

Giant Robot

FOLD SCHOOL, HOMELESS IN TOKYO
BACK IN BEIJING, BIG BAMBOO
FOXXY LADY, KAMI

issue

56



Forks and Fate

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In 1965, an artist designed a poster for a group exhibition in Tokyo that launched him from obscurity to pop-culture icon status. The exhibition, entitled *Persona*, featured works by various artists on the topic of identity. His was a poster of a man in a black suit hanging from a noose, a single rose in hand, with the caption, "HAVING REACHED A CLIMAX AT THE AGE OF 29, I WAS DEAD." To the left of those words was a picture of the creator at one-and-a-half years old; to the right, a class photo with a hand gesture for sex superimposed over it. Arched above all this was his name in capital letters: TADANORI YOKOO.

In the following years, critical attention to both Yokoo's radical and autographical works made him the bad boy of the design world. His notoriety and associations even landed him an acting role in a movie, *Diary of a Shinjuku Burglar*, where he played a book thief. Of course, he designed the accompanying poster. He would also design pieces for albums, books, and other high-profile projects.

In 1972, the 36-year-old graphic designer had a one-man exhibition at MoMA. In 2008, he sits in a small room on the second floor of the Japan Society to give a talk about his paintings, which he has worked on exclusively for the last 28 years. Yokoo-san (pronounced Yoko-oh san) has been on New York soil for only two days, and answers a few questions for a local Japanese newspaper alongside an old friend and interpreter.

"In a sense, I never fully became a graphic designer," he explains, "because I never took clients' demands all that seriously."

Looking at Yokoo-san, you wouldn't guess he is 72 this year. He has defied the effects of time and maintained his youthful appearance by doing one thing: keeping true to himself. Says Yokoo-san, "I didn't start out by wanting to be a graphic designer. I wanted to be a painter."

Tadanori Yokoo's current show at the Friedman Benda Gallery in Chelsea is his first American gallery exhibition.

GR: Why did you decide to stop graphic designing and start painting?

TY: I was finished with graphic design because I had nothing left to say with it. Through my painting, I could be loyal to myself.

GR: When you are painting, do your thoughts constantly change or do you stick with a singular goal throughout the process?

TY: The idea for a painting forms in my head as shards of images and shapes. That's where it begins and that's how I enter the process. But, in fact, the notion that you can complete a painting is illusory. Basically, all my paintings are incomplete because it's impossible to finish one.

GR: Over the past 40 or so years, has there been a noticeable change in the way you come up with ideas for your works?

TY: It's not a sudden burst of change; it's kind of a gradual change at the pace of everyday life. There have been cases where, say, I've gotten sick or had an accident and there's been a big change, but otherwise it's more like the evolution of human cells on our body: They die, new ones are formed, and it's kind of a much more evolutionary change.





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GR: The idea of death is a repeated concept in your paintings. Why is the subject so interesting for you?

TY: As long as you're alive, it's inevitable that you think about death. Death stands in opposition to everything—from beauty to sex to life—so it's kind of an inevitable fascination.

GR: You have done a series of paintings that feature an intersection of two paths. What are you trying to convey with the paths? Maybe life and death?

TY: I encounter my themes rather than plan them in advance. There was a place I used to visit when I was a child. I can't remember if it was a shop or a restaurant, but I went back to see if it was there and it was gone. I photographed the location that night, and when I developed the photograph the next morning, it was a very compelling piece. I decided to make a painting of when the structure had been there. I actually wasn't interested in the fork in the road at all. If people who see it find it a metaphor, that's fine, but I didn't paint it that way.

GR: Would you still make art if there were no spectators?

TY: Absolutely.

GR: Do you have plans to try new media or do anything exciting in the near future?

TY: No plans for the future. As I said, my works are about encounters, so I don't plan them. Fate will take care of everything and I don't have to decide.

GR: How do you compare the vibe of New York in the '70s to its vibe today?

TY: I think of New York as a walking city. I have always experienced it by walking around all day. But this time, because of the exhibition and everything, I'm really just seeing it from the

inside of a car and it doesn't feel like New York. The other thing I've noticed is that the dirty New York, the filthy New York that gave me so much energy when it was filled with dog poop and stray papers, now feels so clean. It just... feels like Tokyo.

GR: If you were to create a painting to represent America, who or what would be a part of that painting?

TY: I don't really want to paint one of America. If I decide I want to paint America, I'll let you know. ☺

A Dark Night's Flashing: N-City V, 2000
Acrylic on canvas, 130.3 x 162.1 cm

Installment, Friedman Benda Gallery, 2008

