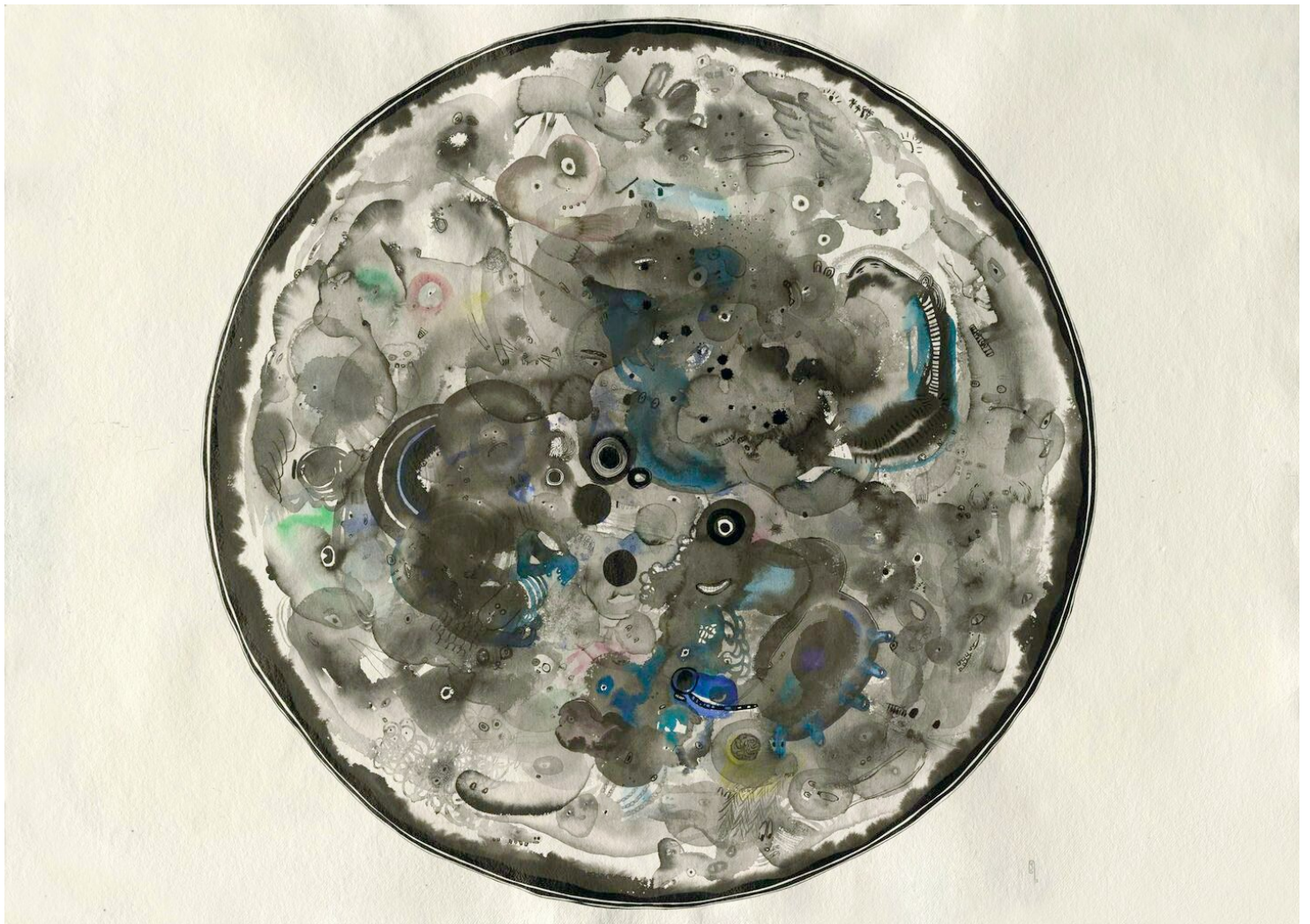


ART REVIEW

At Praise Shadows, Yuri Shimojo paintings give shape to lives lived and lost

By **Cate McQuaid** Globe Correspondent, Updated March 31, 2021, 2:00 p.m.

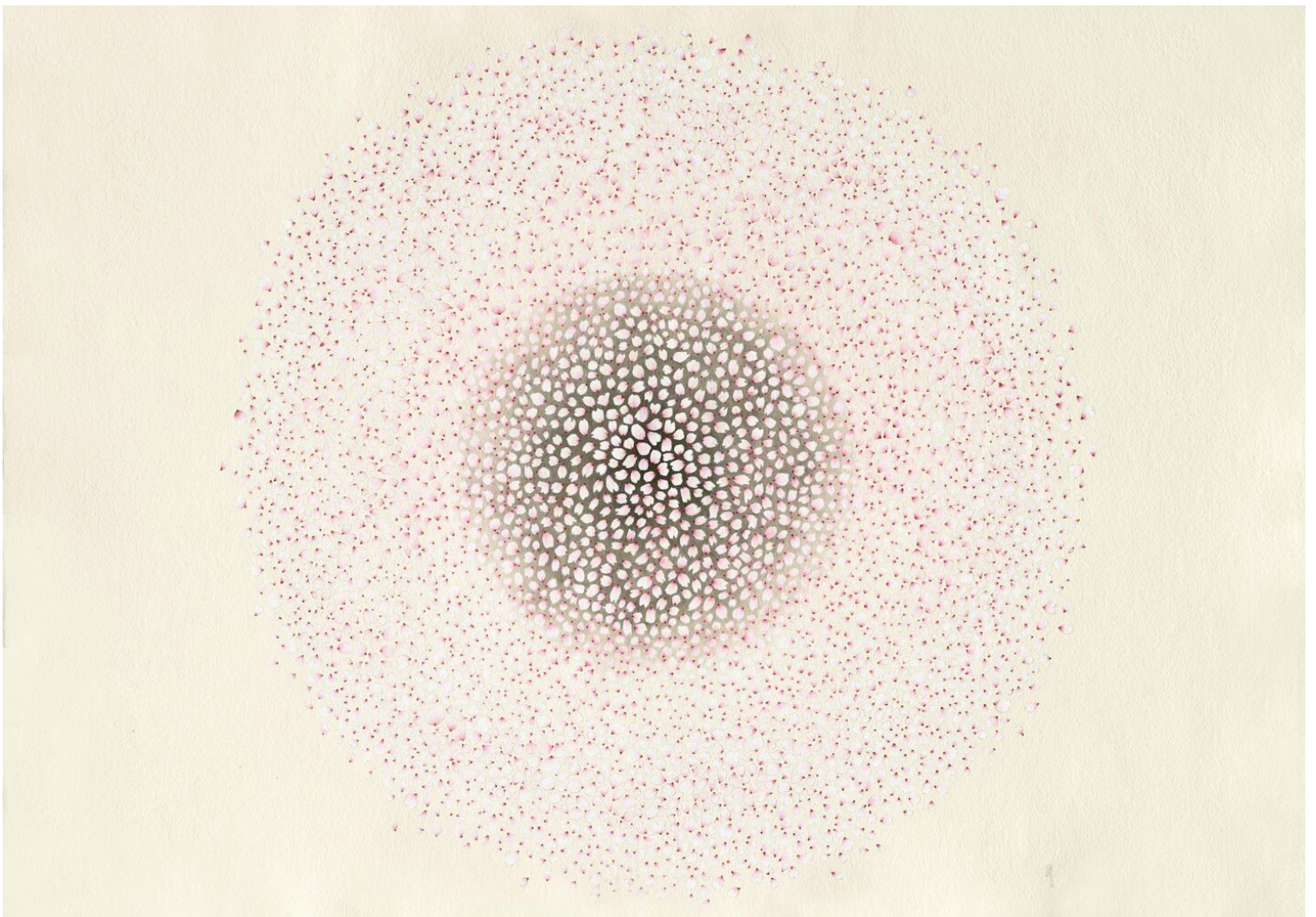


Yuri Shimojo's "Universal Stain," on view at Praise Shadows Art Gallery. YURI SHIMOJO

It's impossible to comprehend the sheer numbers lost to COVID-19. Japanese painter Yuri Shimojo's series "Memento Mori," which meditates on losing individuals and multitudes, helps.

Shimojo made these paintings after the 2011 earthquake and tsunami in Japan, which killed close to 16,000 people, and this is the first time they've been shown in the United States. She was already intimate with loss; everyone in her immediate family died before she was 30. Now she was overcome with the magnitude of it.

A month after the disaster, the New York-based artist learned that cherry blossoms had bloomed in Fukushima. She began to paint single petals as a means of coping. Eventually, those accumulated into a large mandala painting, "Sakura," the first in this series.

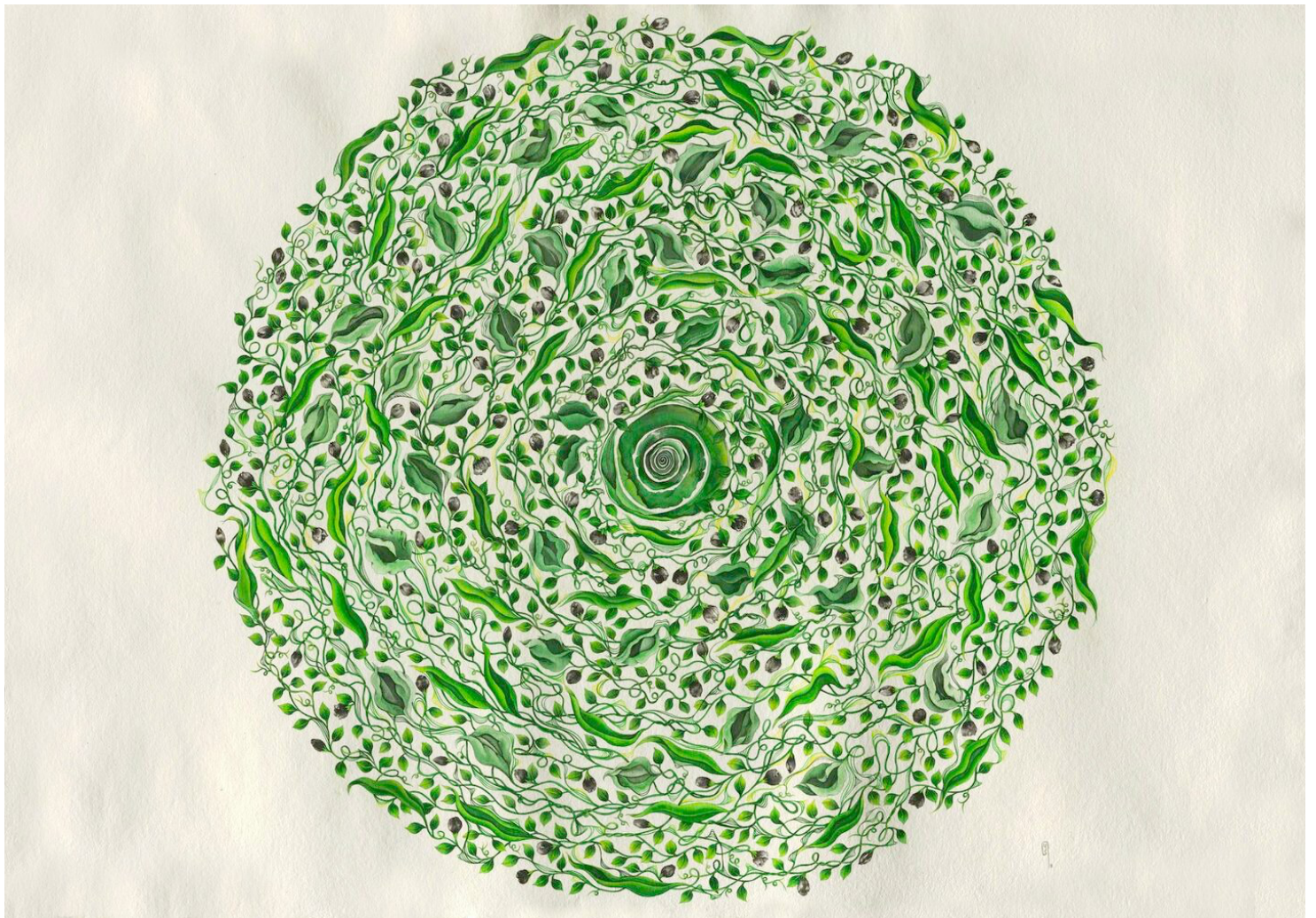


Yuri Shimojo's "Sakura." COURTESY YURI SHIMOJO

It's a remarkable, quivering piece. Tiny petals, blushing white with red tips, float and eddy. They are difficult to distinguish against the pale paper — a clamor of petals, like a crowd on a city street. But at the mandala's core Shimojo painted a gray circle. Petals there stand out like souls coming into focus before they fade into darkness.

In Japan, gray ink signifies condolence, the artist explained in a Zoom talk about the exhibition for Duke Arts at Duke University. "I wanted to wrap it around the petals almost like the tsunami waters wrapped around those bodies, softly, and honor them," she said.

Evocations of death in "Memento Mori" make its references to life — its sensuality, its cycles — tender and dear. In "Vine," dancing green leaves and stems wheel and curl. Their buds, though, are shadowy gray, pregnant with death even as they blossom.



Yuri Shimojo's "Vine." YURI SHIMOJO

Some paintings move toward rebirth. Others feel haunted. In “Universal Stain,” inky blots with eyes and mouths flit like shadows. This mandala could be a petri dish full of menacing microbes, or a murmuring imagination on the edge of sleep.

Working with sound artist Alec Fellman and light artist Maria Takeuchi, Shimojo has created a site-specific installation “Petal Mori.” Petri dishes, each with a paper cherry blossom petal, are assembled on a circle of salt on the floor. Gentle music plays as dishes are illuminated in remembrance. Praise Shadows has storefront windows, and “Petal Mori” is best viewed after sunset. That makes sense; when it comes to reckoning with what we have lost, we are still in darkness.

MEMENTO MORI

At Praise Shadows Art Gallery, 313A Harvard St., Brookline, through April 18. 617-487-5427, <https://praiseshadows.com>

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