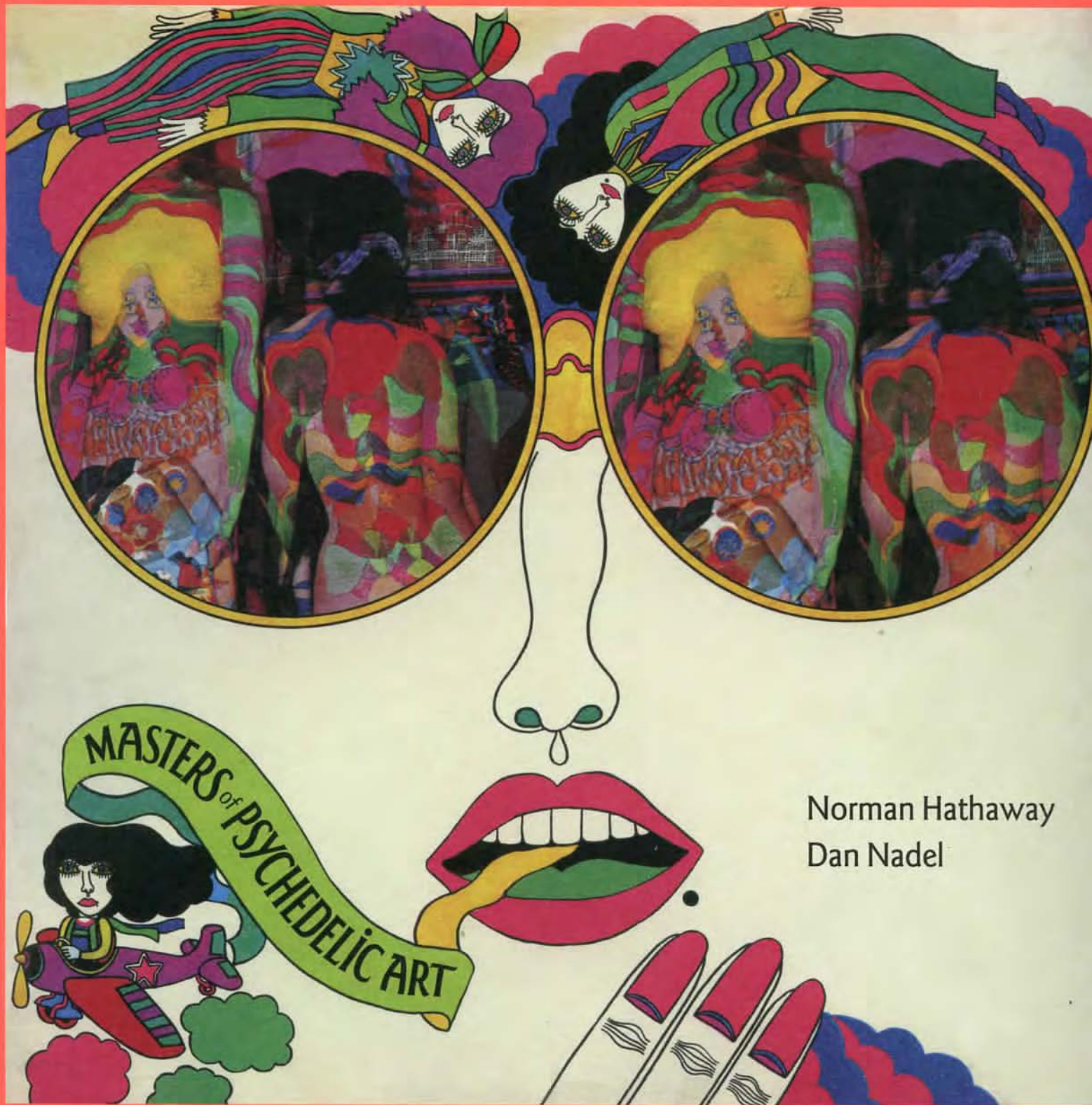


# Electrical Banana



Norman Hathaway  
Dan Nadel

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© Authors for the Texts

# *Electrical*

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# *Banana*

Masters of Psychedelic Art

Norman Hathaway selects, texts, design

Dan Nadel selects, texts





***Tadanori Yokoo***

**Tadanori Yokoo** (b. 1936) collided with psychedelia, but was never of psychedelia itself. Self taught and raised in rural Japan, Yokoo drew upon a deep well of historical and personal symbols for his work. Unbeknownst to the artist himself, he was producing work that could be termed psychedelic as early as 1964, but he was so busy producing his astounding volume of work that he barely noticed the onset of the "Sixties".

When Yokoo did intersect with the psychedelic it was to stunning effect. Using the newly open- and free-thinking of the times to his best advantage, he produced work that at once combined shocking imagery with deeply humane concerns, virtuoso Japanese printing techniques, and an innate cool. All the while, he miraculously maintained a relationship with clients that allowed him to more or less make art on their dime. His psychedelia is one of personal revelation. Yokoo never used the tropes of psychedelia, but the work can be seen as such because of its searing colors, off-kilter contrasts, and optical illusions. It never tilted towards hippie – Yokoo was affected, but not absorbed by the Sixties. He passed through it, impacted it, and moved on. His psychedelia remained resolutely of and from the man himself. Yokoo continues to live and work in Tokyo.

*When and where were you born?*

I was born in 1936 in a province called Kyobo in the center of Japan, north of Kobe. My father was a wholesaler of kimonos. My whole village was devoted to weaving, and was famous for it.

*What type of influence did your parents have?*

Neither of them was educated. They had only finished elementary school and neither drew. I was an only child, so they saw my talent and encouraged it, but I'm sure they were conflicted, because they knew this was a trade that was not going to keep me in the village. It would take me away. These were not my natural parents, of course. It was common then that kids born out of wedlock by someone associated with power would be given over to someone in a lower class within the village. They loved me very much and I'm sure they wanted me to stay close and continue the wholesale business.

*Before you knew you wanted to be an artist, what were the things you saw that really made an impression on you?*

The labels on the kimonos were very vivid and well designed. Those labels were very important to my development; they looked to be at the moment of integrating Western design aspects into the traditional Japanese look, and that was fascinating for me. There were not a lot of books around the house. The next thing would be the seasonal festivals in Japan. On one level there's the gaudiness of them, but on another level you had people

opening up stands, like the circus, and showing all kinds of outlandish things. Also, in my house there was a huge sample book of different kinds of textiles. This would have been from the Edo period. In order to sell the kimonos they'd drawn pictures of the famous kabuki actors of the time wearing those particular fashions. So that was a favorite book of mine. The line, colors, and style was much stronger than you had in the Ukiyo-e prints. And more than that, it was a vivid world. At that time in Japan we were not being taught a lot about the Edo, pre-modern, period, and we were only surrounded by modernity. So it was a portal into this other world. And I liked the traveling kabuki theaters that came through town; they echoed the images in the sample book.

*What did you do prior to becoming a professional designer?*

Until middle school I just copied everything I saw. If it was a photograph of someone I would draw it better than the photograph. If it was a poster, the same. When I finished high school I thought I wanted to be a painter, and later I studied painting. But because of my family finances I couldn't go to university. By the time I was in high school, my parents were quite elderly—they were in their fifties when I was born. So there was no work for them. To make some money for the household I drew posters for the local governmental office, or small illustrations for local magazines. My reputation grew, and around 1956 the Kobe newspaper's design section scouted me out from the provinces to come work for them. But of course this was



the end of my oil painting career. I began that job and was inundated with work – there was no time for anything else. In 1960, when I was 24, I came to Tokyo to the Nihon Design Center, which was the most famous agency at the time, and worked there for four years. That's when my design career really took off.

*In the 1950s did you study what was going on elsewhere in the world of design? I see some Western influence.*

I studied the foreign designers intently. Going to Kobe and being in the big city I suddenly had access to all that material.

*You became a pretty successful professional designer even before your work became more unusual. Was going freelance in 1964 the key to your work changing?*

I wasn't successful! Everyone around me was, but I wasn't. But it depends on what you call success. I had work, but it wasn't until I was 28 or 29, after I became freelance, that I really developed my own voice.

*Around that time your posters begin to include a mixture of modern, traditional and also nationalistic imagery, like bombers and flags and poppies. Where did that interest come from?*

Japan was focused on the "true path of modernism". I was working in the company that was doing work for the Tokyo Olympics. It was the pinnacle of the business, and the owners were flag bearers for the call of modernism. Everything was clean and straight. This rationalism, this functionality, didn't work for me. So I was an assistant, refining the perfect rational marriage of form and function day and night, but I thought, *this could be anyone doing this. I need to get back to myself.* So those images were ways for me to expand the edges of my dimensions and bring that stronger sense of self into my work. The first places one goes back to were the kimonos, to the sample book of pre-modern imagery, and to the freak shows that came to town when I was a kid. I needed to revisit these and spread out my sense of myself, both critically and supportively.

*There seems to be imagery that criticizes nationalism, a critique that appears aligned with Yukio Mishima. Am I reading that correctly?*

I was specifically bringing in fascist or wartime imagery wrapped in the ambivalence and criticism and support of what it meant to me in my lifetime. Mishima, on the other hand specifically would not allow those symbols in his work. He liked my work and appreciated that I could bring in that ambivalence. That became a foundation of our friendship. He told me, "I criticize these things by not including them, but you criticize them by ambivalently including them. But it leads us both back to the same source, and there we have something in common."

*What was your relationship like with other image-makers at that time? Did you feel like there was a camaraderie?*

When I was doing this stuff, all the criticism and nonsense got heaped on me and me alone. I wish there had been others to share it with me! That's why I eventually got out of the business in 1980 and turned to painting. My colleagues were not in the graphic world until after my Museum of Modern Art exhibition in 1972. Before that my friends were in the musical and film and theater communities. They understood what I was doing and gave me support. Eventually I reached a point of respectability in the graphic world, but not until after a lot of years alone.

*When did you first discover Push Pin? Was it an influence or did you admire it as a parallel activity?*

The early 1960s was when I first saw their work in magazines. I think Paul Davis' work is fantastic. His folk art paintings aligned with my sensibility – I'd always worked from that folk art source on one level and I could relate to the surrealist part as well. When we met we became friends instantly.

*How did you first discover psychedelic art?*

There was no news of it in Japan at the time but I was friends with John Nathan, who wrote a biography of Mishima. He'd been in Japan since the 1950s and was a famous foreigner in those days. He spoke in a thick downtown Tokyo accent. He was bright and very intelligent. I think he graduated from Harvard. In 1967 I went to visit him in New York. He said, "You've come at a great time in New York. There's so much happening right now!" Nathan is the one who first told me about psychedelia. So I asked him what it meant, because it didn't exist in the



Japanese language yet. And Nathan explained it to me as a combination of "psychology" and "delicious". That says a lot about him: It's for people with really delicious brains. And if you think of this more conceptually, it's an expansion of consciousness.

*Did you embrace a bohemian or hippy lifestyle in the late 1960s? Did you experiment with psychedelic drugs at all?*

I probably would've done drugs if they'd been around, but you couldn't find that stuff at the time. In 1967 in New York an interviewer started asking me about drugs, and it took a long time for me to understand what he was talking about, because at the time I didn't know anything about drugs.

*What kind of attention do you give to the relationship you have with your audience? Victor Moscoso, for example, designed things that put up roadblocks so that the viewer would be forced to really study the poster in order to be able to understand it.*

It almost goes into an Orientalism/Occidentalism theory kind of thing. I don't know of many Asian artists who would intend for that kind of obstruction, though I wouldn't argue that the effect wasn't similar. And perhaps I recognized that effect and let myself continue in that direction.

*The progression of your work is remarkable partly because of how far away you went from a direct representation of a product or idea. How far could you go yet still manage to keep your clients?*

My clients got stuck with a guy with artistic aspirations. There's only so far you can push me out of myself. Most designers worry about the next job, and so they stay close to the client's directions. But I never did. If I didn't get the first job right for myself there was no reason for a second. So of course I didn't do a lot of work for major corporations, but did tons of work with cultural people, who understood and wanted what I did. And I didn't have cancellations.

*Did you ever experience any censorship or rejection of ideas?*

Only once: the cover of *Time* magazine in 1970. The job was a portrait of the Japanese Prime Minister. I drew him with a necktie of the American flag tied tightly around his neck. The editor called and said, "This looks a lot like the Americans are strangling the Japanese" and I said, *Well done, you got it!* But they insisted I change it.

*When and why did your broad use of multi-religion symbology enter into your work?*

I was in a car accident in 1970 and stopped working for a year-and-a-half. I was in the hospital for two months. While I was in there I read as many religious texts as I could. I read the Sutras, the Koran, the Bible. I have to say, I had some kind of existential uncertainty. Certain things impacted me that emerged later in the work, but that interest has not carried with me to the present day.

*The use of erotic or sexual imagery is very strong in your work. Is it a commentary on pornography, or on sexuality? Some of the imagery seems quite banal, too, [see page 190] which might indicate a distance. What was the inspiration for that kind of work?*

I think that I wanted to show the banality of sex in the best possible way. For the generations that came before me in Japan, sex was not something that needed to be made pornographic, it was natural. If everyone's working out in the field and mom and pop want to have a break and take five or ten to do a sweet one – that was normal. I wanted to be banal and obvious. And we're not a Christian country, of course, so we don't have Western concerns about sin and such things. So, for me, it relates also to my sense of heritage and history, as if to say: That's the way it was and the way it has always been.

*What was your working method at the time? Did you compose carefully in a preparatory stage prior to creating a piece, or improvise it?*

Sorry to disappoint you, but probably a mixture of both. Which is to say that you want to find good contrasts. You want to find two opposing poles and have them coexist, and through their coexistence a new energy emerges. I think that's what I discovered at the point when I became true to myself.

*I'm interested in your use of tracing, and how you used it for a while in the 1970s. Was it an intention to minimize the appearance of 'hand-work'?*

It comes from my interest in Ukiyo-e, which is all line, no shading. Ukiyo-e just has one line for an eye, one line for a mouth, like that. But I wanted to draw *every single element* in the picture, not trace it. Make it as full as possible.



*Your drawing seemed to disappear as you became more prolific. Did you intentionally remove your hand after a certain point?*

Sure. I could have drawn those things, but it takes so much time. And anyway, my point of departure as a child was copying things perfectly, so I had nothing left to prove with my drawing. Whether I drew it or cut it out made no difference to me. My compositional style, even when I was drawing, was very collage structured. So I had no problem just going with the composition itself. At the same time, I wanted to keep my hand for my painting, which I'd begun again in 1964.

*Take us through the process from idea to separations to printing of this poster.*

First, I had some original images I needed to trace in order to make all four color plates. I used to work at a printing factory so I was always very conscious of what the printing process could lend to the work.



*But before you got to that point, how was the design conceived? You had to make a decision of flowers here, person there, etc. How did that happen?*

For the flowers I didn't have to look very far. I have a good collection of books and I'm always browsing for images.

*So it sounds like it's a straight collage process, and once you had created a rough assemblage, you then indicate plates and colors?*

Yes. I *never* work from a completed image in my mind. It's always about the assembly. With this particular work the first thing that came to my mind is that I wanted a red border. I received two photographs to use from the film's distributor. I thought a lone photo would be too static an image, and it could be made dynamic by shifting the placement of the color plates. When I was in New York in '67 I went to the Electric Circus every night. They had projections with different colors, like tracers on the wall. If anything, in this image I was trying to replicate the feeling of a night at the club. And probably if there was an inspiration for the flowers, it was probably thinking of the flower children in San Francisco. It was a job. I had to take the elements of the movie and mix it into what I thought needed to be communicated. That's probably why you have so many elements in my posters: To get the whole piece across I'm always working with both my own heritage and what I understand about the thing that's been asked of me. If you take the example of the Santana (*Amigos*) and Earth Wind and Fire (*Millennium*) record sleeves I did – I constructed those by asking for a list of the leader's 30 favorite things. Some of the things I didn't understand, but I selected the things where he and I met. I then used those to create a composition that was in both of our vocabularies.

Bob Dylan once took a bunch of my work, collaged it together, and his manager brought it to me and asked me to make something similar to it for a cover, and it was awful. It was the day before I had to leave with my family on holiday to Italy, so I had to refuse. But I wish I'd kept the sketch – it was Dylan drawing my images.

*I've always been in awe of the incredibly high technical level the Japanese printers you've worked with. Did you rely on the printers a lot? Was there any collaboration between you and the printer, or did they just carry out your instructions?*

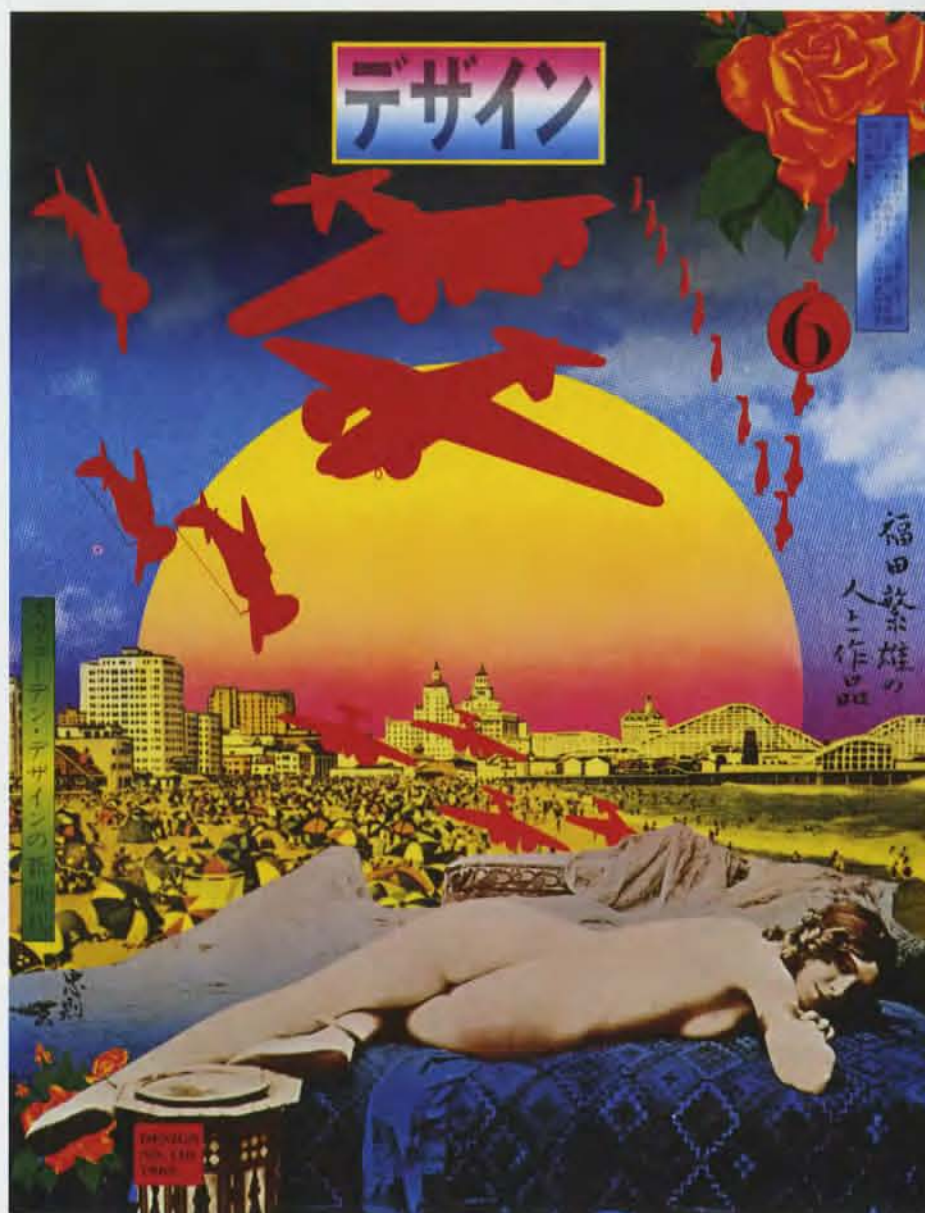
There was absolutely a collaborative aspect. I was very close to my printers. We were both always attempting to do something neither of us had done before. There are several big printing companies here and I have my guy at each one who is willing to go there with me.



"This is a poster for the best and brightest of the Yakuza film stars. It's a personal poster that wasn't commissioned. I am a huge fan of Ken Takakura – I've seen every film he's made many times. This was a homage to him and I wrote all the text."







Design  
Magazine cover  
1968





*Rythm & Blues*  
Paul Mauriat  
Record sleeve  
1969

"I wanted to go as far from his musical sensibility as I could. It's moralistic music. It's very conventional—as typical as it could be. I listened to the music and it did nothing for me. So I expressed my interior rather than his. The decapitated heads of musicians were there in reference to the old days when there was an execution ground with heads on spikes at the gate to each town. It was like a warning, since I thought this

guy was selling us a load of horsecrap about peace and love. Humanity comes from a long and nasty lineage, and this kind of garbage trying to pretend like we're beyond that is very dangerous. It did go on sale, so on some level he and his management endorsed it, so it makes Paul Mauriat a better man than me. He accepted that from me."



ML-3007  
(MES-3015)

*Musicolor Record*

PRESSED IN NHON MUSICOLOR MANUFACTURING CO. LTD.

**BACCI DA ROMA**

**MICKEY CURTIS  
& THE SAMURAI**

SIDE : A

- 1 : PIOVE (CIAO CIAO BAMBINA)
- 2 : IO CHE NON VIVO SENZA TE
- 3 : ROMA NUN FA' LA STUPIDA STASERA
- 4 : MORE
- 5 : IO TI DARO' DI RIU'
- 6 : AL DI LA'

DESIGN TADANORI YOKO

33 r.p.m.



*Bacci da Roma*  
Mickey & The Samurais  
Musicolor picture discs  
1967





"This is especially interesting because the images are the records themselves, and the technology to print playable records of this quality was available only in Japan at that time."



*The Trip*  
Offset movie poster  
1968





*The Trip*  
Offset movie poster  
1968



*Exhibition of Art by Henry Miller*  
Offset poster  
1968

"This is for an exhibition of Henry Miller's drawings. They liked the poster so much that for the exhibition, they covered all the surfaces – floors, ceilings, walls – with my poster. And then they hung his drawings over them. The poster used fluorescent colors, so when you used blacklight on it, it would pop. But then of course it overshadowed Henry Miller's work. Miller was very happy with the poster so he invited me over to his house and made dinner for me."





Exhibition of Art by Henry Miller  
Silkscreen poster  
1968



X-SEX print series  
 Four of a series of five silkscreen editions  
 1968





*Torture C*  
Silkscreen edition  
1968



*Bara-kei* [Ordeal by Roses] new edition  
Yukio Mishima  
Book slipcase  
1970





*Bara-kei* [Ordeal by Roses] new edition  
Yukio Mishima  
Book illustration  
1970



*Yakuza-kei* [Ordeal by Roses] new edition

Shintaro Ishihara

Book illustration

1970





*Bara-kei* [Ordeal by Roses] new edition  
Yukio Mishima  
Book illustration  
1970



Lullaby of Matura / Poor Boy  
Akiyuki Nosaka  
Single cover  
1969





*All About Ruriko Asaoka – A Rear Window View of My Mind*  
 Ruriko Asaoka  
 Record sleeve  
 1969

"This was 1969. I got a bunch of small photographic prints, cut them all out carefully, and collaged them together. It would be quite simple to do this now on the computer, but somehow I don't think you'd achieve the same effect."



*Opera from the Works of Tadanori Yokoo*  
 Toshi Ichiyanagi  
 Picture discs  
 1969





"Ken Takakura is singing a song I wrote on this record. I moved the label down because I thought it was boring that it was always in the middle. So when it spins it remains on the outside. And I didn't want the label between me and Ken. I said, *Get out of here!*"

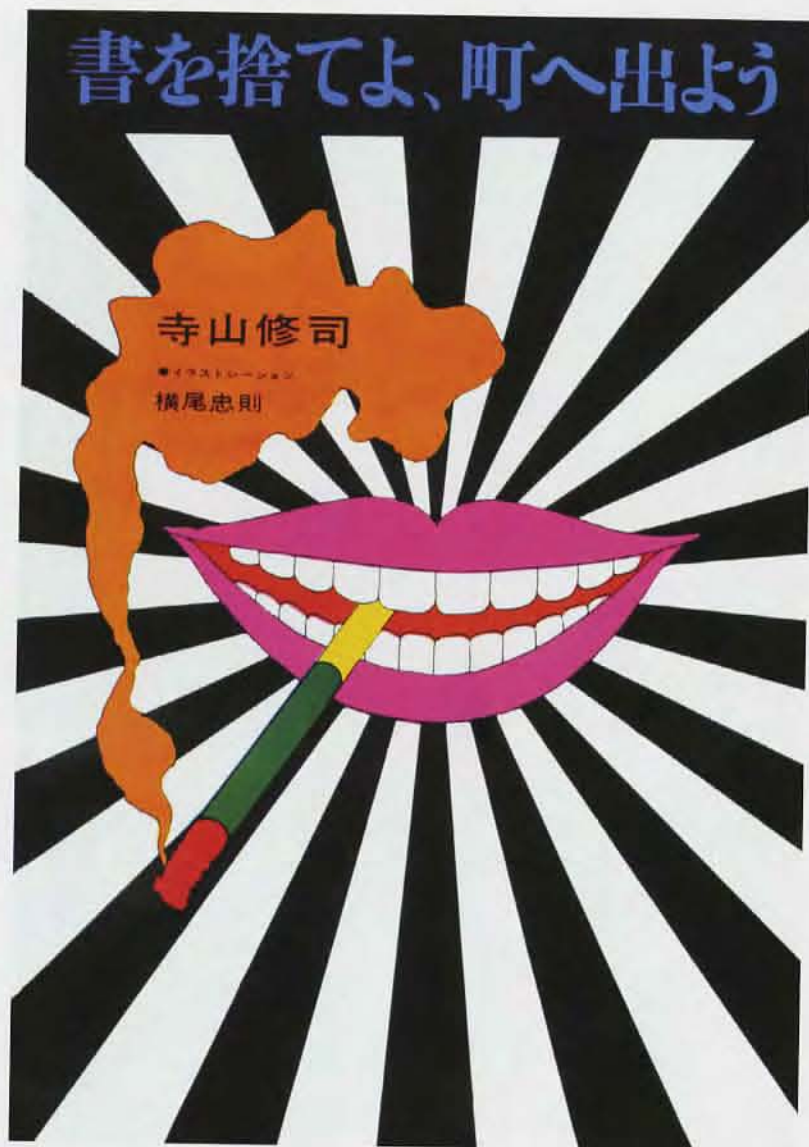


Emerson, Lake & Palmer  
Offset poster  
1972





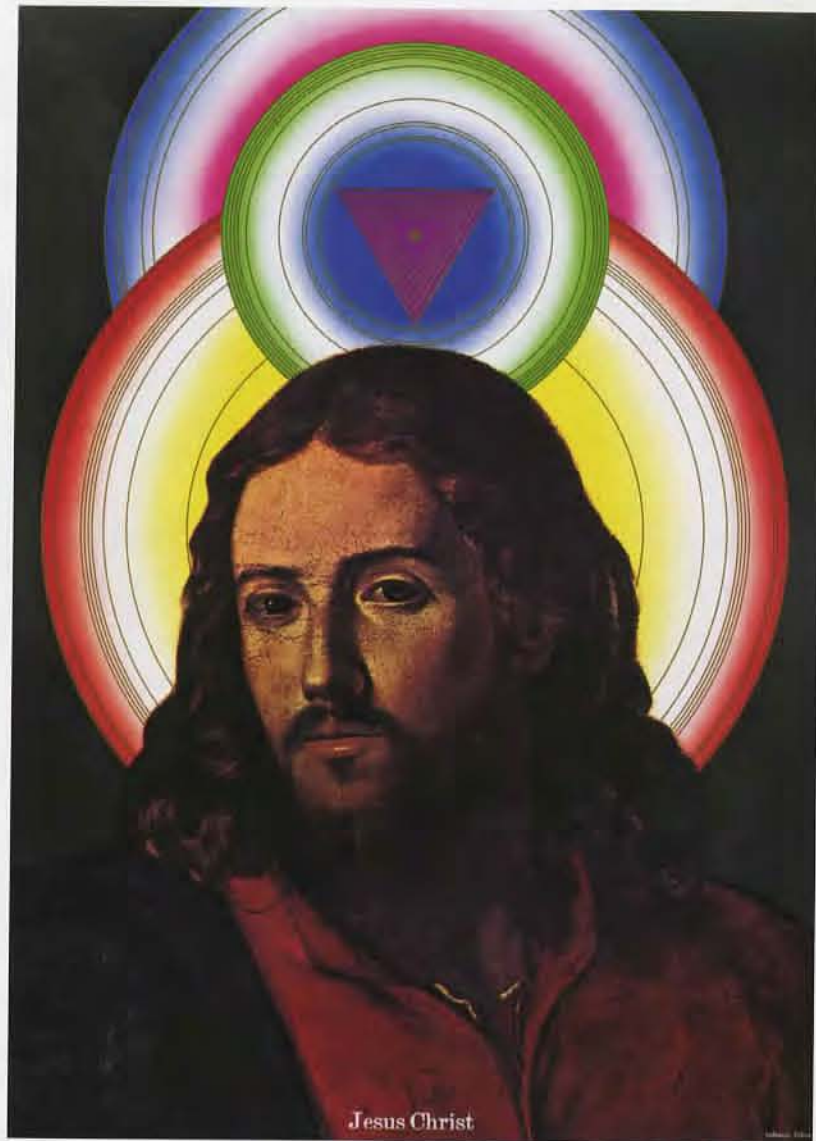
Earth, Wind & Fire  
Offset poster  
1976



*Sho wo Suteyo Machi e Deyo* [Throw Away Your Books, Rally In the Street!]

Shuji Terayama  
Book jacket design  
1967





*Jesus Christ*  
Yamigawa Electric Corporation  
Offset poster  
1973

"This is a poster for the 150th anniversary of a lighting company. So I thought of light as an aura, almost holy. The company made tons of these posters, scrunched them up into balls and piled them in front of a window with light coming through for a display. So no one really saw this poster."