

Where it comes from and where it is heading: a concise history of Japanese contemporary art

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There seems to be a gap between contemporary Japanese art as it is thought of in Japan and how it is typically viewed abroad. Outside Japan, contemporary Japanese art is now usually exemplified by work that draws on the subculture media of *manga* (cartoons) and *anime* (animation), that is probably best epitomised by the works of Takashi Murakami. In Japan, however, the situation is more complex and not as amenable to easy labelling.

To begin with, it was the Gutai group (concrete group), whose energetic experimentation in Kobe in the 1950s and 1960s pioneered performance art and used chance-operations to present art-making methods on par with “happenings” and Abstract Expressionism that were the international stylistic currency of the time. Especially keen to promote their artistic activities internationally, the Gutai group attained renown and now enjoy a high level of notoriety around the world even though many other artist groups, such as High red centre and neo-Dada organisers Jikkenkoubo, were engaged in similar experimentation during the same period. In 1968, Nobuo Sekine created his simple but strongly impressive Land Art work entitled *Phase: Mother Earth*, linking him to the beginnings of the Mono-ha group, which emerged to become the leading school of Japanese artists with Ufan Lee as its theoretician. With the rise of Mono-ha, Japanese contemporary art began to place more importance on nature and materials. In this it displayed affinities with the concerns of Land Art, Conceptual Art, and Art Povera, that were international movements of the time; but in contrast, it established Zen and an Oriental stance at the heart of its practice.

With the international revival of expressionism at the end of the 1970s, Japanese contemporary art was increasingly marked by colourful figurative painting and, by contrast, installations, often by women artists who were particularly active at this time. In 1984, *Bijutsu Techo*, the most prestigious art journal of the epoch, published a special feature edited by critic Yoshiaki Tono entitled “Cho-Shojo” (Super girls) that introduced young women artists, and positioned Yayoi Kusama as their precursor and pioneer.

The early 1980s were characterised both by expressionistic work that incorporated Pop Art touches, and by the emergence of women artists. However the international recognition of Japanese contemporary art that took off in the 1980s got its jump start with the *Aperto* exhibition at the Venice Biennale in 1988 which featured five young Japanese artists, including Tatsuo Miyajima and Yasumasa Morimura. Later in 1989, *Against nature*, an exhibition of ten young Japanese artists, including some who had been selected for *Aperto*, toured the United States and showcased Japanese contemporary art work with Conceptual Art and Pop Art elements, reflecting a postmodern sensibility. These occasions introduced Miyajima and Morimura in Europe and New York, and thanks to the combination of affordable travel and the new convenience of information technology these artists, who came to represent Japan, seemed to be visible and in demand all over the globe. A year later, an exhibition entitled *Primal Spirit* of Mono-ha-inspired work by Toshikatsu Endo and others from the 1970s, also toured the United States.

Other exhibitions in tandem with these developments were *Reconstructions: Avant-Garde Art in Japan 1945-1965* at the Museum of Modern Art, Oxford in 1986 which focused on post-war Japanese art and *Le Japon des Avant-gardes* held at the Pompidou Centre in 1989 which focused on the development of modern art in Japan

since the Meiji restoration. In the late 1980s, Japanese contemporary art had entered the limelight and was receiving international attention. The Venice Biennale in 1993 featured an exhibition entitled *Passage to the Orient* which presented artists of the Gutai and Mono-ha groups and a number of other artists including Yoko Ono, Yayoi Kusama and Jiro Yoshihara.

In the mid-1990s, however, contemporary Japanese art began to show vitality of another sort with the works of a new group of artists. While the works of Yukinori Yanagi, who was seen at the 1993 Venice Biennale, delivered trenchant critiques of Japanese politics and wartime history, they stood out as an exception, much like the solitary efforts of a Johnny-come-lately 1960s activist. By contrast, what particularly marked the period were the cheerful works of Takashi Murakami, which appropriate the subcultures of *manga* and *anime*, and the illustrations of menacing-looking children by Yoshitomo Nara; which attained cult status among young girls. At the same time, Mariko Mori achieved a meteoric rise and took a new approach by combining futuristic settings with the appeal of her persona as a young Japanese woman, thereby staking out a territory for herself while carrying on the sensibility of the young Japanese women artists who had taken the art world by storm in the late 1980s.

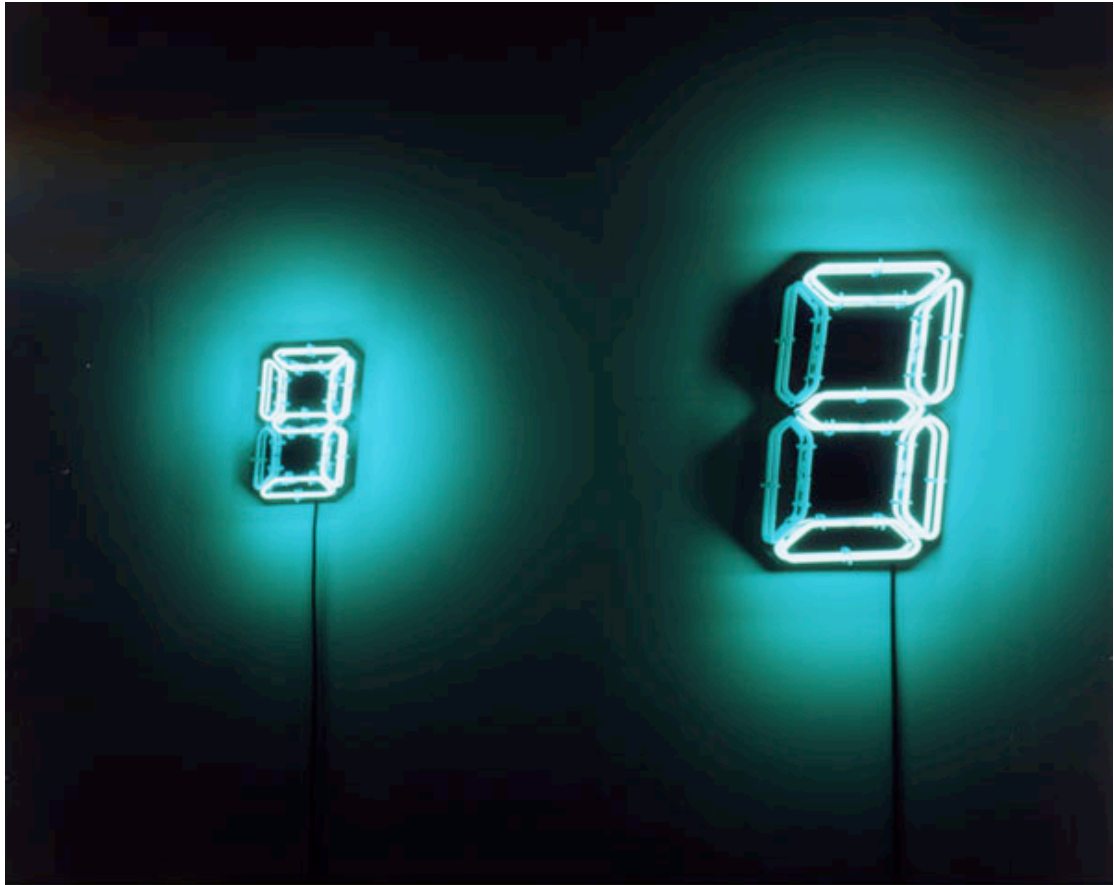
Today Japanese contemporary art is mainly viewed in terms of the images that these artists established for themselves during this period. But, in fact, new artists have continued to burst onto the art scene, and their work indicates that international clichés are no longer applicable. Encompassing performance, computer-aided work, photography, video, and interactive pieces, *Mediarena: contemporary art from Japan* provides a concise cross-section of the diversity of Japanese contemporary art at this precise point in time. Some works harness the internet while other works employ traditional Japanese painting techniques in retro-images of present-day Japan. We are presented with self portrait series depicting a young girl with many different costumes (so called costume play), as well as fashion that runs the whole gamut of design. If there are small collages in the exhibition there are also massive neon pieces.

We see that a new generation of artists such as Miyajima and exonomo expertly make use of extreme cutting-edge technology and materials. At the same time, a number of other artists have chosen their subjects from daily life with a sense of fun and pop style. The range extends from Hiroyuki Matsukage, whose work incarnates his unabashed desire to be a star, no doubt an aspiration of many young people today, to Tabaimo, whose retro-look animation depicts the household of a typical housewife and Japanese company worker today. On the other hand, although Yayoi Kusama is the oldest artist represented, her inflatable work is dynamic and simple, and also full of a sense of childish play. Makoto Aida's generation of artists once called themselves the "kotatsu-ha", a label that could be conveyed as something like "sitting-around-the-warm-tea-table-covered-by-futon (traditional) group". In his work he has strategically selected a postmodern style that avails itself of past modes of painting and images that smack of nostalgia for the lives of ordinary Japanese people in the 1950s.

Japan today is weighed down with sluggishness in the aftermath of the collapse of the bubble economy that overtook it up until the late 1980s. Pouring all its resources and energy into national reconstruction, post-war Japan raced ahead, always in emulation of the United States and Europe. At the height of the economic boom Japan appeared to have attained the peak of prosperity. Now without a concrete goal it seems to have lost its bearings, and with this loss of direction, its consciousness is also adrift. In such a time, art does not uphold lofty causes or overarching objectives, nor does it take on a political purpose or flaunt authority. Rather, we see that this art immerses itself in

everyday life and technology; it invokes the culture of children who are simultaneously cute and menacing yet full of playfulness; it inclines toward fantasy and the sub-cultural references of *anime* and *manga* and displays a game mindset as it transfers images from one medium to another. In doing so it displays a vastness of content by expanding expression, media choice, and sensibility.

Mediarena: contemporary art from Japan showcases the diversity of media and content found in contemporary Japanese art today. Deployed together as in a veritable arena, the works are put to the test, as it were, to see just how much heat and chemistry they can generate in this collective display. Indeed we can see here some of the hottest aspects of Japanese contemporary art that represent the term *Gross National Cool*. I hope this emergent state of Japanese art today will spur the inspiration for new creation, and be helpful in some small way in understanding Japanese culture today.



Shot 2: Tatsuo Mitajima Counter me on 6 (green/green)2003 reprinted from
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Art Gallery- (Fumio Nanjo)