Two Painterly Requiems for the Nuclear Weapons Over The Pacific, 1945 - 1954

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If oceans are often sites of trade and connection between cultures, they are also the location for havoc and destruction. Wars force oceans to be the vast swath of liquid tombs burying humanity on their rims. The two nuclear devices used over Hiroshima and Nagasaki, “the bombs of August” as Howard Zinn (1922-2010) called them, annihilated the two port cities of the Japanese archipelago within a few hours. The horror stories of Hiroshima and Nagasaki are numerous, told by the survivors. Only 9 years later, on March 1st, 1954, at Bikini Atoll, Marshall Islands, in the middle of the Pacific, an even more powerful bomb was detonated. It was the first hydrogen bomb testing, known by its code name “Castle Bravo”. A Japanese tuna trawler, named “Daigo Fukuryumaru/Lucky Dragon, No. 5” sailed into the highly toxic air with its crew members, 23 in all, all bathed in the shower of radiation; one, the Radio Officer, would die several months later. My talk this afternoon is about the works of two artists, one Japanese Hirayama Ikuo (1930-2009), and one American, Ben Shahn (1898-1969). Their artistic strategies in creating their respective images could not have been more different.

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