAPER, 97" X 32"