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Tadanori Yokoo unearths a future from personal past

By [MATTHEW LARKING](#)
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The establishment of a museum in the name of an individual is always, to a degree, a memorializing issue in preparation for the inevitable. The inauguration of the Yokoo Tadanori Museum of Contemporary Art in many ways heralds such, and Yokoo's oeuvre has often been a dialogue with death.



Revisiting memories: "DNF: N City-II (Four Times)," painted by Tadanori Yokoo in 2003, uses a very similar composition of the same subject as, "DNF: N City-II" (pictured below), which was painted in 2000. ARTIST'S COLLECTION; PRIVATE COLLECTION

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"I always think about dead people when I paint," he once wrote, and in April 2010 he tweeted: "What'll I think when it's really time to die? Will I think, 'Now I'll be able to live eternally'?"

To answer: he may — at least in institutionalized form.

The purpose of the new museum is to exhibit works and provide access to research materials (apply at least a week in advance for the latter) of

the Nishiwaki, Hyogo Prefecture-born artist. Yokoo donated more than 3,000 paintings and other items to the prefecture, which subsequently decided to renovate the west wing of the Harada no Mori Gallery, formerly the Hyogo Prefectural Museum of Modern Art, to house it all. Now renamed after the designer-cum-artist, the exhibition space is managed jointly with the nearby Hyogo Prefectural Museum of Art, and it turns Nada Station, a JR Kobe Line stop just outside the city, into something of a contemporary art-pilgrimage site.

The title of the first exhibition, "Yokoo Tadanori: Han-han-puku-puku-han-puku" has no English translation, but the ostensible cues are to art anti-establishmentarianism, the return to beginnings, and repetition. Another tweet of Yokoo's from August 2012 noted, "Copying was my starting point." Arguably, however, copying is also what has sustained Yokoo over several decades of art practice, as this exhibition illustrates.

Yokoo made his first poster debut in a culture fair at his high school in 1953. He then took a series of advertising and art-director jobs from 1956, before taking a role in a performance-happening with the avant-garde styled Hi Red Center in 1964. Meeting the internationally renowned Yukio Mishima in 1965, Yokoo ended up creating illustrations for the writer's serialized essay "The End of Aesthetics," published in the *Josei Jishin* magazine.

Yokoo's "Pink Girls" series, part of his solo exhibition in Osaka in 1966, was the artist's debut as a painter, and it featured immodest forms of women in shades of hot pink with big breasts, mouths agape, hairy armpits and low-angled up-skirt points of view. Full-frontal poses and a kind of playful pornography were the gist of the works, though occasionally he set them against a background that borrowed renowned



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imagery. For example, "Mona Lisa" (1966) shows a blond-haired woman squirting milk from her right breast before the craggy backdrop scenery of Leonardo da Vinci's masterpiece.



Similar compositions, different strokes: "Moat" (1966) by Yokoo Tadanori THE TOKUSHIMA MODERN ART MUSEUM

knickers, referencing Marcel Duchamp's work of the same title. Loosely transliterated, the letters amount to a French pun "*Elle a chaud au cu,*" meaning "She's got a hot ass."

Yokoo's body of work never really resulted in a mature style as the summation of his artistic experience. Rather, he tended to recycle his earlier works, "self-counterfeiting" as he called it, being self-referential and autobiographical. Yokoo's motifs were mostly ones from his childhood that he redeployed, though these were always kitsch and pop and combined with high art references. He has a penchant for stereotypical imagery, such as postcard images of waterfalls, *ukiyo-e* prints, clippings from postwar boys magazines, pictures of Tarzan, Mickey Mouse and Astro Boy, and illustrations from the "Kenya Boy" manga by Ken Takakura and Soji Yamakawa, which he read as a middle school student.

Even later in life, Yokoo still emphasized the primacy of his own biography. The "Y Junction" series, which he began in 2000, presents photographs of a crossroads, the former site of a model shop that he had frequented as a child. He later shot a variety of other such junctions in his hometown, as well as in other cities, which he turned into paintings. He sought less photographic veracity than a practice of collage that blended early memories with the changing urban fabrics of the cities and sites he found himself in.

Happy to work in the re-stylized idioms of a horde of Western-art historical references — supplied by Pablo Picasso, Henri Rousseau, and Renaissance Annunciation painting among others — Yokoo also

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The genesis of that series and its iterations evolved from Yokoo's childhood experience of being taken by his mother to the women's section of the local communal hot baths. For the artist, the experience was erotic, fearful and formative, and his 2005 work "Two People's D's" (2005) displays a similar composition, though this time the painterly application is more expressionist, and Yokoo imprints "L.H.O.O.Q" on the woman's

reworked the paintings of Peter Paul Rubens for "After Rubens (Unfinished)" (2003).

Elsewhere he can be found re-picturing those personal to him. "Remembering Past Friends" (2003) features around 20 now-deceased friends, represented in black portraits in swirling clouds above a railroad track, where he pictures himself in red. Ascension, it appears, is never far away in the artist's thoughts.

"Yokoo Tadanori: Han-han-puku-puku-han-puku" at Yokoo Tadanori Museum of Contemporary Art runs till Feb 17; open 10 a.m.-6 p.m. (Fri., Sat. till 8 p.m.). ¥800. Closed Mon. www.ytmoca.jp.

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