

“Riusuke Fukahori: Seeing oneself on the other side of the water’s surface”

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Fish fiend: Artist Riusuke Fukahori first became intrigued by goldfish in 2000. | MASA HARU HATTA

Layer upon layer of clear, high-performance nonyellowing epoxy resin cover three-dimensional figures of goldfish painted incrementally in acrylics. The finished works cast stunning natural shadows, shimmering beneath the surface as though they were alive. These are the renowned works of goldfish artist Riusuke Fukahori.

Though he is now so famous that his name is almost synonymous with goldfish both in Japan and overseas, when Fukahori first left art school he had no interest in goldfish at all. “When I was little I saw goldfish as somewhat uncool, not really a fitting subject for art. I was born near the city of Yatomi, where there were a lot of goldfish farms, so I suspect there were just too many of them around. Back then the Japanese tended to be in awe of anything foreign, and I confess that I, too, found tropical fish far sexier. I’ve always had an interest in creatures that live in water, though. Human beings can’t survive underwater. For animals like these, however, underwater is home; in fact, without water they die. One side and the other, with the water’s surface forming the boundary: The more I thought about it, the more it intrigued me as a theme.”

The allure of goldfish struck him like a bolt from the blue. “I was hanging around in my room, exhausted from trying to decide whether to quit art altogether. In the murky aquarium next to my bed I glimpsed a startlingly beautiful flash of red spine. I felt a sudden urge to express that beauty, and I drew and drew and drew some more.” That impulse was not external; it came entirely from within himself. “I’ve been working on goldfish paintings ever since,” he continues, “hoping that the people overseas, of course, but also Japanese will notice the beauty of goldfish.”



Shinchuya goldfish merchant recreation: Installation view at Shonan the Hiratsuka Museum of Art

Goldfish certainly seem to be an uncommon sort of creature. Since emerging as a genetic mutation, they have been kept by humans for more than 1,500 years, retaining their vivid colors. It has been said that if humans stopped keeping them, goldfish would revert to their ancestral carp form in three generations. “That makes them sound like an ephemeral sort of creature,” Fukahori admits, “but actually, with some love and care, they can live an inordinately long time. They’re pretty tough fish. And the way they behave is very reminiscent of humans. Keep too many in a small tank and they start fighting, just as humans wage war on each other. The way they foul water with their urine and excrement simply by being alive also brings to mind human existence. Our planet is like an aquarium that’s getting dirtier every day. We may treat our sewage, but in reality we still aren’t able to clean up our messes completely.”

In 2019, Fukahori is staging his first solo touring exhibitions at public art museums. The displays feature a modern-day re-creation of the famous Edo-period goldfish merchant Shinchuya. Along with several large acrylic pieces that were more than a year in the making, Fukahori is presenting a range of other works both two- and three-dimensional. He explains frankly, “I’ve employed various forms of expression but, fundamentally, it’s all about goldfish. Goldfish are what I identify with.”

“This will be my 18th year painting goldfish, but there is still so much I want to do, and so many people around the world who I wish could see my work. I hope to be painting goldfish until my dying day.”