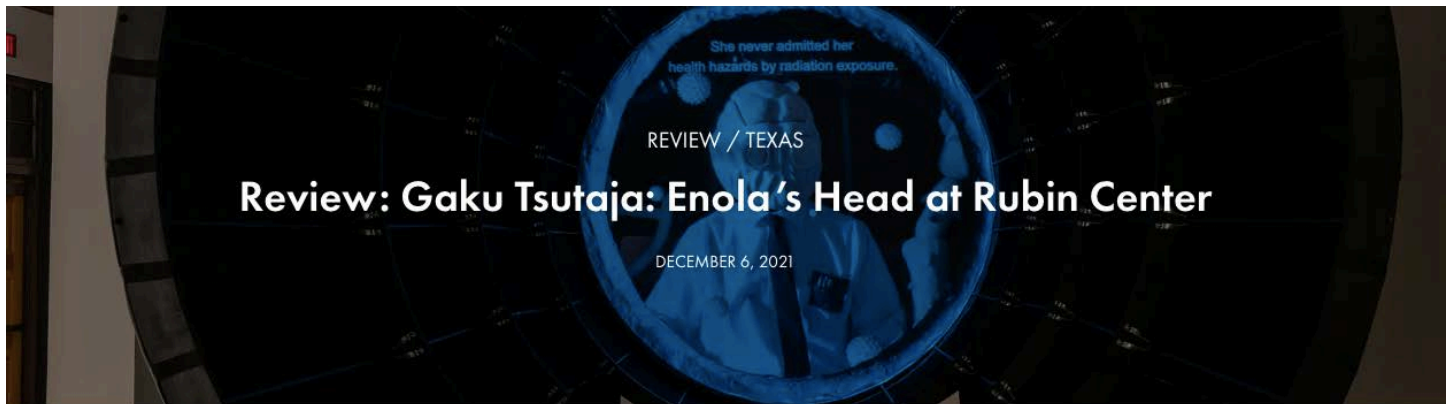


# Southwest Contemporary

Curated and critical perspectives on arts and culture.



*Gaku Tsutaja: Enola's Head* at UTEP's Rubin Center recreates the aircraft that dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima—and tells a different history of the victims and survivors of nuclear warfare.



Gaku Tsutaja reconstructed *Enola Gay*, the aircraft that dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima, Japan during World War II. Courtesy Rubin Center for the Visual Arts.

## **Gaku Tsutaja: Enola's Head**

September 16–December 10, 2021

Rubin Center for the Visual Arts, University of Texas at El Paso

The history of the atomic bomb is complex, messy, and tragic, especially for the people and places—including the Southwest region as well as Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Japan—impacted by the Manhattan Project. In a site-specific installation commissioned by the Rubin Center for the Visual Arts at the University of Texas at El Paso, Japanese artist Gaku Tsutaja unpacks the sordid history of the atomic bomb in the exhibition *Enola's Head*.

The show, on view through December 10, 2021, traces the history of nuclear weapons from World War II to the present and consists of collected interviews from Japanese and American victims, historians, activists, disarmament experts, physicists, journalists, and educators whom the artist met. These experiences are translated into a science fiction-style narrative driven

by fourteen non-human characters with masks that resemble ancient artifacts. These masks refer to the extinct drama-dance process involved in *gigaku*, which was performed in Japan in the seventh and eighth centuries via the Silk Road from Central Asia.

Tsutaja's work, through sumi ink and graphite drawings, provides insight into living and working within worlds that continue manufacturing and supporting atomic bombs. As the viewer moves through the exhibition, they encounter expressive black and white drawings in which the characters—half-human, half-animal—invite viewers into their surrealistic other worlds. Nearby, the sounds of *Enola Gay*, which resembles a reconstruction of the first aircraft to drop an atomic bomb in warfare, coaxes the viewer to step inside the reconstructed machine.

Tsutaja's research for the exhibition started in 2019 with visits to the White Sands Missile Range in southern New Mexico and surrounding areas. In preparation for the creation of the site-specific Rubin Center commission, the artist made additional research trips to Alamogordo, New Mexico, Hiroshima and Nagasaki in Japan, Hanford Site in Washington state, and Wendover, Utah: all sites of atomic bomb development or deployment.

While seated in this semi-enclosed theater within the reimagined aircraft of *Enola Gay*, an unfolding story on the screen communicates the message that committing mass murder is justified and referred to as "civilization." The sounds of dropping bombs drown in and out.



The interior of Enola Gay in Gaku Tsutaja: Enola's Head. Courtesy Rubin Center for the Visual Arts.

In this work, Tsutaja provides visibility to powerful but often overlooked roles of military infrastructure. By housing the installation in this area of the Southwest—Fort Bliss and the White Sands Missile Range are home to large United States Army outposts—the artist also amplifies awareness of the militarization of El Paso and the neighboring city of Las Cruces, New Mexico. As someone who has grown up living and working in the area—I've also taught art history to active military stationed at Fort Bliss—this connection reminds me of the conversations I've had with my students about war, art, and nationalism.

The exhibition wall text states that "while the hazards of nuclear energy within our own world are often invisible, the world within *Enola's Head* seeks to reveal the reality that we cannot see." Tsutaja's exhibition certainly does this and more—it bridges the way art can move us towards empathizing and understanding perspectives about nationalism and the atomic bomb. Through the use of half-human characters in the show, the viewer is unable to take recognizable sides.

*Gaku Tsutaja: Enola's Head* remains on display through December 10, 2021, at the Rubin Center for the Visual Arts at the University of Texas at El Paso, 500 West University Avenue.



Gaku Tsutaja, *Enola's Head*, installation view, 2021, Ruben Center for the Visual Arts, El Paso. Courtesy Ruben Center for the Visual Arts.



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## ISADORA STOWE

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