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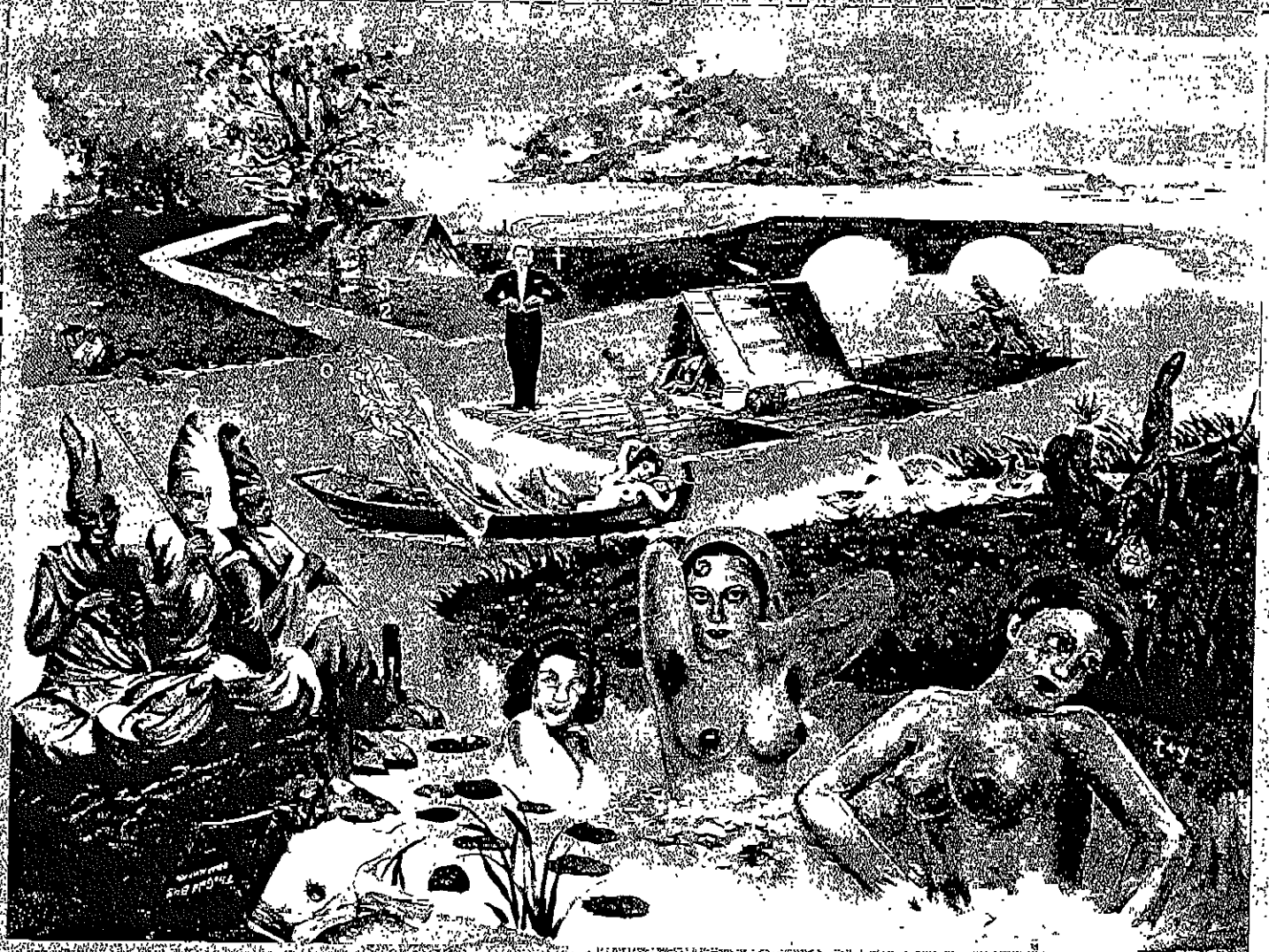
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YOKOO'S UNIVERSE OF ADVENTURE p.8

ART



A UNIVERSE OF ADVENTURE

Dean Poland visits the world of Yokoo Tadanori

YOKOO TADANORI IS A GRAPHIC designer, illustrator, printmaker, and painter whose body of work has been described as revolutionary, nationalistic, vulgar, sublime, homoerotic, cosmic, and comic. His latest exhibition, titled "Yokoo Tadanori: Be Adventurous!", brings together a selection of works from his early career as a graphic artist to his most recent attempts at large-scale paintings. The show includes hundreds of pieces sprawled across the exhibition space like celestial debris left over from some kind of cosmic cataclysm: bright pink girls touching their genitals, a dog's

anus thrust centre stage, celestial waterfalls, rural landscapes signposted with giant dildos and sublimely-painted suburban streets. Welcome to a universe of images brought into existence by the "big bang" of Yokoo Tadanori's anarchistic creative energy.

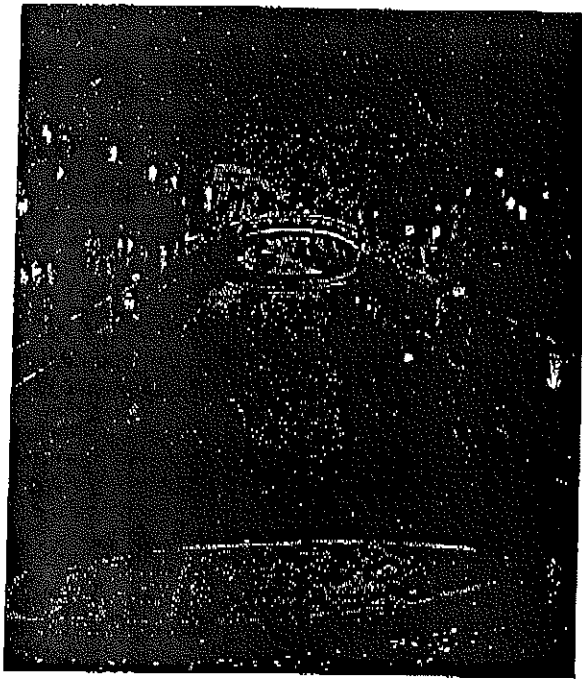
Born in Hyogo Prefecture in 1936, Yokoo's career began when he moved to Tokyo to join the Nippon Design Center in 1961 and was recognized almost immediately with awards from the Art Directors Club of Tokyo.

While living in Tokyo, he participated in demonstrations against the U.S. Japan Security Treaty

(or Anpo) and became involved in the flourishing avant-garde movement, working with such notorious performance artists as Terayama Shuji, and Kara Juro, and *ankoku butoh* founder Hijikata Tatsumi. He produced controversial posters to advertise their revolutionary performances, many of which are displayed in this latest exhibition. By using the techniques of collage and reproduction, these posters captured the subversive energy of the times. They were wild fusions of nostalgic images from the early Showa Period and 1960s psychedelic sub-culture, with a general air of art-deco. Also, by adhering to the "populist" principles of traditional *ukiyo-e* and *nishiki-e* prints, which had flourished as forms of popular art in the Edo Period, Yokoo's curious collages managed to be both eclectic and accessible to a modern Japanese audience. He also received praise from foreign viewers, and after his solo show in the early 1970s at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, he became one of Japan's most successful and internationally recognized artists.

Yokoo names Mishima Yukio and Kurosawa Akira as his two major influences, but his work is informed by a long list of artists including Joan Miro, Francis Picabia, Giorgio de Chirico, and Pablo Picasso. Moreover, because much of his work is based on the techniques of collage and reproduction, his respect for other artists goes beyond mere admiration, often borrowing images from their paintings and transplanting them into his own. As the art historian Wakakuwa Midori points out, Yokoo has made extensive use of the method of "intertextuality." Whereas collage attempts to eliminate coherence by juxtaposing images that have no connection with each other, intertextuality patches together pieces of previous, usually well-known works within a single pictorial space. A prime example of this method is "Relation between Rose and Rose Bud" (1988), also in the new exhibition. In this painting, Yokoo merges a rural landscape with Peter Paul Rubens' famous painting "The Rape of the Daughters of Leucippus" by dividing the surface of the canvas into a mosaic grid. He has also used this intertextualized motif in a series of large-scale paintings such as "The Relation between Cause and Effect in Michelangelo and Hokusai" (1990) and "Promised Meeting" (1990).

It could be said that Yokoo's artistic aims are akin to those of the American Pop artists, who in turn based their work on those of Marcel Duchamp and the Dadaists - seeking to override accepted notions of good and bad taste and to eliminate the barriers between the art work, the viewer, and the reality of everyday life. These methods of collage, reproduction, and intertextuality encourage participation by creating visual puzzles that entice the viewer into an imaginative dialogue with the work. In the case of intertextuality, for example, one is asked to guess from which famous paintings the images were taken and an intellectual bond



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① Poster (colour coordination) for "A La Maison De M. Civeçawa" (1965, 44.0cm x 31.0cm)

② "Kinosaki Fantasy" (2006, 227.3cm x 181.8cm)

③ "Bamboo Horse Constellation" (2006, 116.7cm x 90.9cm)

is created between the viewer and work of art. As with Pop artists like Andy Warhol and Roy Lichtenstein, Yokoo is a voracious consumer of the signs and symbols that surround him, and his pictorial spaces are filled with the bric-a-brac of contemporary culture: TVs, kitchen sinks, washing machines, and mass media images, including photographs, films, cartoons, and newspapers (see "Garden of Fertility"). Yokoo is well aware that the modern world has been saturated with manufactured images and misleading information. His work, therefore, often casts an ironic eye on the complex relationship between art and commerce.

Unlike the Pop artists, however, Yokoo's work also possesses an overtly spiritual dimension. He has travelled widely in India, and like many who sank into the psychedelic swamp of the late 1960s, much of his work is splattered with images and themes of spiritual transcendence. Recurring motifs of waterfalls, Buddhas, angels, UFOs and extra-terrestrials all suggest, as Mishima Yukio affectionately put it, "a popcorn spiritualism." Even his infamous "Pink Girls" series, in which women with bright pink skin, thick eyelashes, and bloodshot eyes, face forward openly revealing their bare breasts, unshaven armpits, and public hair, is strangely reminiscent of medieval Christian icons. Ultimately, it could be argued that his artistic sensibility is a curious mixture of Andy Warhol and William Blake.

Having achieved fame in the 60s and 70s as a graphic artist, Yokoo dramatically changed direction in the early 80s after visiting a Picasso exhibition. He then issued an "artist declaration"

and turned to large-scale painting. His recent paintings, many of which appear in the current exhibition, such as "Blue Island" and "Caprice" (both 2008), have been criticized as lacking both painterly technique and the visionary power of his early graphics. But in 2000, he began a series of sublime paintings based on the unlikely theme of Y junctions. This motif developed from an experience he had in his hometown of Nishiwaki. The impact of seeing a photograph of a forked road in the suburbs led Yokoo to revisit Nishiwaki and photograph a variety of Y junctions at night. He quickly realized the significance of such a motif. Anybody who has walked the suburban streets of Japan is familiar with these junctions, and the general dinginess, clut of telephone cables, soiled billboards, and manholes that tends to surround them. This is modern Japan. Yet, from this dismal landscape, Yokoo created something strangely moving. Much like de Chirico's depictions of the empty piazza of Turin in paintings such as "Mystery and Melancholy of a Street" (1914), Yokoo's Y junctions, like "A Night in Miyazaki II," touchingly express the devastating sense of loneliness felt by many people who are lost in the machinery of modern life.

Through the power of his artistic instincts, Yokoo managed to transform these drab forks in the road, which on the surface are so uniquely Japanese, into a universal symbol of the various turning points we meet over the course of our lives. By presenting a choice of paths, Yokoo is perhaps confronting the viewer with the existentialist notion of "choice" and the role our decisions have in shaping our lives – the act of being human in a world which more often than

not tries to erode our humanity.

As well as examples of his early graphic work, avant-garde posters and Y-junction paintings, the exhibition includes a vast collection of ink-and-paper illustrations, comparable to the refined decadence of Aubrey Beardsley. However, much of the show is made up of his more recent large-scale paintings. Lacking the visionary vitality of his early works, and relying too much on nostalgic imagery and outdated sexual symbolism, these paintings have led many critics to question whether Yokoo, now 72, is out of step with the concerns of 21st-century culture. But has Yokoo ever been "in step" with the trends of his time? His work has never been fashionable in the realm of mainstream culture. In fact, it is his creative exuberance and technical inconsistency that give his oeuvre its unique power. To be repulsed by the vulgarity of his "Pink Girls" and then touched by the delicacy of the ink-on-paper illustrations, is a contrast that ironically adds a sense of balance and unity to this chaotic collection.

While it is true that his more recent paintings lack the sparkling innovations of his early designs, these works must ultimately be viewed in the context of Yokoo as a popular artist. As the writer Murakami Ryu stated: "Yokoo is a Pop artist guided by the universe." At the centre of this vast universe of imagistic experimentation is Yokoo himself, shining like an aging star, holding the debris together with the gravitational force of his immense imagination, and still pulling in visitors after 40 years of artistic adventure. **KTO**

See the Yokoo Tadanori exhibition at the Hyogo Kanrikyu Bijutsukan in Kobe through Aug. 24.