

Takehiko

SUGAWARA



The Art of Takehiko Sugawara

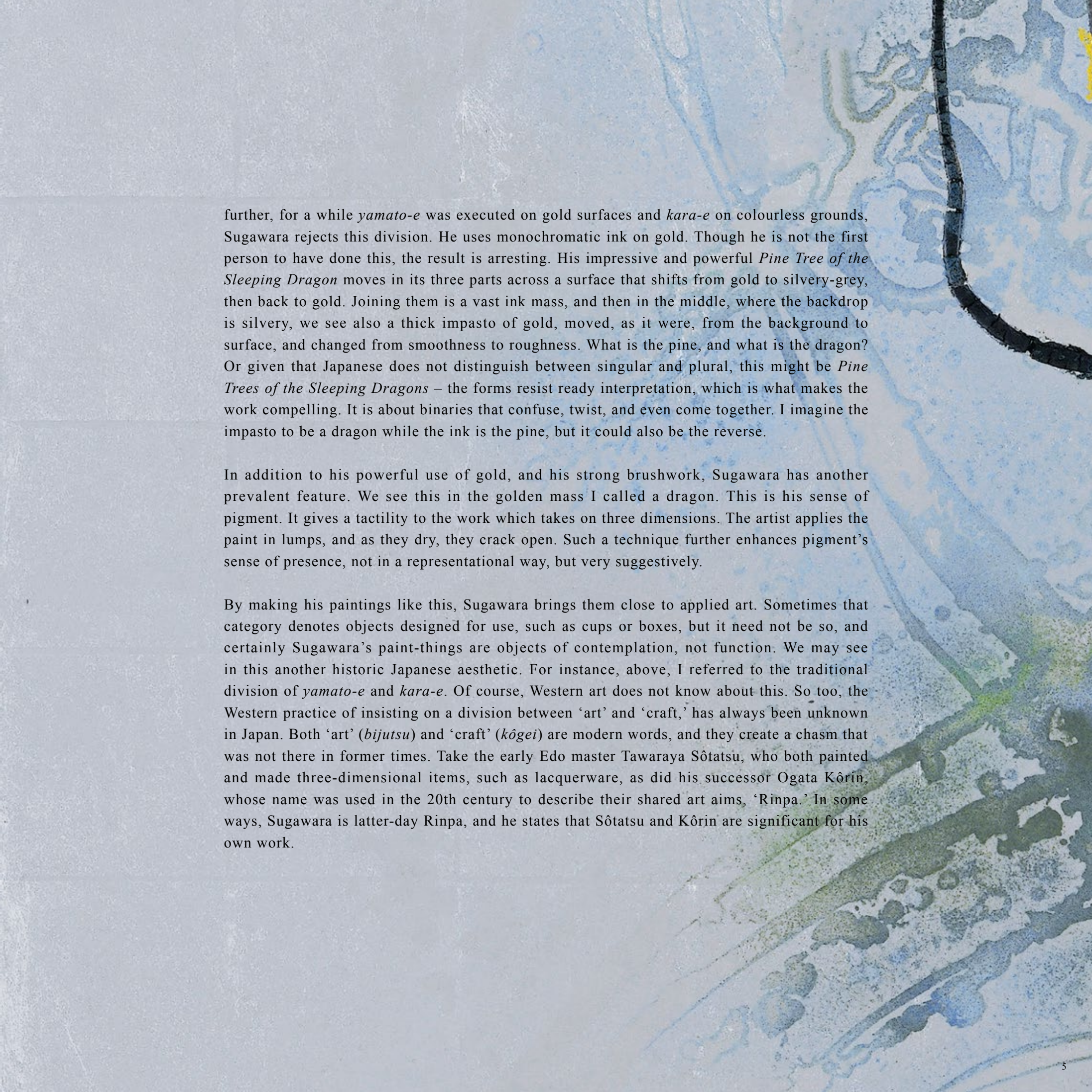
Eclectic Japanese Art: from Traditional to Contemporary

Aesthetics

The stupendously rich and thought-provoking work of Takehiko Sugawara is already known to those interested in contemporary Japanese art. Sugawara has become more widely admired internationally through the numerous exhibitions that was held worldwide. Sugawara's work has been recognised at the highest levels, with purchases by the Japanese Government via its Agency for Cultural Affairs (Bunka-chô), and now, at the close of the second decade of the twenty-first century, Sugawara stands out as one of Japan's most important living artists.

I myself am a specialist in the historical arts of Japan, especially of the Edo Period, so when I was first approached by my former student, Kiyomaru Tamenaga, to write a short piece about Sugawara, I felt somewhat daunted and unqualified. But the more I looked at his paintings, the more I felt I might have something to contribute on the subject. I have the impression that past Japanese paintings are essential to him, because of several parallels apparent in his work. First, like many historical Japanese artists, Sugawara works in both colourful paint and monochrome ink. Traditionally, these have been referred to as *yamato-e* (or *waga*) and *kara-e* (or *kanga*). The former was used more for the representation of indigenous things, such as Japanese birds, flowers, stories and landscapes, and the latter for things relating to 'kara,' that is, the Asian continent. We might simplistically say one is emotional or lyric work, and the other more severely moral. Monochromatic work also includes calligraphy, which is executed in ink alone, whether it is used to write things in Japanese (*wabun*), or Chinese (*kanbun*).

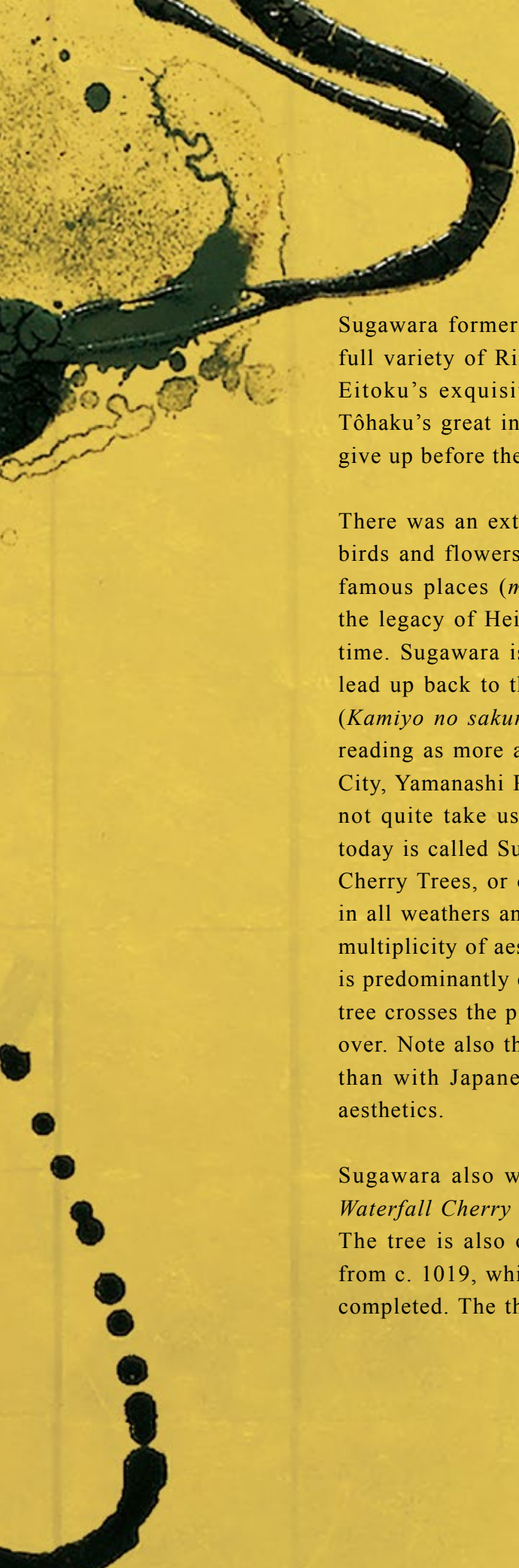
Sugawara demonstrates a very contemporary touch when he combines both types of traditional style within a single work. Some of his compositions are divided down the centre, with a colourful half and a monochromatic half. By doing this, he both reinforces and questions the long-standing artistic polarity, the 'self' against the 'other.' Sometimes Sugawara goes



further, for a while *yamato-e* was executed on gold surfaces and *kara-e* on colourless grounds, Sugawara rejects this division. He uses monochromatic ink on gold. Though he is not the first person to have done this, the result is arresting. His impressive and powerful *Pine Tree of the Sleeping Dragon* moves in its three parts across a surface that shifts from gold to silvery-grey, then back to gold. Joining them is a vast ink mass, and then in the middle, where the backdrop is silvery, we see also a thick impasto of gold, moved, as it were, from the background to surface, and changed from smoothness to roughness. What is the pine, and what is the dragon? Or given that Japanese does not distinguish between singular and plural, this might be *Pine Trees of the Sleeping Dragons* – the forms resist ready interpretation, which is what makes the work compelling. It is about binaries that confuse, twist, and even come together. I imagine the impasto to be a dragon while the ink is the pine, but it could also be the reverse.

In addition to his powerful use of gold, and his strong brushwork, Sugawara has another prevalent feature. We see this in the golden mass I called a dragon. This is his sense of pigment. It gives a tactility to the work which takes on three dimensions. The artist applies the paint in lumps, and as they dry, they crack open. Such a technique further enhances pigment's sense of presence, not in a representational way, but very suggestively.

By making his paintings like this, Sugawara brings them close to applied art. Sometimes that category denotes objects designed for use, such as cups or boxes, but it need not be so, and certainly Sugawara's paint-things are objects of contemplation, not function. We may see in this another historic Japanese aesthetic. For instance, above, I referred to the traditional division of *yamato-e* and *kara-e*. Of course, Western art does not know about this. So too, the Western practice of insisting on a division between 'art' and 'craft,' has always been unknown in Japan. Both 'art' (*bijutsu*) and 'craft' (*kôgei*) are modern words, and they create a chasm that was not there in former times. Take the early Edo master Tawaraya Sôtatsu, who both painted and made three-dimensional items, such as lacquerware, as did his successor Ogata Kôrin, whose name was used in the 20th century to describe their shared art aims, 'Rinpa.' In some ways, Sugawara is latter-day Rinpa, and he states that Sôtatsu and Kôrin are significant for his own work.



Sugawara formerly depicted only in black and white, but he has increasingly embraced the full variety of Rinpa expression, in colour too. He says, ‘I inherited a dynamism from Kanô Eitoku’s exquisite screens, such as his *Cypress Trees*, and a sensitivity from Hasegawa Tôhaku’s great ink works.’ He goes on, ‘no one is confident of superseding Tôhaku, so they give up before they’ve even tried. I aspire to be the one to succeed in this challenge.’

There was an extensive thematic field for Rinpa artists, but they are mostly associated with birds and flowers, and especially with those that feature in *waka* poetry. They also depicted famous places (*meisho*), notably, those appearing in *waka* and *monogatari*. Rinpa built on the legacy of Heian literature, which in the Edo Period began to be widely read for the first time. Sugawara is interested in *meishô*, but the sites of our modern age, selecting ones that lead up back to the past. One example is *Cherry Tree from the Age of the Gods – Gold Leaf* (*Kamiyo no sakura – Kinpaku*; some might pronounce this *Jindai-zakura*, but I see the other reading as more authentic). The tree is real and grows on the grounds of the Jissô-ji, Hokuto City, Yamanashi Prefecture. Experts suggest it may be as much as 2000 years old, which does not quite take us back to *kamiyo*, does bring us to the mythical Japanese king (*daiô*) who today is called Suinin-tennô, in the Yayoi Period. It is regarded as one of Japan’s Three Great Cherry Trees, or one of the Hundred Famous Trees. Sugawara went to visit it and sketched it in all weathers and seasons, blossoming, or under heavy snow. His resultant painting brings a multiplicity of aesthetic senses together, in scintillating fusion. Half the painting’s background is predominantly coloured, while half is gold, divided horizontally. A strong, wild, calligraphic tree crosses the piece diagonally, while two branches rise upwards. It scatters pink flowers all over. Note also that the painting is in square format, which one associates more with Western than with Japanese art. Therefore, the piece is both a reflection of Japanese and Western aesthetics.

Sugawara also works in monochrome, as noted above, and a tree is found in his *Miharu Waterfall Cherry* (*Miharu-Takizakura*), also a real tree, in Tamura-gun, Fukushima Prefecture. The tree is also one of the Three Great Cherries and is estimated to be 1000 years old, or from c. 1019, which means it began to grow just as *The Tale of Genji* (*Genji monogatari*) was completed. The third tree is the Usuzumi-zakura in Gifu, mid-way between the others in date,

at 1500 years old so planted about 515, during the reign of the King Keitai (today referred to as Keitai-tennô), who is regarded as the first ruler of the dynasty of today's Emperor of Japan. Sugawara has also painted this tree. The *Miharu Waterfall Cherry* is especially relevant for today because it was damaged in the Great East Japan Earthquake of 2011. The attendant fears about radiation led to a decline in visitors going to see it.

Sugawara depicts the natural sublime, ephemeral yet eternal. He seeks to capture such contrasting greatness through the veneration of his artworks. As one can instantly tell from Sugawara's selected subjects, and from a comparison with Sôtatsu and Kôrin, the human aesthetic sense, and our mode of representation have transformed over time. Nevertheless, the sublime, and the great art that captures it, always moves viewers. That much is constant. This is perhaps why Sugawara enjoys such a reputation worldwide. I for one excitedly await his continuous, future evolution.

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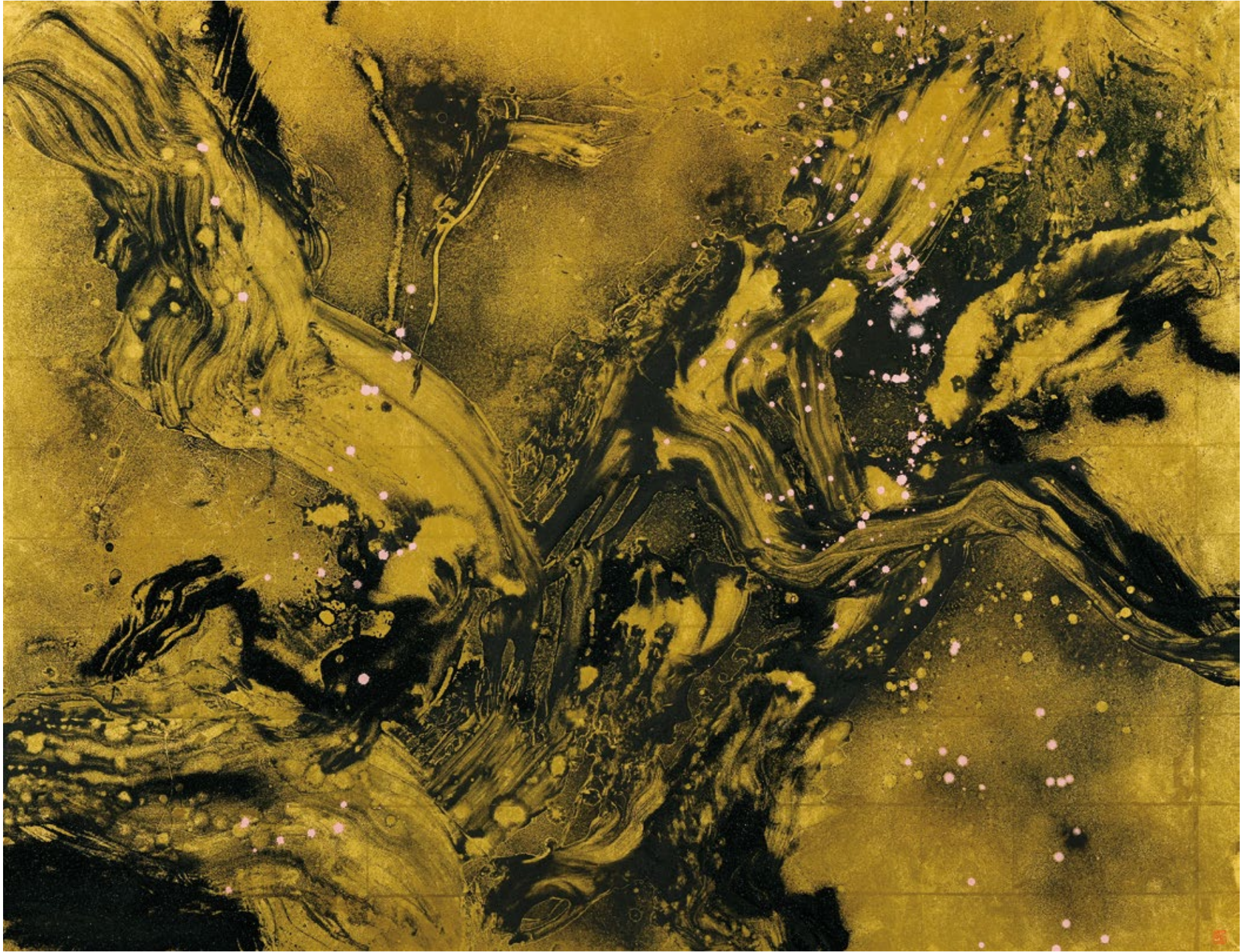
Cypress Trees Kanô Eitoku



Pine Trees Hasegawa Tôhaku

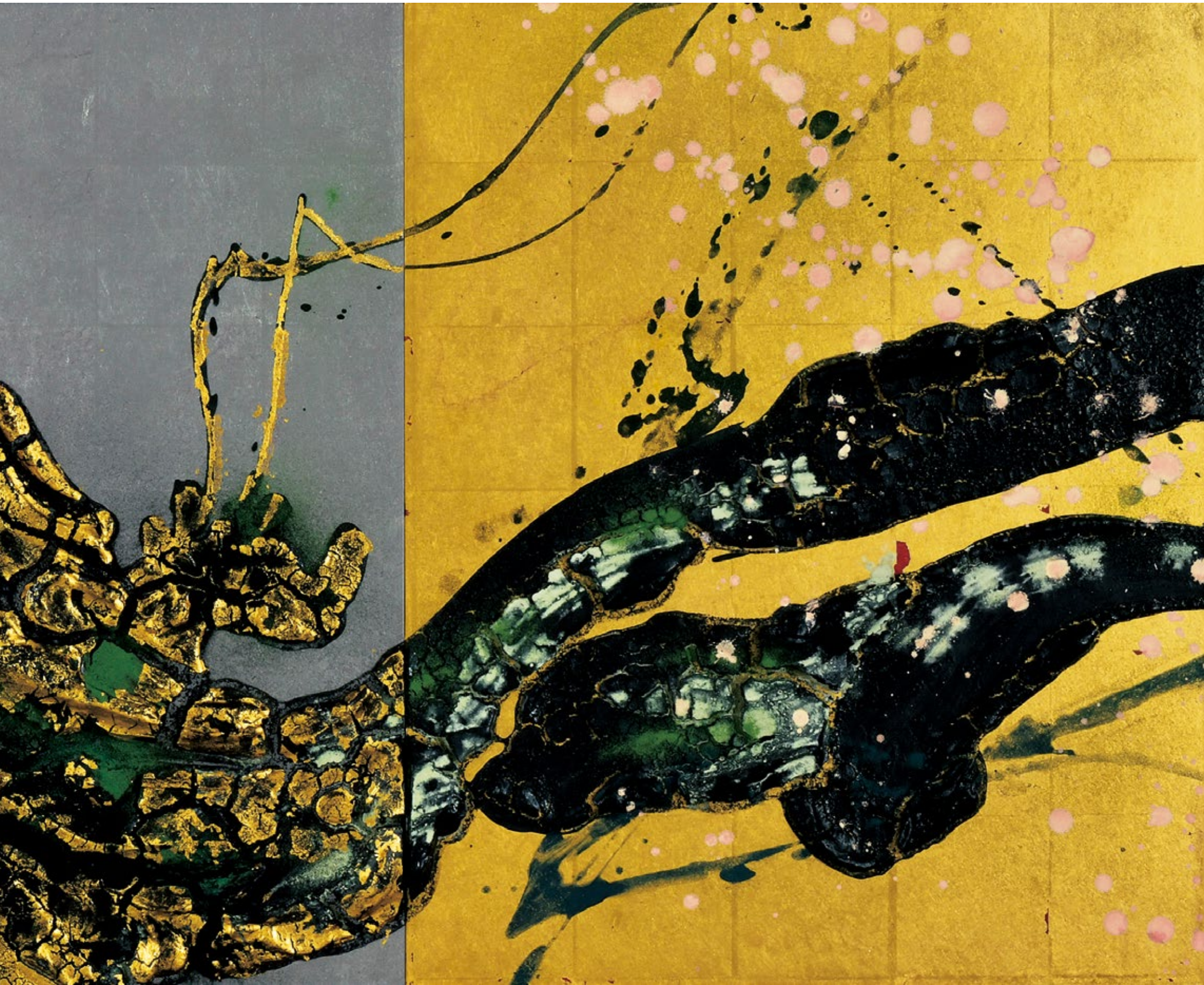


Miharukaika
194 × 162 cm



Miharukaika
112 × 146 cm

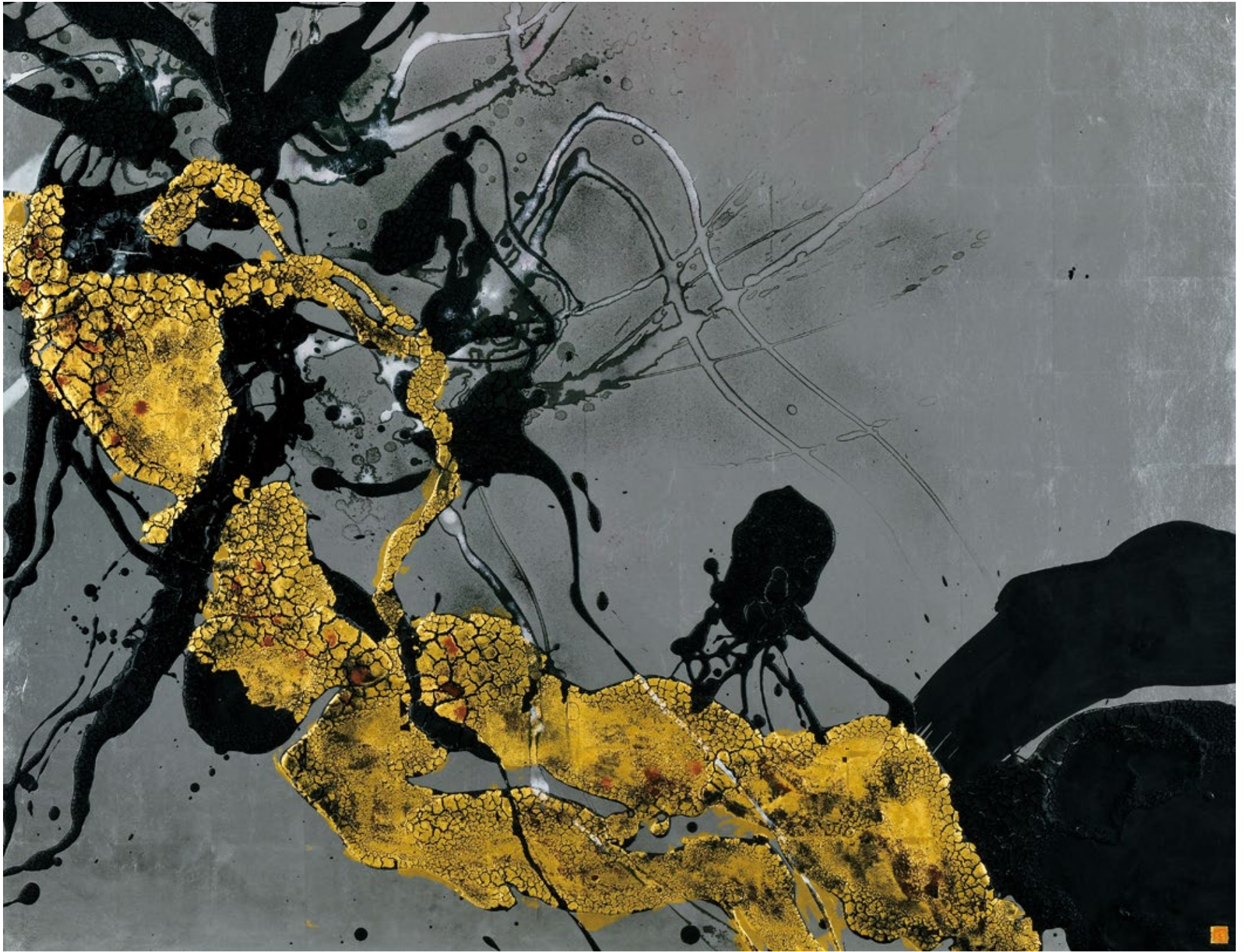




Shogetsuji no sakura
65 × 159 cm



Garyu no matsu
162 × 224 cm



Yukimatsuzu
112 × 146 cm