

Rawlings, Ashley. "Tadanori Yokoo: Dark was the Night." *ArtAsiaPacific*, July & August, 2011.

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DARK WAS THE NIGHT

TADANORI YOKOO

BY ASHLEY RAWLINGS

Y.

(Previous spread)

LUMINOUS PATH IN THE DARKNESS:

CITY N (V)

2000

Acrylic on canvas, 130.3 x 162.1 cm.

Private collection.

(Opposite page)

A LA MAISON DE M. CIVEÇAWA

("AT MR. CIVEÇAWA'S HOUSE")

1965

Silkscreen on paper, 103 x 72.8 cm.

Collection of Museum of Modern Art,
New York.

All images in this article are courtesy
the artist; SCAI the Bathhouse, Tokyo;
and Friedman Benda, New York.

Awash with crashing waves, blooming roses and radiating suns, the kaleidoscopic compositions of Tadanori Yokoo's silkscreen posters are instantly recognizable. His name is frequently emblazoned across the designs, as if to ensure there is no forgetting whose work you are looking at. These prints, which derive their motifs as much from 19th-century *ukiyo-e* prints as from 1960s psychedelia, bridge the disciplines of graphic design and fine art. Moving in the avant-garde circles of 1960s and 1970s Tokyo, Yokoo designed posters for figures such as the novelist Yukio Mishima, photographer Eikoh Hosoe and performers such as Tatsumi Hijikata, Shuji Terayama and Juro Kara.

Underlying the dazzling vibrancy of Yokoo's work is a potent combination of irony, political critique and morbid prophecy. This tone was the product of the profound psychological rupture that occurred on a national scale in the two decades following Japan's defeat in World War II, when the country transitioned from near-total destruction to becoming one of the world's most advanced nations. Born in 1936 in Nishiwaki, a small town near Kobe, Yokoo was eight years old when the US Air Force conducted its relentless bombing raids over Japan. "I remember seeing the sky beyond the mountains turn a deep red as they bombed Kobe and Akashi," he tells me. "Perhaps the fear I felt at the time unconsciously led me to use so much red in my work." He describes the bombings as his first experience of fear triggered by the outside world, and yet he perceived something "sublime" in these moments of catastrophe. At the same time, his anxieties came from within the home, where his father was a chronic sleepwalker. One night, Yokoo saw his father's face drenched with blood after he smashed his head through a window pane.

Yet the fear that these nightmarish scenes instilled in Yokoo is seemingly absent from his early work, which reflects not gloom and angst but rather the vibrancy and pride of Japan's rapid postwar economic growth as well as the nation's struggle to redefine itself in relation to its former enemy, occupier and now strategic partner, the United States. In 1956, when Yokoo was 22 years old, he joined the Japan Advertising Artists Club (JAAC); winning an honorable mention at a JAAC poster exhibition in Tokyo in 1958 provided the young artist with a gateway to the cultural scene there. Two years later, he moved to Tokyo, where his friendships and collaborations with the influential artists of the time led him to broaden his

approach to advertising design. "I didn't do all that much commercially driven design," he says. "Rather, I became involved with people working in theater, music, cinema and fine art, so I tried to express myself through themes such as life, death, eroticism and the opposition and fusion of Japan and the West. I wanted my work to convey the energy of the time."

Yokoo designed several posters for Tatsumi Hijikata, the founder of the Ankoku Butoh movement. Its name meaning "dance of utter darkness," Ankoku Butoh explored the savage and perverse impulses of the human spirit in grotesque stage performances. In Hijikata's first major piece, *Forbidden Colors (Kinjiki)* (1959)—which was inspired by Yukio Mishima's novel of the same title that describes the marriage of a gay man to a young woman—he tapped into the troubled conflation of homosexuality with paedophilia, holding a live chicken between the legs of a young man and then chasing him off the stage in darkness. "When Hijikata commissioned posters from me," Yokoo says, "he would tell me about his performances, but his explanations were abstract, conceptual and hard to understand. So, I absorbed the mood he was putting across to me and translated it into my own ideas. Thankfully, he really liked my designs."

One of Yokoo's most famous Ankoku Butoh commissions, titled *A La Maison De M. Civeçawa* ("At Mr. Civeçawa's House") (1965), advertises *Rose Colored Dance*, a homoerotic duet between Hijikata and fellow Butoh dancer Kazuo Ohno. The work is made up of an array of peer-to-peer homages, reinterpretations of classical Western painting and references to the clichés of Japan's pre- and postwar self-representations. The title dedicates the work to Tatsuhiko Shibusawa, a prominent novelist, art critic and translator of French literature, whose image is shown in the top-left corner. As with most of Yokoo's posters, the backdrop is a radiant halo of sunbeams, evoking the *Kyokujitsu-ki* military flag, which for many is a symbol of Japan's imperial aggression. (The flag was banned during the US military occupation [1945 to 1952], but was reinstated in 1956 by the newly established Japan Self-Defense Forces). While this pattern is laden with troubled connotations, Yokoo subversively eclipses it with a pink rose. Bearing Hijikata and Ohno's faces on its stem, the rose towers over a reproduction of the famous 1594 painting *Gabrielle d'Estrées and One of Her Sisters*, which shows d'Estrées, mistress of King Henri IV of France, holding what is assumed to be

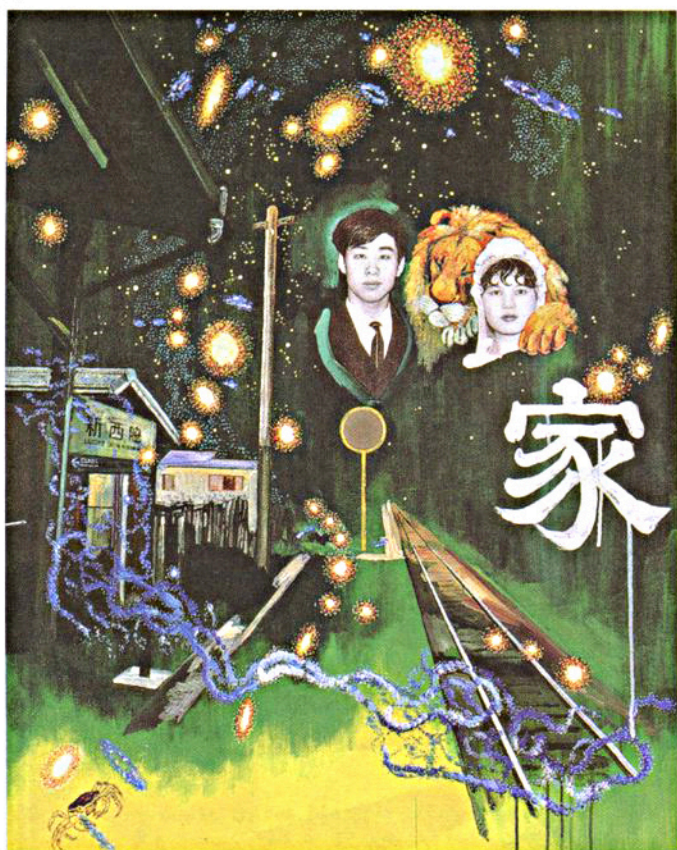


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Henri's coronation ring, while her sister pinches her right nipple. In Yokoo's irreverent adaptation, however, the sister's pinch unleashes a spurt of green liquid; meanwhile, d'Estrées' right hand is smeared with a bluish-white substance as she dips it into a can of tuna lurking at the base of the image. On either side of the sisters, tall blue waves close in on a tiny Mount Fuji, evoking Hokusai's 19th-century woodblock print, *The Great Wave off Kanagawa*; at the poster's top, a *shinkansen* ("bullet train") swerves into view through orange clouds, the icon of Japan's newfound status as an industrial powerhouse.

The dark humor for which the artist's work is known is more overt in the self-portrait *Tadanori Yokoo* (1965), a poster that he made for the "Persona Exhibition," a group show of 16 designers held at Tokyo's Matsuya department store. The artist's name arches over the top of the composition, crowned by the words "Made in Japan." Mount Fuji appears twice, but with ominous overtones. In the top-left corner, the *shinkansen* passes in front of it, but the volcano is spewing smoke, threatening to erupt; in the top-right corner, however, the volcano's explosive potential is usurped by an even greater power—a mushroom cloud. A photograph of the artist aged one and a half sits in the bottom left, while on the bottom right, there is a school photo superimposed with a giant pink hand making a sexually suggestive gesture. The center of the image is dominated by a figure hanging by his neck and holding a rose—below him, the radiant sun rises from behind the words, "Having reached a climax at the age of 29, I was dead."

Some people believed that Yokoo had died when they saw the poster. It was a deception that the artist was keen to explore. Three years later, he published the book *Isakushu* ("A Collection of Posthumous Works") (1968), which included essays by Yukio Mishima and Shuji Terayama, and he issued an announcement of his death in the Japanese newspapers while away in New York for four months. "As with *Tadanori Yokoo*, these works represented a form of rebirth for me," the artist explains, adding that while he was in New York (where his work was being shown in the "Word & Image" group exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art), his peers took it upon themselves to elaborate the extent of the ruse. "*Isakushu* features

photographs of a funeral procession that Terayama and other friends staged as a performance, but I knew nothing about it."

This morbidity typified the avant-garde art and writing of the time, and it fueled Yokoo's collaboration with Yukio Mishima and Eikoh Hosoe in 1970. Toward the end of his life, Mishima espoused increasingly nationalist views, advocating that Japanese society return to samurai codes of honor, reinstate the emperor as a sovereign and divine being, and thus regain the country's imperial glory. To this aim, he even set up his own private militia of rightwing college students, the Tatenokai ("Shield Society"), after he trained in the Self-Defense Forces. Identifying strongly with the Ankoku Butoh movement's savage, grotesque interpretations of desire, sex and death, Mishima had collaborated with Hosoe in 1963 on a photographic series entitled "Ordeal by Roses." Hosoe's rich black-and-white portraits of Mishima show the novelist in his rococo-style house in Tokyo, posing before reproductions of Renaissance paintings while wearing a *fundoshi* (traditional male loincloth). In one image, mimicking Guido Reni's painting of the martyrdom of Saint Sebastian, Mishima stands with his hands tied above him and arrows piercing his chest.

Mishima and Hosoe commissioned Yokoo to illustrate and design the third edition of "Ordeal by Roses." Yokoo's cover for the 1970 publication's slipcase is composed of five prints depicting Mishima naked, his prostrate body painted gold and his nipples and groin covered by bright red roses. Yokoo describes this vulnerable, reclining pose as the form of a dying Buddha, whom he imagines as tortured by roses. Overlooking the scene amid clouds of yellow and red mist is a Hindu goddess with nine heads, their gazes sweeping across the composition, carried by the beams of the sun behind them. Yokoo completed the work shortly before Mishima's shocking public suicide, in which he and four members of the Tatenokai stormed the Tokyo headquarters of the Self-Defense Forces with the aim of staging a coup and eventually restoring the Emperor's powers. When the mission failed, Mishima committed *seppuku*, and one of his junior officers beheaded him. "Mishima saw the work and asked me if I had made his *nehanzo* [a portrait of the reclining Buddha as he reaches enlightenment before death]," Yokoo recalls. "Through his suicide, Mishima aimed to break out of the cycle of transmigration between life and death. He did not want to be reincarnated in this world. So this work certainly portrayed his fate."

By this point, and following an inspiring trip to India, Yokoo had become increasingly interested in mysticism, Buddhism, the universe and the possibility of extraterrestrial civilizations. He designed posters and album covers for rock and folk musicians who shared similar interests, including the Beatles, Cat Stevens and Carlos Santana—his cover for Santana's triple album *Lotus* was awarded the special jury prize at the Brno Biennial, Czechoslovakia, in 1974. However, in the 1980s Yokoo shifted away from graphic design in order to explore his instinctive, intuitive approach to image-making without the constraints of clients' briefs or commercial objectives. His silkscreen-on-ceramic-tile piece, *Postwar (The Direct Aftermath of World War II)* (1986), shows the beginning of his more emotive and haunting meditations on Japan's midcentury tumult, portraying the wasteland of Tokyo as mottled expanses of red and orange, dotted with the stark husks of the buildings that survived the firebombing.

Yokoo's painting style varies greatly, from almost photorealistic depictions to highly impressionistic uses of brushwork. "I don't have any one, particular style," he says. "The look of the painting changes to suit the subject matter or theme. I have several identities, so it's natural that I employ a diverse range of styles." As with his graphic-design works, Yokoo's paintings have their own set of recurring motifs. But whereas those he used in his posters were mostly ironic critiques of Japanese national symbols or references to his peers, in his paintings his repeated depictions of constellations, solar systems, fireflies, lions, waterfalls, railroads and children in school uniform are more personal, evoking a wholehearted fascination for

(Opposite page)
I GOT MARRIED AT THE AGE OF 21.
2001
Oil and collage on canvas,
100 x 80.3 cm.
Private collection.
[See article for the full-length title
of this work].

(This page)
**POSTWAR (THE DIRECT AFTERMATH
OF WORLD WAR II)**
1986
Silkscreen on ceramic tile, 200 x 200 cm.
Collection of Hara Museum of
Contemporary Art, Tokyo.

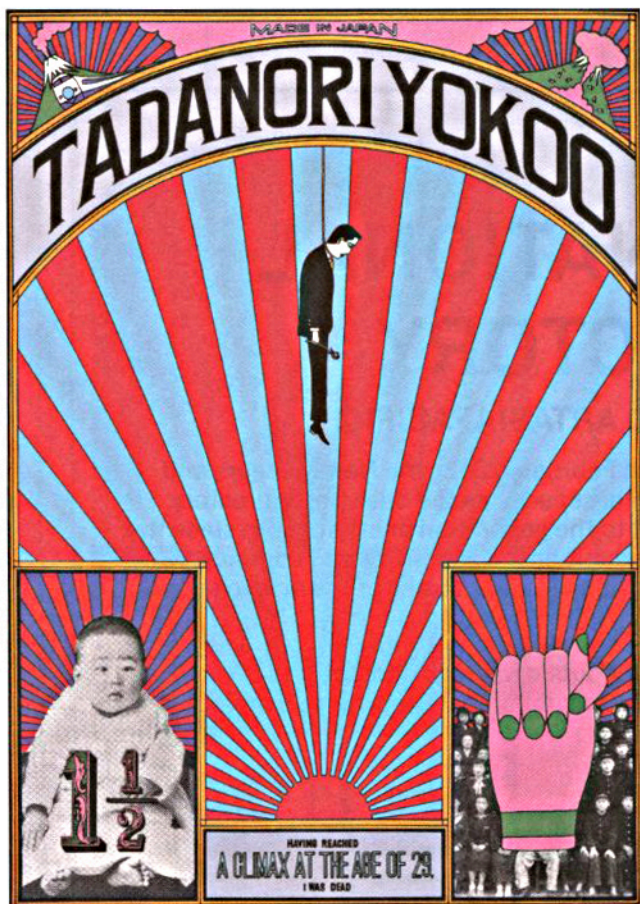
In the 1980s, Yokoo shifted away from graphic design in order to explore his instinctive, intuitive approach to image-making without the constraints of clients' briefs or commercial objectives.



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(Opposite page)
DESTINY
 1997
 Acrylic on canvas, 277.3 x 181.8 cm.

(This page)
TADANORI YOKOO
 1965
 Silkscreen on paper, 103 x 72.8 cm.
 Collection of Museum of Modern Art,
 New York.

the natural world and all the unknowns that it harbors. One set of related paintings shows a young boy and girl standing on a wooden bridge, with some iterations of this image showing the figures clearly and others subsuming them in abstraction. In *Picasso, 20th Year* (2001), it is daylight and one can see the children and a waterfall in the background—though the entire scene is upside down and the face of the Modernist master looms large in the top-left corner. In other paintings, such as *Destiny* and *Cosmic Fireflies* (both 1997), the figures are obliterated by cascades of vivid red, surrounded by copulating fireflies and swirls of galaxies in the night sky. These images manage to be both apocalyptic and transcendental.

If his *Tadanori Yokoo* and *Isakushu* self-portraits of the late 1960s were nihilistic attempts to achieve rebirth through faked deaths, by contrast one self-portrait from 2001 stands out for being a more celebratory, almost mawkish reflection on his life. From a night sky above a green landscape, dazzling solar systems drop down onto the platform of a rural train station, its tracks receding into the distance. Collaged in the middle of the canvas are black-and-white images of the artist as a young man with his bride; just below them, the Japanese character for “home” or “family” hovers enigmatically. A lion nuzzles the side of her face, while a crab floats in the bottom-left corner of the picture. The work is entirely autobiographical, as its unusually long title recounts: *I got married when I was 21. / The wedding took place at my parents' home in my hometown of Nishiwaki. / My wife was born under the sign of Leo (according to Western astrology) / and under the sign of the Boar (according to Chinese astrology). / I was born under the sign of cancer and also of the rat. And we've never stopped rushing around in our 45 years together.*

Though Yokoo's works are known for their spectacle and visual cacophony, the artist has also succeeded in making strong imagery out of quiet scenes, as in his series depicting Y intersections in Japanese towns. In *Luminous Path in the Darkness: City N (V)* (2000), one's eyes dart back and forth from left to right, from one street to the other. A sign gives directions to a cheap restaurant just off the

street on the left, where a light emanates from a side alley, hinting at activity that may be occurring out of sight. On the right, the other street recedes into blackness, punctuated only by some red and yellow lights in the distance.

The Y intersection paintings are reminiscent of the work of Italian Surrealist Giorgio de Chirico. Best known for his depiction of large, empty plazas with looming buildings and monuments, de Chirico played tricks on the viewer by filling his compositions with exaggerated perspectives, foreshortened lines, numerous vanishing points and shadows that do not fall as they should. “Throughout his life, de Chirico never stuck to just one approach,” Yokoo says. “He addressed all kinds of themes and used an array of techniques. So, in the sense of having multiple identities, I feel there is something in common between him and me.”

In some of the Y intersection paintings, Yokoo plays surrealist tricks, such as portraying mirror images of road markings in the night sky, or giving an exaggerated glow to a street lamp. But above all it is the subtle lack of an actual vanishing point in some of these works that makes them uncanny. Whereas in *Luminous Path in the Darkness: City N (V)* the darkness at the end of the streets is broken by distant spots of light, as its title suggests, *Luminous Path in the Darkness: Double Obscurity* (2001) is even more enigmatic. What seems to be a country lane diverges into two paths, one only slightly better lit than the other. But, with both receding into pitch-blackness, they are equally intimidating.

Though Yokoo's graphic works and paintings are solidly rooted in a Japanese context, his imagery—be it mundane or outlandish—reward viewers of all backgrounds with the innumerable entry points they offer. Underlying what may be hermetic cultural references to some are universal themes that speak to all. Life, sex, humor, religion, spiritualism, death, rebirth, hope and pessimism collide. Looking at Yokoo's work, one can laugh out loud at absurd suggestions, recall the wonder of gazing up at the Milky Way and imagine what comes next when the night sky rains fire.