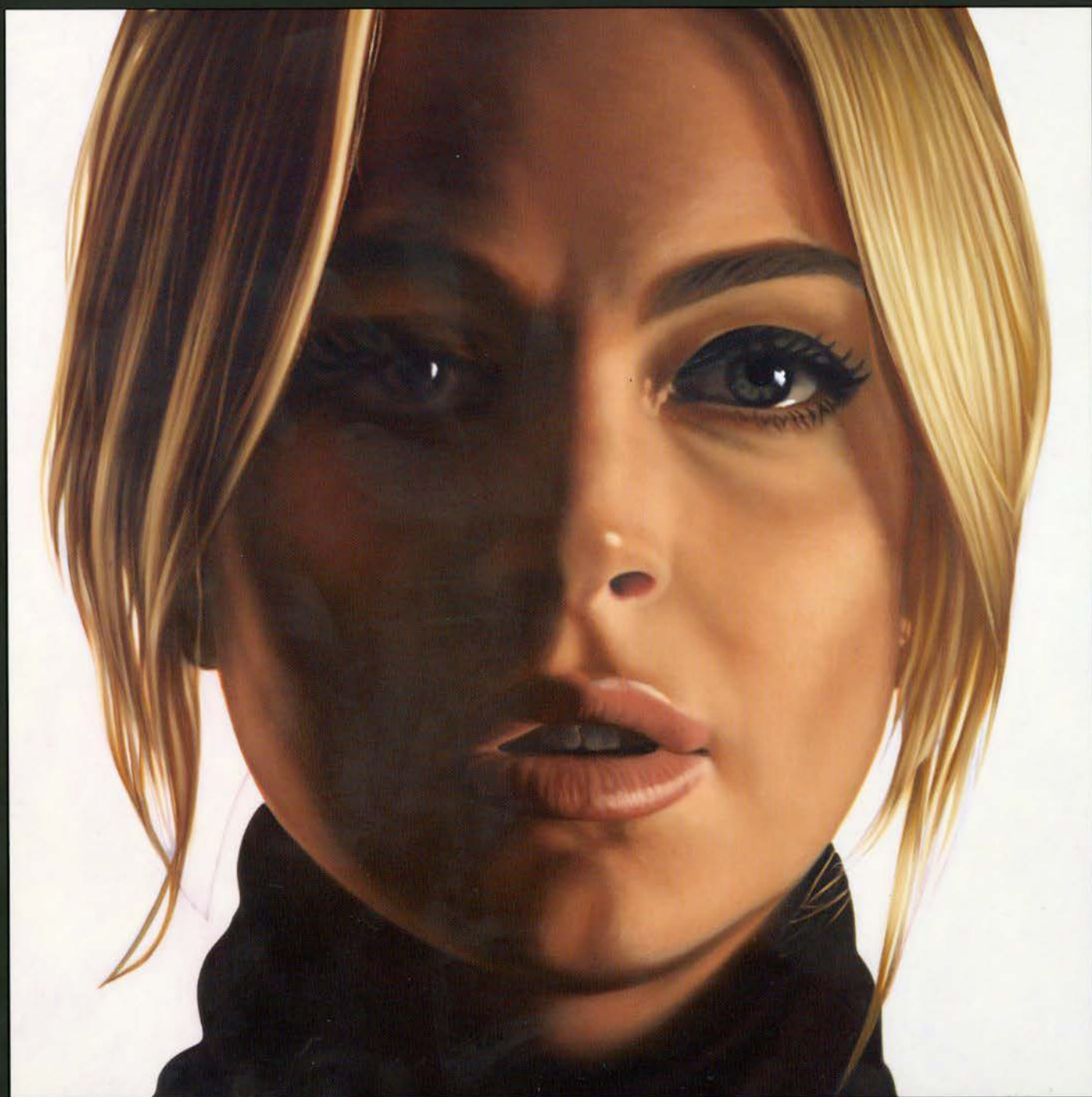


whitewall


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THE FASHION ISSUE

GEORGINA CHAPMAN, YAYOI KUSAMA, RICHARD PHILLIPS, TADANORI YOKOO

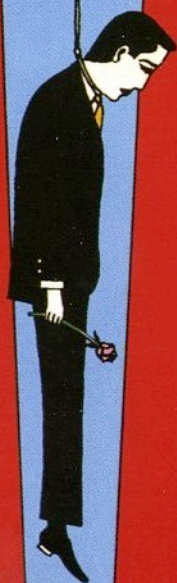


TADANORI YOKOO

BY ANNA SANSOM, PORTRAITS BY ARAM DIKICIYAN

MADE IN JAPAN

TADANORI YOKOO



HAVING REACHED
A CLIMAX AT THE AGE OF 29,
I WAS DEAD



Tadanori Yokoo emerged as a pioneer in Japan's avant-garde art scene in the 1960s and today he is one of his country's most prominent artists. A museum dedicated to his work is opening in Kobe in November. To be called the Yokoo Tadanori Modern Art Museum, it will be housed in an annex building of the Hyogo Prefectural Museum of Art.

Yokoo, now 72, trained as a graphic designer and collaborated with the stars of Japan's underground scene, who grappled with the country's defeat in the Second World War. A graphic poster on the theme of suicide that he made in 1965 propelled his success. Titled *Tadanori Yokoo*, it depicts a man, wearing a black suit and holding a single rose in his right hand, hanging by a noose in front of the red stripes of Japan's imperial flag; the flag's white stripes have been replaced with blue. In between a photo of himself as a baby and a group photo from his student days obscured by a large pink hand with green fingernails, the bottom of the poster reads, "Having reached a climax at the age of 29, I was dead." The poster, with its surreal touches, connotations of different types of imagery, and preoccupation with death, set the tone for Yokoo's oeuvre.

His achievements as a graphic designer saw him designing a poster for the Beatles and being invited to have a solo show at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1972 at the age of 36. Yet Yokoo strove to become an artist, and eight years later, after seeing a Picasso exhibition at MoMA, he started painting seriously. His paintings are often characterized by crimson landscapes and

for the novelist Yukio Mishima, the photographer Eiko Hosoe, the Butoh dancer Tatsumi Hijikata, and the playwrights Shuji Terayama and Juro Kara. What characterized the mood of that period? Did you have the impression that it was a unique, radical moment?

TY: I had originally aspired to become a painter, but after high school I took a job at a printing shop and designed posters at a Kobe newspaper. In 1960 I moved to Tokyo and joined the Japan Designer Center as an assistant designer. The Japanese graphic design world was preoccupied with modernistic design and my pre-modern indigenous designs repulsed my peers and were spurned by corporations. When I quit after four years, the avant-garde art movement captivated me. That was when I met Mishima Yukio and mingled with artists of different genres in his milieu, who were opposed to modernism, and designed posters for their projects. Our rebellious creative output soon earned the sobriquet "underground." Most of us were simply pursuing ourselves as artists, rather than raising the propaganda banner of politics. After collaborating with the Osaka Expo in 1970, which many leading corporations participated in, underground artists found themselves spotlighted in the media as "upper-ground" artists. Our coterie gradually drifted apart, and while establishment-minded society began to accept anti-establishment art, the spirit of the avant-garde and the underground was gradually diluted.

"WHEN I MET MISHIMA . . . OUR REBELLIOUS CREATIVE OUTPUT SOON EARNED THE SOBRIQUET 'UNDERGROUND.' MOST OF US WERE SIMPLY PURSUING OURSELVES AS ARTISTS, RATHER THAN RAISING THE PROPAGANDA BANNER OF POLITICS"

burning skies, surreal twists, and collisions of reality and fantasy.

Yokoo's work is being showcased in two exhibitions that will be on view until October 21, 2012. His 1974 "Shambala" series (including paintings, woodblock prints, silkscreen prints, and other works) is featured in the "Seeking Shambala" exhibition at the Museum of Fine Arts Boston. Over in Paris, some of his humorous paintings made in tribute to Henri Rousseau have been loaned by KAWS to the "Histoires de Voir: Show and Tell" exhibition at the Fondation Cartier. Friedman Benda, which presented the artist's latest collages in New York this spring, organized this correspondence between *Whitewall* and Tadanori Yokoo.

WHITEWALL: You were eight years old and living in Nishiwaki, a small town 40 kilometers north of Kobe, when the U.S. bombed Japan. Your use of the color red is linked to how you can recall the sky beyond the mountains turning crimson. How would you describe the images that have stuck in your mind?

TADANORI YOKOO: One sunny day, during the almost daily American firebombing of the Japanese homeland, I spied my first B-29 trailing a long white vapor high up in the sky. I fantasized that the bomber was spewing smoke from a Japanese military attack. At the time, no Japanese airplane could fly high enough to emit vapor. The fuselage of that B-29 appeared to me like a shimmering silver crucifix. When the night firebombing eventually began, the skies over Akashi and Kobe, dozens of kilometers away, were tainted bright red. Even the stars seemed to glimmer in red. I think it must be the hellfire tint of that sky which, six decades later, spurs me to paint crimson nighttime skies seemingly on fire. The shade of red that often appears in my work is an emblem of death, yet sufficiently powerful to gush with life.

WW: You played a pivotal role in the underground culture of 1960s Japan, when you designed silkscreened advertising posters

WW: At 29, you made the poster *Tadanori Yokoo*, depicting a young man, wearing a black suit and holding a rose, who is hanging from a noose. How do you recall this feeling that you had nothing left to live for so early in your career?

TY: I found the original inspiration for this poster in the title of Norman Mailer's book *Advertisements for Myself*. I created it around the time I quit the Japan Design Center and went freelance, though I never intended it as an advertisement for myself but as an independent work of art. This poster is my declaration of departure from modernism. I had just lost my parents and found myself tormented by fears of my own death. In order to conquer my dread, I decided to place myself in the realm of the dead, gaining the perspective of death toward life. In all my subsequent work, I've never strayed from the death motif. As creativity brought greater fulfillment to my life, I became mysteriously overcome by a fear of death and now I believe that painting and living must be inherent goals.

WW: In 1972 you had a solo show at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. How did it feel to be exhibiting your work there, and what were the differences between how your work was perceived in Japan and in the U.S.?

TY: Many Japanese designers assumed that my MoMA solo exhibit was the result of western exoticism. But the curator explained to me, "My interest in your work is not exoticism toward

Previous spread, right:

Tadanori Yokoo

Tadanori Yokoo

1965

Silkscreen on paper

40 x 28 inches

Courtesy of Friedman Benda and the artist

Opposite page:

Tadanori Yokoo

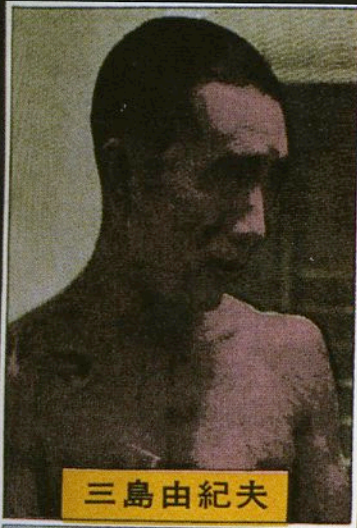
The Aesthetics of End

1966

Silkscreen on paper

40 x 28 inches

Courtesy of Friedman Benda and the artist



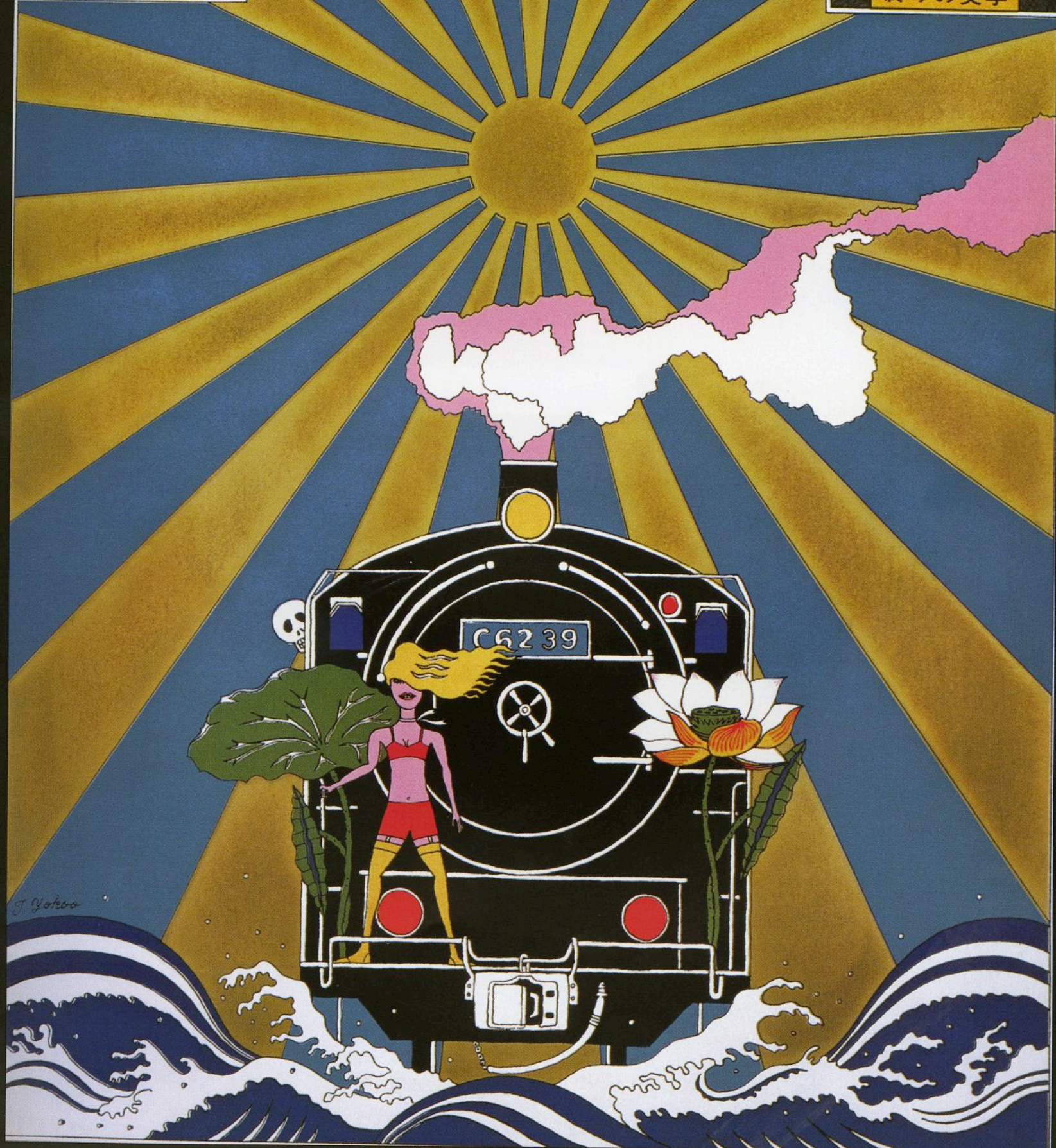
三島由紀夫

YUKIO MISHIMA

発 狂 社



終りの美学



Tadanori Yokoo
Me as an Insect
 2006
 Collage on paper
 12 x 16 inches
 Photo by Tom Whalen Photography
 Courtesy of Friedman Benda and the artist



Above:
 Tadanori Yokoo
Boys Be Nonsensical
 2006
 Acrylic on canvas
 46 x 35 inches
 Courtesy of Friedman Benda and the artist

Right:
 Tadanori Yokoo
ScanDALLst
 2012
 Collage on paper
 16 x 12 inches
 Courtesy of Friedman Benda and the artist





Perspective of Waterfalls installation from "Tadanori Yokoo." Friedman Benda, New York, NY, 2008.
Courtesy of Friedman Benda and the artist

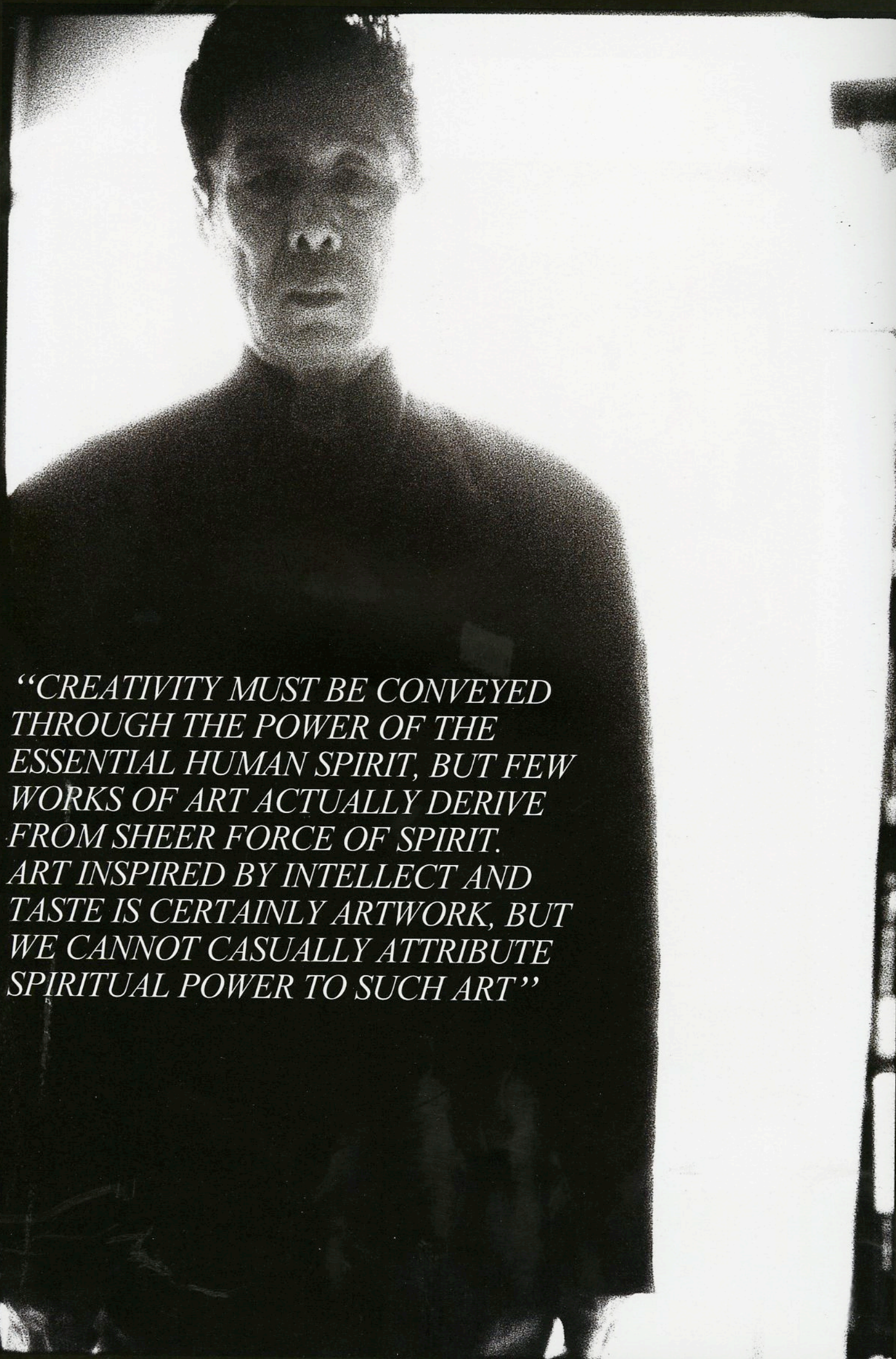


Tadanori Yokoo
Heavy Smoker
2007
Acrylic on canvas
18 x 15 inches

Courtesy of Friedman Benda and the artist



Tadanori Yokoo
Mysterious Persona
 2012
 Collage on paper
 16 x 12 inches
 Photo by Adam Reich Photography
 Courtesy of Friedman Benda and the artist



*“CREATIVITY MUST BE CONVEYED
THROUGH THE POWER OF THE
ESSENTIAL HUMAN SPIRIT, BUT FEW
WORKS OF ART ACTUALLY DERIVE
FROM SHEER FORCE OF SPIRIT.
ART INSPIRED BY INTELLECT AND
TASTE IS CERTAINLY ARTWORK, BUT
WE CANNOT CASUALLY ATTRIBUTE
SPIRITUAL POWER TO SUCH ART”*

Japan or Asia. I was moved by your universal themes of life and death and eroticism." I was honored because my solo show was the first MoMA exhibit of a living graphic designer. But because design is always considered inferior to painting, I wasn't overcome with joy. I have always aspired to be a painter.

WW: *Eight years later, after seeing a Picasso retrospective at MoMA, you decided to start painting seriously. What did you want to express in painting, and how did Picasso influence you?*

TY: I realized that Picasso's rightful loyalty to himself as an artist was the element most missing from my work as a designer. For me, design remains "work," while painting is "life" itself. It was in that exhibit that I determined to integrate painting and life into my way of life, and I wanted to express the integration of body and spirit in painting. By materializing my myriad, varied, small selves on the stages of my canvases, I wanted to experiment with how to portray not a specific identity but my multiple identities in a range of subjects and styles.

WW: *Earlier this year, Friedman Benda in New York presented your latest collages, which use images from vintage American magazines such as Life, Time, and Playboy. How would you describe your collage-making process?*

TY: To create the collages, I asked the gallery to send me stacks of American magazines from the fifties to the seventies, and worked with photo essays from their pages. I wanted to examine America's present by making those past decades my motif. This is my second collage exhibit. In my first, at the Roy Boyd Gallery in Chicago, my subjects were war, religion, space, and sex, and I was often asked, "Why?" It had become clear to me, from the pages of magazines, that these subjects were not so much mine as America's. The subjects emerged naturally as I cut out magazine photos and assembled them. So I imagine that the subjects apparent in my new collages are also issues confronted by American society and those American concerns are also global concerns. My collage works are a direct deployment of a Surrealism concept: In the moment of encounter between two dissimilar things, an unexpected vision is born. Through such hybridizations, a series of visions are created, resulting in a work of art. Some of the collages are intentionally unfinished since unfinished work is more imaginative and liberating.

WW: *Some of your collages use images from American magazines alongside those of destroyed temples or Mount Fuji — relating to destruction and Japanese heritage. Is this to reflect the U.S.-influenced aspirations and dreams of postwar Japan?*

TY: While creating collages I try to give in to my unconscious emotions as much as possible. If I employ various theories, the work becomes unimaginative. Some part of me is naturally drawn toward destruction because I sense a powerful beauty in what has been destroyed. When I create, I constantly involve both my personal reality and social reality in my imagination.

WW: *Your collage Disappeared Picture [2012] features an empty frame, a Cranach nude, Michelangelo's David, and a severed image of Jacques-Louis David's Napoleon Crossing the Alps, on a page that reads "America's recession" at the bottom. What was the starting point for this collage, and what thoughts about the art world arose as you were making it?*

TY: I became interested in picture frames and wanted to create a collage whose theme was art. When I think about painting, classical painting always comes to mind first, and I chose classical works everyone knows. Some figures are modern, and I placed products of civilization and culture on an equal footing with the classics. I had no idea that the phrase "America's recession" was part of it because I can't read English! It was pure coincidence. Perhaps the complexity of the work was enhanced by the chance intervention of these words.

WW: *Your collage ScanDAList [2012] invites reflection on consumerism while capturing Dalí's exuberance. What inspired you to make a work about the Spanish Surrealist?*

TY: In the 1970s, I traveled to Spain's Port Lligat, near Cadaqués,

and visited Dalí's home. I spent three hours with Dalí and Gala. From that experience, I decided to make a collage of Dalí portraits. Suddenly, Gala also appears. A fox appears on the head of Dalí, the materialist who loved money, and in memory of the day I felt outfoxed when I met Dalí and his wife. The bottle of alcohol at the bottom is the drink I was served, though not the exact type of liquor.

WW: *From 1977 to 1999 you designed invitations to Issey Miyake's fashion shows in Paris. How would you describe your collaboration and friendship?*

TY: I first met Issey Miyake in 1971, when I happened to be in New York at the time of his first fashion show at the Japan Society and he sent me an invitation. After I returned to Japan, he asked me to design the invitation to one of his Paris shows, which is how our collaboration began, and he recently asked me to design some textiles. As one of the directors of 21_21 Design Sight in Tokyo, he has offered to exhibit my work there, but, given our collaboration, I can't just exhibit ordinary work. I'm working on an idea now.

WW: *You asked Arata Isozaki to design your studio. What's it like, and what are the optimal conditions for you to paint in?*

TY: I first asked Tadao Ando to design my studio, but his design called for a wooden structure. Unlike concrete, wood can breathe, so it's perfect for the human body, but it's vulnerable to fire. So I asked Arata Isozaki instead. His design is entirely of slate, so there's no fear of fire. The studio is built on a slight elevation surrounded by forests and trees. Direct sunlight pours in from the southwest balcony while gentle light streams from the ceiling, creating a delightful space, which I use by moving around my work area.

WW: *A museum dedicated to your work that will be called the Yokoo Tadanori Modern Art Museum is opening in an annex building of the Hyogo Prefectural Museum of Art in Kobe in November. What can you tell us about this?*

TY: My works at the museum will be both donated and loaned. There'll be three exhibitions per year that will borrow from museum and private collections, and involve collaborations with other artists. I have no specific position there and my own creative activities will continue as usual. The building, which was originally designed by Togo Murano, was supposed to be renovated by Tadao Ando, but the prefectural government changed its plans, making the renovation impossible. Such a shame.

WW: *What other activities concerning your work are happening?*

TY: A documentary film about me is under way and the producers have commissioned me to direct a fictional film as part of the project.

WW: *You've said that you believe in the soul's everlastingness and that you think all the works you create should be considered "posthumous works." With this in mind, what legacy do you want to leave behind?*

TY: Creativity must be conveyed through the power of the essential human spirit, but few works of art actually derive from sheer force of spirit. Art inspired by intellect and taste is certainly artwork, but we cannot casually attribute spiritual power to such art. In this sense, my own work remains immature. If I have created even a single work rendered by the power of the spirit, at least by the time of my own death, I should be able to die in peace. I would call work created this way my "legacy." If all of my works could be considered "legacies" as defined in this way, I would be a blessed artist, but what a truly arrogant ambition!

"Seeking Shambala" at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston and "Histoires de Voir: Show and Tell" at the Fondation Cartier in Paris both run until October 21, 2012.

For more information: www.mfa.org; www.fondation.cartier.com; www.friedmanbenda.com