

ArtReview Asia

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Tadanori Yokoo 49 Years Later

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Forty-nine years ago Tadanori Yokoo produced a painting of a bather, her eyes bloodshot and her armpits unshaven, swimming through surf that resembled both a wave from a classic woodblock print and a partial outline of the Japanese coast. The canvas belonged to the 'Pink Girls', a group of paintings in which flushed women – in various settings and poses – confronted viewers with lascivious glances and gaping, tooth-ringed mouths.

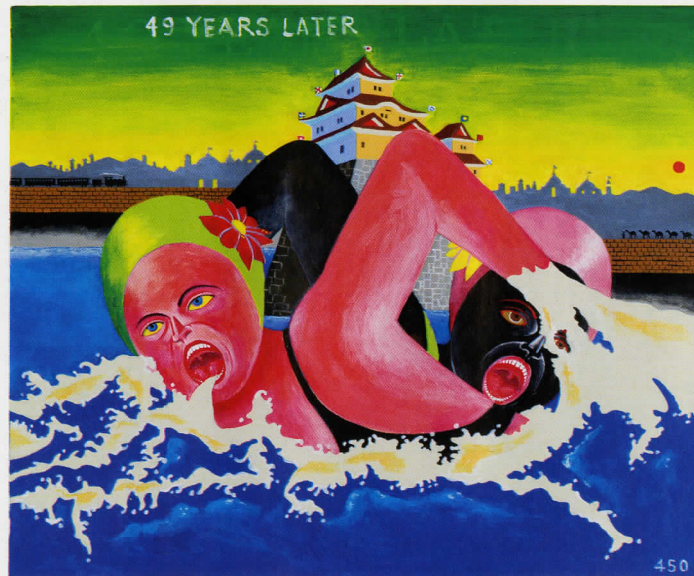
Yokoo was then – along with designers like Awazu Kiyoshi and Aquirax Uno – the poster boy for a creative underground, creating graphics for, among others, the author Yukio Mishima, the Butoh dancer Hijikata Tatsumi and the dramatist Terayama Shuji. Like their work, Yokoo's combined the traditional and the contemporary, the refined and the vulgar; like theirs, it stood at the nexus of a nascent critical understanding of kitsch as an expression of collective, often sublimated desire; and like theirs, it played with violence and transgressive sexuality as an outlet for that repressed emotion.

Riffing on Tom Wesselmann's nudes, Roger Vadim's 1960 vampire flick *Et mourir de plaisir* (*Le sang et la rose*) and, perhaps, Koga Harue's 1929 canvas *Sea*, a celebration of modern Japan anchored by a swimsuit-clad woman pointing skyward, the 'Pink Girls' are, in one interpretation, allegorical portraits of Japanese society as it was overwhelmed by American-style consumerism and popular culture.

Since then the bather has been a recurrent theme in the artist's oeuvre, and 49 years on it is the subject of a series of 22 paintings (all works but one, 2015). In these the figure, her arm raised and her mouth, which is spewing water as in those first iterations, appears singly and in groups, swimming through settings ranging from a flotsam-strewn sea to a wooden floor. The group is complemented by nine works of a dancing couple, based on a 1920s Rudolph Valentino film, that are pixelated in patterns ranging from cubist geometry to Picabian abstraction and Pop psychedelia, stylistic devices the artist has used before.

Yokoo has often cribbed from his past work, and the sense of autobiographical stock-taking implicit in the show's title is heightened both by this recycling and by introspective phrases like 'Incomplete Life, Incomplete Art', 'Collaboration between Self and Beyond Self' and 'Don't Fight, Do not Compete', which appear in several of the paintings. But where the campy Freudian force and outré content of his 1960s work reflected a culture under stress and posited the indulgence of desire as a possible defence against the dampening effects of commercialism and conformity, this current work lacks edge. In it, the past has become deadweight that allows only for permutation and combination – mix-and-match pastiches that lack formal and emotional vigour. Like the bathers in the recent series who seem to founder in heavy surf – which might be the wake of their own desperate strokes – Yokoo's work now suggests an artist and a nation truly at sea.

Joshua Mack



49 Years Later, 2014, acrylic on canvas, 46 x 53 cm.

Photo: Norihiro Ueno. Courtesy the artist and Albertz Benda, New York