

Opinion

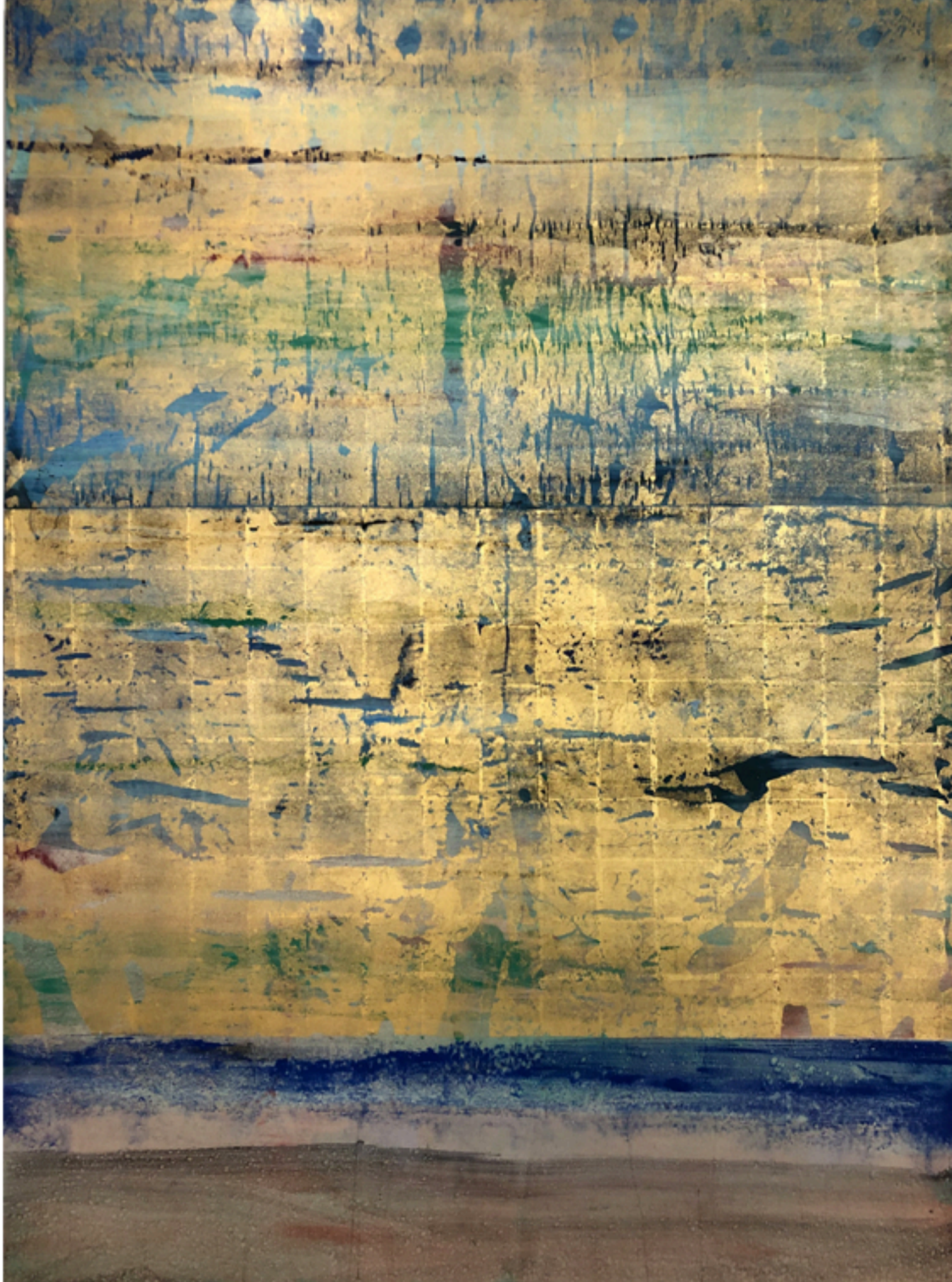
Longing for an Internet Cleanse

A small rebellion against the quickening of time.



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“Golden Sea — a New Song,” a recent painting by Makoto Fujimura.
Waterfall Mansion & Gallery, New York

The two most recent times I saw my friend Makoto Fujimura, he put a Kintsugi bowl in my hands. These ceramic bowls were 300 to 400 years old. But what made them special was that somewhere along the way they had broken into shards and were glued back together with a 15th-century technique using Japanese lacquer and gold.

They look like they have golden veins running through them, making them more beautiful and more valuable than they were in their original condition.

There’s a dimension of depth to them. You sense the original life they had, the rupture and then the way they were so beautifully healed. And of course they stand as a metaphor for the people, families and societies we all know who have endured their own ruptures and come back beautiful, vulnerable and whole in their broken places.

I don’t know about you, but I feel a great hunger right now for timeless pieces like these. The internet has accelerated our experience of time, and Donald Trump has upped the pace of events to permanent frenetic.

There is a rapid, dirty river of information coursing through us all day. If you’re in the news business, or a consumer of the news business, your reaction to events has to be instant or it is outdated. If you’re on social media, there are these swarming mobs who rise out of nowhere, leave people broken and do not stick around to perform the patient Kintsugi act of gluing them back together.

Probably like you, I’ve felt a great need to take a break from this pace every once in a while and step into a slower dimension of time. Mako’s paintings are very good for these moments.

He was born in Boston to a Japanese family and studied art back in Japan. His paintings are gorgeous works of abstract expressionism, using a Japanese style called Nihonga. He grinds colored minerals like malachite and azurite into fine particles and then layers them on paper. Each layer takes time to dry, and Mako may use 60 layers in a single work.

Nihonga is slow to make and slow to see. Mako once advised me to stare at one of his paintings for 10 to 12 minutes. I thought it would be boring, but it was astonishing. As I stood still in front of it, my eyes adjusted to the work. What had seemed like a plain blue field now looked like a galaxy of color.

“A beautiful thing, though simple in its immediate presence,” the critic Frederick Turner once wrote, “always gives us a sense of depth below depth, almost an innocent wild vertigo as one falls through its levels.”

The Greeks had a concept of Kairos time, which is not quantitative like our normal conception of time but qualitative — rich or empty, the meaningful hour or the hurried moment. When you’re with beauty, in art or in nature, you tend to move at Kairos time — slowly, serenely but thickly.

The great philosopher of time is Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel. In his great book “The Sabbath,” he points out that the first sacred thing in the Bible is not a thing, it is a time period, the seventh day. Judaism, he argues, is primarily a religion of time, not space.

“The seventh day,” he writes, “is a palace in time which we build. It is made of soul, of joy and reticence. In its atmosphere, a discipline is a reminder of adjacency to eternity. Indeed, the splendor of the day is expressed in terms of abstentions.”

The Sabbath, he continues, is not a rest from the other six days. It is the peak experience the other six days point toward. On this day the Orthodox do less and in slowness can glimpse the seeds of eternity.

Sabbath, Heschel concludes, “is endowed with a felicity which enraptures the soul, which glides into our thoughts with a healing sympathy. It is a day on which hours do not oust one another. It is a day that can soothe all sadness away. No one, even the unlearned, crude man, can remain insensitive to its beauty.”

Mako has the sorts of thoughts one has when you live at a different pace. He is, he says, a border stalker.

He is Japanese but also American, a Christian and also a prominent figure in the art world. He is one of those people who live on the edges of groups and travel between groups, bringing news from outside.

There’s an ambiguity, complexity and sometimes a hiddenness to his writing and speech that can’t be expressed as a hot take.

He once wrote a book called “Culture Care.” It is an argument against the whole idea of a culture war. It advocates an environmental movement for the culture — replacing the harsh works that flow from fear with works that are generous, generative and generational.

That last word is a breath from another age. What would it mean to live generationally once in a while, in a world that now finds the daily newspaper too slow?

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