

Ikeda Manabu, [Meltdown](#), 2013



Acrylic ink on paper mounted on board, 48 x 48 in.

Colonel Rex W. and Maxine Schuster Radsch Endowment fund purchase, 2013.24

*Human beings are part of nature. If nature changes, humans within it will also change. It might be that our role in humankind is to create a new way of life according to the evolving environment in which we find ourselves.*

– Ikeda Manabu <sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Mueller, Laura J., "Ikeda Manabu: Disciple of Detail," *Three Directions: TeamLab - Tenmyouya Hisashi - Ikeda Manabu* (Madison, WI: Chazen Museum of Art, 2014), 49.

## **Artist's Biography**

Ikeda Manabu (Japanese, b. 1973) is a contemporary artist who has received international recognition for creating highly detailed dreamworlds drawn with pen and ink. A recurring theme in his work is the struggle between nature and humankind's industrial development and material consumption. Ikeda was born in Saga, a city in southern Japan. As a child he was fascinated with the intricacies of everyday things and had a playful impulse to draw them with pencils. He attended the Tokyo University of the Arts, earning a BFA in 1998 and an MFA in 2000.

To create his unique images, Ikeda takes inspiration from a variety of sources and influences, foremost among them his own observations and memories. His drawings incorporate qualities of movement and humor typical of *manga*, a style of Japanese comics books or graphic novels, and *anime*, animation in Japanese film and television. His compositions also evoke designs and subject matter observed in *ukiyo-e*, or "pictures of the floating world," a genre of Japanese art especially associated with color woodblock prints popularized in Japan during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Looking outside Japanese culture, Ikeda has also been inspired by the minute details and fantastical world of *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, a painting made around the turn of the sixteenth century by the Netherlandish painter Hieronymus Bosch. Art historian Laura J. Mueller has observed that as in the bizarre landscape of Bosch's painting (which presents hybrids of natural and unnatural elements), Ikeda's drawings articulate complex ideas, like, for example, the intersection of humankind and nature. Ikeda has stated that his works are open-ended and that ultimately the viewers of his drawings create their own stories about the subjects he depicts.<sup>2</sup>

For his monumental works, Ikeda does not predetermine the composition, but rather conceptualizes a theme and allows the image to develop organically over time. His drawing style is characterized by an intensity of detail, rendered with tiny, meticulously applied pen strokes. Ikeda uses pens with nibs that must be dipped into the different colored inks, further adding to the time and attention necessary to draw his intricate compositions. He estimates it takes one day to complete a 4-inch square area of the paper. The result of his efforts are works that inspire viewers to look closely and discover subjects and narratives that are not readily apparent at first glance.

As Ikeda gained international notice, his works appeared in major group exhibitions from Berlin to Ontario to New York City. Cementing Ikeda's position as a leader in contemporary art, renowned *New York Times* art critic Holland Carter selected *Existence*, the artist's 2004 drawing of civilization and nature entangled in an enormous tree, as one of the best artworks of 2011.<sup>3</sup> That same year, Ikeda received an Emerging Artist Overseas Study Grant from Japan's Agency of Cultural Affairs, and he moved

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<sup>2</sup> Mueller, Laura J., "Ikeda Manabu: Disciple of Detail," *Three Directions: TeamLab - Tenmyouya Hisashi - Ikeda Manabu* (Madison, WI: Chazen Museum of Art, 2014), 66; see also Wisconsin Life video:

<https://www.pbs.org/video/wisconsin-life-japanese-fine-artist/>

<sup>3</sup> <http://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/slideshow/2011/12/18/arts/design/20111218-COTTER-5.html> [accessed November 27, 2020]



with his family to Vancouver, Canada, a city that attracted him for its integration into a mountainous landscape.

On March 11, 2011, while Ikeda was working in Vancouver, the Great Tōhoku Earthquake produced a tsunami, which devastated the northeastern coast of Japan's main island and caused a nuclear accident at the Fukushima Daiichi power plant. The catastrophe had a profound influence on Ikeda's career and the subject matter of his drawings for the next several years. After initially watching the catastrophe unfold on the Internet and in Canadian news media, Ikeda made a trip in February 2012 to the Tōhoku region to see firsthand the effects of the tsunami in anticipation of producing new drawings addressing the disaster, including *Meltdown*. In July 2013, Ikeda began a three-and-a-half-year residency at the Chazen Museum of Art, where he created a monumental work that explored themes of life, death, and resiliency in response to the 2011 tsunami. That work, titled *Rebirth*, is now in the collection of the Saga Prefecture Art Museum in Japan.

Ikeda currently lives in Madison and is working on a site-specific commission.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.epic.com/epic/post/coloring-outside-lines-epic-welcomes-manabu-ikeda>

### **Location**

*Meltdown* is installed in the Ruth and George W. Mead Gallery 17. To view this artwork in person, see the Chazen's website for the latest information about open hours and entry. Admission is always free.

### **Visual Description**

*Meltdown* is a highly detailed ink drawing on paper created by artist Ikeda Manabu in 2013. A square image, it measures four feet by four feet and is composed of meticulously drawn lines and hash marks. The central focus of the work is a large, gray rock-like structure that appears to be sliding down the edge of a steep, tree-lined slope toward a body of water that fills the bottom of the composition. The water is composed of a series of thin blue lines that ripple like waves at the left edge. In the bottom right corner, a white silhouette of a moose stands along the shoreline and looks left while two white bird silhouettes fly above. Behind the moose, a vivid green slope of uniformly drawn trees climbs right and halfway toward the drawing's middle. The structure that hovers over the water has jagged edges like that of carved rock; the lower third half resembles an icy blue iceberg. The structure almost encompasses the entire span of the paper. Beginning at the top of the structure, a series of large rust-colored pipes begin to wind down its surface into an industrial landscape. Silhouettes of six white rams stand atop the pipes on different tiers. Masses of uniform-size blocks resembling buildings grow like moss along the bottoms and edges of the pipes throughout the structure. Series of smaller pipes wind throughout the structure and appear to connect the buildings to one another almost like a sewage system. Different modes of transportation are depicted throughout the structure: cable cars float, trains wind around tracks and through tunnels, cars drive, and submarines are docked along the lower right edge of the large rock. Three yellow construction cranes are hard at work, though only two are visible in their entirety. In the upper right side of the structure, a white cable suspending a green mass in a net implies the presence of a third crane. The green mass is not clearly defined but could be plant material pulled from the green slope. Near the top right corner, a bright, almost toxic-yellow substance spills from a pipe. The same yellow substance spills like water from a pipe in the lower left corner of the structure. Also, in the upper right corner, smoke billows from pipes and blends into the hazy, gray clouds of the drawing's background. Along the upper left edge of the large rock structure, a cluster of white silhouettes scatter like confetti in the wind. The silhouettes are mostly curved, and boomerang shaped, although some appear to be shaped like birds. Some of the boomerang shapes have secondary, non-descript white shapes beneath them.

## **Content and Context**

*Meltdown*, by contemporary Japanese artist Ikeda Manabu, depicts an immense industrial complex built into a block of rock and ice. This colossal structure integrating both natural and human-made elements seems to defy gravity as it sits, perfectly balanced, on a forested mountain slope over a calm blue sea. However, a closer look reveals the iceberg-like mass is slipping down the mountainside, tearing up trees and leaving a trail of dirt and debris in its wake. Soon the mass will plunge into the water, and what will happen then is anyone's guess.

*Meltdown* is the first work in which Ikeda engaged directly with a contemporary sociopolitical issue, namely the risks of generating electricity with atomic energy. Ikeda created this pictorial allegory in response to the nuclear accident that occurred in 2011 at Japan's Fukushima Daiichi power plant. On March 11, 2011, at 2:46 PM, a magnitude 9.0 earthquake—among the largest ever recorded—triggered a series of tsunami waves that devastated several communities along the northeastern coast of Japan's largest island, Honshu, and claimed thousands of lives. In response to the earthquake's vibrations, the reactors at three nuclear power plants nearest to the epicenter automatically shut down. However, at Fukushima Daiichi, the seawalls protecting the plant were inadequate against the waves of the tsunami, which disabled backup generators needed to run the plant's cooling systems. The resulting partial meltdown of the fuel rods led to breaches in the containment of nuclear material. Over the ensuing days and weeks, the plant leaked significant amounts of radiation, prompting the evacuation of tens of thousands of people living within eighteen miles of the power plant and contaminating soil and water in the region.

Ikeda's suspenseful image *Meltdown* evokes a sense of imminent doom related to the risks of atomic energy. "This time it occurred in Japan," Ikeda said, "but there are hundreds of nuclear plants throughout the world, and you never know where an accident will occur next."<sup>5</sup> Considered more broadly, Ikeda's juxtaposition of industrial development and the natural world, raises open questions about the sustainability of human civilization and our tenuous relationship with the environment we depend on to survive. The complex of giant tubes in the central mass in *Meltdown* supports an industrial city drawn with the extreme level of detail that is characteristic of Ikeda's work. Dozens of box-like dwellings cover the built environment. Cable cars run across cavernous spaces between factories and construction sites. Smoke and steam pour from the pipes. Scattered throughout the drawing are small figures of people and animals represented by white silhouettes. Ikeda has explained that these undrawn figures offer an entry point for viewers to engage with the image and contemplate the narrative.<sup>6</sup> A moose watches the mass slip down the mountainside while a flock of birds flies past its icy façade. Instead of populating natural rock formations, bighorn sheep have migrated to the craggy architecture

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<sup>5</sup> Ikeda, Asato. "Ikeda Manabu, the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake, and Disaster/Nuclear Art in Japan," *The Asia-Pacific Journal* vol. 11, issue 13, no. 2 (April 1, 2013)

<sup>6</sup> Mueller, Laura J., "Ikeda Manabu: Disciple of Detail," *Three Directions: TeamLab - Tenmyouya Hisashi - Ikeda Manabu* (Madison, WI: Chazen Museum of Art, 2014), 47



of the built environment. In contrast, people jump from cliffs with parachutes and hang gliders. A few seem to have crashed into or been snagged by rocky outcrops; perhaps some have perished. In the lower right, a giant raptor flies over the forest carrying human prey. Despite advancements in science, engineering, and technology, humans remain vulnerable to nature.

As an island nation with limited arable land for farming, dependent on fishing, and prone to volcanos, earthquakes, and tsunamis, Japan has long had a tenuous relationship with the environment. *Meltdown* fits within a history of Japanese art addressing disasters. For example, *namazu-e* are allegorical pictures invoking a Japanese folktale where earthquakes are the result of a giant catfish living beneath the country. *Namazu-e* in the form of color woodcuts often reflect an uneven social duality resulting from earthquakes: punishment for some, but profit for others able to capitalize on a need for rebuilding and revitalization. In addition, so-called "nuclear art" addresses a particularly modern type of disaster. Surprisingly, given Japan's experience with nuclear devastation during the Second World War, the country did not entirely condemn the use of nuclear energy, but rather advocated for its peaceful use to generate electricity.<sup>7</sup> With limited natural resources capable of producing electricity, Japan embraced nuclear power as a sustainable solution.

Yet, as *Meltdown* attests, the 2011 Fukushima Daiichi accident has instilled in Japan a broad sense of trepidation about the safety of its nuclear reactors. Before the 2011 accident, nuclear power provided Japan a third of its energy, and the nation planned to increase that percentage to fifty percent by 2030, as part of its strategy to reduce carbon emissions.<sup>8</sup> Now nuclear power provides only a tiny fraction of Japan's electricity.<sup>9</sup> According to an article by Eric Margolis published in *The New Republic*, fears of another nuclear disaster have led Japan to increase its use of fossil fuels, especially coal, thereby limiting the country's ability to counteract the effects of climate change and achieve carbon neutrality. Today, fossil fuels—coal, natural gas, and oil—provide about eighty percent of the country's power, and Japan plans to build twenty-two new coal-burning power plants within the next five years.<sup>10</sup> Japan's continued dependence on coal is in conflict with serious concerns about the effects of climate change. A 2018 heat wave killed more than one thousand people in Japan, and sustained increases in ocean temperatures are threatening local fish stocks, a source of livelihood for people and a vital part of Japan's natural ecosystem.<sup>11</sup> To avoid the use of both nuclear and fossil fuels, Japan would need to develop infrastructure for more sustainable sources of energy, like hydroelectric, solar, and offshore wind, which

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<sup>7</sup> Ikeda, Asato. "Ikeda Manabu, the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake, and Disaster/Nuclear Art in Japan," *The Asia-Pacific Journal* vol. 11, issue 13, no. 2 (April 1, 2013)

<sup>8</sup> <https://newrepublic.com/article/160216/fukushima-nuclear-disaster-put-japans-climate-policy-decade-long-purgatory>

<sup>9</sup> As of 2017, nuclear power provided Japan about 3% of its electricity:

[https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/03/climate/japan-coal-fukushima.html?searchResultPosition=1;](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/03/climate/japan-coal-fukushima.html?searchResultPosition=1)

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2019/world/climate-environment/climate-change-japan-pacific-sea-salmon-ice-loss/>



are challenging and expensive to build due to Japan's small size, high population density, and mountainous geography.<sup>12</sup>

Although it was the 2011 nuclear calamity at Fukushima Daiichi which inspired Ikeda's allegorical drawing *Meltdown*, his composition, which portrays humankind's tenuous relationship with nature, probes issues beyond that historical event. Viewed within the context of Japan's coal-centric energy policy and its competing carbon reduction goals to stop climate change, *Meltdown* raises questions about competing priorities and social anxieties as obstacles to long-term environmental sustainability.

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<sup>12</sup> <https://newrepublic.com/article/160216/fukushima-nuclear-disaster-put-japans-climate-policy-decade-long-purgatory>

### **Discussion Questions**

1. How is this artwork related to sustainability? What do you see that makes you say that?
2. Ikeda is known for his highly detailed drawings in which a lot of visual information is buried in the details. What do you think he intends to communicate by drawing this way? What do you see that makes you say that?
3. Look at the cluster of white figures in the upper left corner of the rock. What do you think they represent? What do you see that makes you say that?
4. In *Meltdown*, human and animal figures are represented by white silhouettes. Why do you think this is? What was the artist's intention in choosing to represent them as "blank" figures?
5. Ikeda says his art represents the struggle between human and nature. How does this piece contribute to a discussion of human versus nature?
6. Based on what you see in *Meltdown*, would you argue that Ikeda thinks humankind is capable of reversing the damage caused?

**Collection Connections for Further Engagement:** *Not all these artworks are currently on view; click the titles of each to determine if they are currently on view in the museum, and in which gallery.*

Ikeda Manabu (Japanese, b. 1973), [Grass Mantis \(Kusakamakiri\)](#), 2004. Acrylic ink on paper mounted on board, 9 1/16 x 11 7/16 in. John H. Van Vleck Endowment Fund purchase, 2013.25

This drawing by Ikeda depicts a mantis composed of plant leaves and flowers. Close looking reveals insects crawling on the plant life. Forming a fantastical ecosystem, the mantis might be viewed as an allegory of the interconnectedness of diverse forms of life in the environment.

Katsushika Hokusai (Japanese, 1760 - 1849), [Behind the Wave off Kanaqawa \(The Great Wave\)](#), from the series *Thirty-six Views of Mt. Fuji*, 1830-1835. Color woodcut, 10 3/8 in. x 15 in., equest of John H. Van Vleck, 1980.2386

This print is among the most widely recognized images in Japanese art. The juxtaposition of the massive wave with Mount Fuji in the distance speaks to Japan's deep relationship with the ocean, which both nourishes and threatens the island nation. Compare *The Great Wave* with Ikeda's *Meltdown*. How are the narratives you observe the same or different?





Chazen Museum of Art

*The Art of Sustainability*

William T. Wiley (American, b. 1937), [\*Three Mile Island Three Years Later\*](#), 1983. Color lithograph, 35 3/4 x 23 13/16 in. Gift of Richard E. Brock, 2019.20.12

Wiley is considered a leading California artist of his generation; sometimes described as a “funk artist,” he has adopted the stance of a libertarian free spirit, willing to unflinchingly confront political and social issues. *Three Mile Island Three Years Later* is one of several prints by Wiley about the accidental release of radiation at the Three Mile Island nuclear power plant in Pennsylvania in 1979.

### **Additional Resources**

Denyer, Simon, and Chris Mooney, “The Climate chain reaction that threatens the heart of the Pacific,” *The Washington Post* (November 12, 2019):

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2019/world/climate-environment/climate-change-japan-pacific-sea-salmon-ice-loss/>

Ikeda, Asato, “Ikeda Manabu, the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake, and Disaster/Nuclear Art in Japan,” *The Asia-Pacific Journal* vol. 11, issue 13, no. 2 (April 1, 2013), <https://apjif.org/-Asato-Ikeda/3922/article.html>

Margolis, Eric, “The Fukushima Nuclear Disaster Put Japan’s Climate Policy in a Decade-Long Purgatory,” *The New Republic* (November 17, 2020): <https://newrepublic.com/article/160216/fukushima-nuclear-disaster-put-japans-climate-policy-decade-long-purgatory>

Mizuma Art Gallery, “池田学展 「誕生」 / IKEDA Manabu *Rebirth*” (August 21, 2017), 5 minutes, 29 seconds: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VJuM8FnjTOs>

Mueller, Laura J., “Ikeda Manabu: Disciple of Detail” and “Ikeda Manabu,” in *Three Directions: TeamLab - Tenmyouya Hisashi - Ikeda Manabu* (Madison, WI: Chazen Museum of Art, 2014), 44-63; 66-67.

PBS, “Japanese Fine Artist,” *Wisconsin Life* (November 24, 2016), 5 minutes, 37 seconds: <https://www.pbs.org/video/wisconsin-life-japanese-fine-artist/>

Pletcher, Kenneth, “Japan earthquake and tsunami of 2011,” *Encyclopedia Britannica* (2011, most recent update May 2020): <https://www.britannica.com/event/Japan-earthquake-and-tsunami-of-2011#ref1119288>

Stewart, Jessica, “Japanese Artist Spends Years Completing Enormous, Intricate Pen and Ink Drawings,” *My Modern Met* (May 25, 2018): <https://mymodernmet.com/manabu-ikeda-large-pen-ink-drawings/>

Tabuchi, Hiroko, “Japan Races to Build New Coal-Burning Power Plants, Despite the Climate Risks,” *The New York Times* (February 3, 2020, updated February 5, 2020): <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/03/climate/japan-coal-fukushima.html>

World Nuclear Association, “Fukushima Nuclear Accident” (updated May 2020): <https://www.world-nuclear.org/information-library/safety-and-security/safety-of-plants/fukushima-daiichi-accident.aspx>