

The Japan Times

CULTURE



Tadanori Yokoo's "A Requiem of Memory" (1994) | COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

ART

Imagination runs wild in Japanese contemporary art

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SPECIAL TO THE JAPAN TIMES

JUN 11, 2014

“Nostalgia and Fantasy: Imagination and its Origins in Contemporary Art” is a ragtag grouping of nine individual artists and one unit, each of whom focus on extremely different things. It is difficult to say, in fact, where “nostalgia” and “fantasy” come into play in some instances. With only minimal wall-panel descriptions, contextualization is a major stumbling point, not the Larking, Matthew. “Imagination Runs Wild in Japanese Contemporary Art.” The Japan Times, June 11, 2014

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least with the subtitle and the supposed origins of the imagination in contemporary art. Many of the works, however, are outstanding.

Among the best is the superlative super-realist painter Sai Hashizume, whose technical mastery and compositional skills place her among the best young painters working today. Some of the work borrows from a fairy tale by Hans Christian Andersen in which the poor protagonist, Karen, is taken in by a wealthy woman and is given bright red shoes that she wears to church to everyone's consternation.

The shoes take over her life forcing her to continually dance until, eventually, she has to have her feet amputated and seeks Christian redemption. Hashizume's "Still Life with Skull" (2011) is a vanitas still-life painting with bright red high heels set amongst symbolic death imagery, such as a skull, open book and tipped over glass. These are the conventions of 17th-century Dutch painting, though the computer set within the other objects is an obvious technological update. Her other paintings deal with sexualized female imagery, though the heads are cropped or the visage obscured. "Girls Start the Riot" (2010-11) almost has a Balthus-like quality

Keisuke Yamamoto is both painter and sculptor, though he also uses his sculptural surfaces as an opportunity for painting. He creates large-scale abstract paintings along with small-scale wooden sculptures. The really compelling piece, however, is the monumental wooden sculpture "Untitled" (2007) — a kind of fairy-tale land that includes a giant face equipped with an elaborate hair-do, candy-floss protuberances and outcroppings that sprout mushrooms and fried eggs

Other works to spend time looking over are those of Toshiyuki Konishi, who toys with the family portrait. Faces are done in swaths of paint, so that they are obscured and sometimes grotesque with swollen eyes and features that begin to spiral out of control. "Untitled" (2007) depicts a mother or father with a child in a pool holding some kind of float, whereas another untitled painting draws together three generations of a family with one figure holding up a baby. In a wall installation, dozens of portraits are pooled together, some in color, others in black and white, suggesting a kind of family tree of successive generations, though all figures are de-gendered and anonymous.

Yukiko Suto creates subtle graphic works that lean toward the sketch or have the quality of preparatory drawings, though sometimes her flower-and-garden imagery could almost be kimono designs. Her larger-scale works, such as "W House — Entrance Side" (2010), which depicts an urban scene of a car parked in front of a house surrounded by trees and foliage,

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adopt a style similar to Chinese literati painting — the “brushwork” of her pieces like that common to the genre’s conventions. Her illustrations, however, are in fact all worked up in pencil.

Koji Tanada’s figural sculptures appear almost religious, such as his “Springing Up Boy” (2011), for which a child with a resigned expression on his face stands in the posture of a crucified Jesus Christ. The art unit Yodogawa Technique, meanwhile, has created a wall of discarded garbage, which you can walk behind to open circular windows that you can stick your face through. From the other side, it’s like a photo-opportunity tourist attraction, where, ostensibly, you are trash too. Yosuke Kobashi, on the other hand, does big colorful paintings that blend representation and abstraction in fusions that offer little long-lasting interest

These are the young, new generation of artists. But the exhibition is bracketed by two of the elder statesmen of contemporary Japanese art — the “origin of imagination”: Yoshihisa Kitatsuji and Tadanori Yokoo.

Kitatsuji’s work is the most enigmatic, and includes an installation of a spinning, hypnotizing coil, behind which sea imagery and lapping waves are projected. “A Small Room of Life” (2014) is an outward-facing bookcase, its shelves forming walls that enclose a two-tatami-mat-sized room. Elsewhere, his work delves into collages of disparate imagery referencing the poems of Akiko Fujiwara, particularly that of her 2008 work “O to ha.”

Tadanori is a widely acclaimed favorite with his stylistic bricolage of so many things in his bright coloristic upbeat paintings. “Full House” (1994) contains numerous symbolic references, including a helium balloon on which is written “Japan is not No.1,” combined with Noah’s ark and all its animals and two warriors in sword battle. Artistic imagination is an all too common issue, conceptual fantasy and so-called nostalgia as an exhibition concept is commonplace. The art is good, but the museum’s handling of it is conceptually, and indescribably, bizarre.

“Nostalgia and Fantasy: Imagination and its Origins in Contemporary Art” at The National Museum of Art, Osaka, runs till Sept. 15; open 10 a.m.-5 p.m. (Fri. till 7 p.m.). ¥900. Closed Mon. and July 22. www.nmao.go.jp/en/

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