

ART STAGE SINGAPORE

REPORT JAPAN

Japanese Contemporary Art From Emergence to Global Recognition

By Darryl Wee*

The birth of Japanese contemporary art was of humble beginnings, brought about by the influences of Western art movements. Since then, Japanese contemporary artworks have managed to retain a strong Japanese identity while incorporating a western-influenced aesthetic, quickly gaining international visibility in the contemporary art scene today.



Yoshitomo Nara + graf
Yogya Bintang House Mini, 2008,
Mixed media, 340 x 390 x 420 cm
Yuz Foundation Collection

The early days of Japanese contemporary art

A useful starting point for tracing the history of Japanese contemporary art is **Tokyo Gallery**, often considered to be Japan's first dedicated contemporary art gallery. Established in 1950, the gallery played an instrumental role in introducing Japanese audiences to foreign artistic movements in America and Europe, as well as maintaining links with Japanese artists living and working abroad. This was a fertile period of **exchange between Japanese and foreign artists and critics**: Michel Tapié's ideas on French art informel and critical writings on American Abstract Expressionism were widely disseminated in Japan, for instance.

Some important movements that emerged from this era include the Osaka-based **Gutai Art Association** led by Jiro Yoshihara, and artists from the Mono-ha (literally, "school of things") group, which proposed an art that was based on the spatial relations between objects, brushstrokes and materials. Action painting and works with a strong bodily character, including Happenings, became prominent new trends, and experimental crossover activity across visual art, theater, photography, music and film prevailed among the Tokyo and Osaka avant-garde. Some of these artists, including painter **Natsuyuki Nakanishi** and photographer **Takuma Nakahira**, and graphic artist and animator Keiichi Tanaami are still prominent and active today.

Other seminal Japanese artists from this period found their stride while living and working in New York, associating with conceptual artists and members of the Fluxus movement. **On Kawara**, who has been based in the city since 1965, began creating his renowned Today series of paintings during this time, and **Yoko Ono** showed her first "instruction" pieces at galleries in both New York and Tokyo, in addition to serving as a link between art circles in the two cities.

Fast forward to the 1990s, an exuberant time for consumer and pop culture in Japan, despite the official collapse of the bubble economy. Often dubbed the era of "**Saison culture**" – a reference to the way in which Japanese department stores like Parco and Seibu functioned as art patrons by setting up museums within their shopping complexes – the mid 90s celebrated pop, underground culture, and manga- or anime-influenced stylings that showed up in the early work of **Takashi Murakami** and **Yoshitomo Nara**. The young **Tomio Koyama**, who had been working for the established dealer Masami Shiraiishi at SCAI the Bathhouse, left the gallery and took both Murakami and Nara with him to open his own gallery in Tokyo, representing them at US art fairs in Hollywood and Los Angeles, where the gallerists Tim Blum and Jeff Poe were also beginning their works to local collectors. As critic Adrian Favell has pointed out, this early LA connection proved crucial to the subsequent global reception of both artists – the "Superflat" show that gave its name to an entire current of Japanese contemporary art was held at LA's Museum of Contemporary Art (MoCA) in 2001, for example.

Overview of current situation

Takashi Murakami's efforts to revitalize what he sees as a stodgy art system centered around elite art colleges and a tortuous route towards recognition perhaps best be seen at **GEISAI**, an open-call art festival first held in 2002. Young painters like **Akane Koide**, scouted by Murakami's Kaikai Kiki Gallery at GEISAI in 2006, have found commercial success through this route. Both GEISAI and Kaikai Kiki also have outposts in Taipei, where Japanese art and culture enjoys perhaps the warmest welcome in Asia.

Murakami's conviction that young Japanese artists lack a clear sense of their place in society has also driven him to become a personal mentor to a cohort of assistants and disciples at the **Kaikai Kiki Miyoshi Factory** in Saitama, outside Tokyo. His first assistant-cum-protégé, **Mr.**, is now a well-known artist in his own right, working with themes related to Japan's otaku (nerd/geek) culture and young girls in sexually charged and often pedophilic contexts.

This past year (2011) turned out to be a significant year for Japanese contemporary art in terms of both international visibility and historical reappraisal. **Lee Ufan**, one of the founding members of the Mono-ha movement, had his first US museum show at New York's Guggenheim Museum in June, while the Centre Pompidou in Paris mounted a retrospective of **Yayoi Kusama**, who also received a thoughtful survey of her early performance-based work at Tokyo's Watari-Um Museum this past summer.

It was the Japan Society in New York, however, which offered the most up-to-date sample of the current zeitgeist in Japanese contemporary art. "Bye Bye Kitty!!!" a long overdue survey of 16 younger and mid-career artists curated by David Elliott, reflected the Japan's relative sobriety and sense of social malaise in comparison with the growth and exuberance of China and the rest of Asia.

Makoto Aida, who featured prominently at this show, is perhaps the leading – and certainly the most provocative – contemporary artist of his generation. Aida is both an accomplished, classically trained Japanese nihonga painter and an ironic prankster whose work combines delicacy and brutality in equal measure. His expansive canvases depict a myriad of subjects: wonderlands of frolicking schoolgirls, huge contingents of salarymen getting pulped to death in giant blenders, and Japanese Zero fighter planes launching a retributive strike on New York City as payback for Pearl Harbor.

Other leading contemporary exponents of this neo-nihonga aesthetic include **Akira Yamaguchi**, whose fantastical urban landscapes portray a hypothetical, retro-modern Japan where tile-roofed streetscapes huddle next to shopping complexes outfitted with both high-tech conveniences and traditional rural comforts. **Hisashi Tenmyouya** plays similarly with this traditional-modern dialectic, and **Tomoko Konoike** creates traditional folding screen paintings focusing on wolves and other animals with spiritual or mystical associations.

Contemporary **sculptors** who have recently risen to prominence include **Kohei Nawa** and **Motohiko Odani**. Nawa's sculptures consist of taxidermized animals and other objects coated in translucent "pix-cell" beads, giving them a surface that approximates the way in which digital technologies distort, magnify and enhance our visual environment. Odani explores themes of mutation and transformation through pieces that are both finely wrought and contorted at the same time.

Japan's strengths in **photography** are embodied by senior artists such as **Hiroshi Sugimoto**, who combines multimedia installations incorporating found objects and Japanese antiquities with serene monochrome landscapes and panoramas. **Daido Mori** energy, now into his 70s, uses grainy contrast and off-focus framing to lend his images a raw energy, mirroring the restlessness of the turbulent streets that he loves to haunt. **Nobuyoshi Araki** has attracted much infamy for works depicting bondage scenes and erotic fetishes, but is also respected for his series of intimate portraits documenting the life of his late wife, **Yoko**, and a long-running documentary obsession with the urban landscapes of his native Tokyo. **Naoya Hatakeyama** and **Toshio Shibata** are respected masters of the landscape genre, casting an impressive eye on both urban and natural environments. **Tomoko Yoneda** and **Yuki Kimura** are known for more conceptual work that explores issues of representation and framing, as well as photography as an index and document.

Finally, several senior Japanese artists working mainly with large-scale installations have been **based abroad** for an extended period, where they have found greater creative and logistical freedom, as well as a more receptive and critical audience than they would have received at home. The best examples include **Tatzu Nishi**, who has been based in Germany for more than two decades producing work for Sculpture Project Münster and other European art festivals; **Tadashi Kawamata**, a Paris-based artist whose outdoor huts, bridges and walkways crafted from plywood have been showcased at Documenta and various biennales; New York-based **Mariko Mori**, whose recent projects visualize cosmic and metaphysical phenomena using immaculate surfaces and industrially-fabricated materials; and Berlin-based **Chiharu Shiota**, whose sprawling installations made from salvaged wooden doors, labyrinthine tangles of thread and other unwieldy materials are partially inspired by her experiences studying with performance art legend Marina Abramovic.

Important institutions

Museums

Postwar Japan's meteoric rise as an economic superpower culminated in a construction boom in art-related infrastructure during the buoyant 80s. This was paired with a growing trend in corporate arts patronage, centered on private museums with lavish collections consisting primarily of European painting, especially works of French Impressionism and post-Impressionism. Some examples of these corporate collections can be found in the **Suntory Museum of Art**, the **Bridgestone Museum of Art**, and the **Mitsubishi Ichigokan Museum**.

The country's major contemporary art museums include the **Mori Art Museum** in Tokyo's Roppongi district, currently staging the first ever retrospective of the 60s avant-garde Metabolism architecture movement; the **Museum of Contemporary Art** in Hiroshima; and the **Fukuoka Asian Art Museum**, a pioneering institution whose Asian Art Show helped to spark Japanese interest in Asian contemporary art as early as 1980. Several of these museums are designed by some of Japan's leading architects – SANAA's **21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art** in Kanazawa, Jun Aoki's **Aomori Museum of Art**, and Ryue Nishizawa's **Towada Art Center** being the most notable examples.

Foundations

Among the many foundations that oversee Japan's private and corporate art collections, one in particular stands out for the breadth and ambition of its public outreach programs and museum infrastructure. Headed by chairman of the Benesse Foundation publishing company Soichiro Fukutake, the **Naoshima Fukutake Art Museum Foundation** seeks to revive a particularly depopulated region of rural Japan through contemporary art and architecture. It runs four magnificent museums designed by Tadao Ando and Ryue Nishizawa, a luxury hotel also designed by Ando, and several contemporary art spaces in former industrial and derelict spaces that sprawl over three islands in the Seto Inland Sea, located between Okayama and Kagawa prefectures.

Another prominent presence is the **Shiseido Foundation**, which runs one of Tokyo's most stimulating and challenging contemporary art spaces in the basement of the Tokyo Ginza Shiseido Building. The gallery itself dates back as far as 1919, but its current incarnation after a comprehensive refurbishment now focuses on Asian contemporary artists like Cai Guo-Qiang, Cao Fei, Masato Nakamura and Simryn Gill. Retired Shiseido president and honorary chairman Yoshiharu Fukuhara is currently director of the **Tokyo Metropolitan Museum of Photography** in Ebisu, where he has spent the past decade turning around a moribund institution and successfully doubling its visitor numbers. Fukuhara is also co-president of the **Kigyo Mécénat Kyogikai (KMK)**, a privately-established non-profit organization that promotes corporate patronage of the arts. The KMK played an instrumental role in introducing a number of initiatives that offer Japan-based corporations tax deductions for supporting art projects.

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