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Warning: Genius at Work - The Art of Aida Makoto 取り扱い注意！天才作業中ー会田誠のアート

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David McNeill

Images are from the Mori Art Museum Website.

Is Makoto Aida a misogynist? It seems a fair question. Among his cheerfully scattershot collection at the Mori Art Museum is a series of manga-style paintings called 'Dog,' showing naked young women with severed and bandaged limbs being led around on a leash. A 62-minute video depicts the artist tediously masturbating in front of the kanji characters "beautiful young girl." In "Blender," he uses more naked girls to make a bloody milkshake. What was the thinking there?

“Well,” he says smiling, “If I made a shake with men it wouldn’t taste very good.”

That reply: glib, irreverent and a bit irritating is vintage Aida. As Mori curator David Elliot says in his introduction to the largest-ever exhibition of Aida’s work, covering quarter of a century: “Nothing seems to add up – on purpose.” Aida often resembles a very clever but alienated schoolboy, scrawling caricatures of the teachers and tossing peppery one-liners from the back from the class. And like the schoolboy he becomes squirmy and inarticulate when asked to discuss the “meaning” of his art, though he’s happier describing its origins. “I can’t really explain this stuff,” he concedes. “That’s why I draw, I suppose.”

Aida’s bad-boy persona made its first appearance over quarter of a century ago in one of his breakout international pieces. “A Picture of an Air Raid on New York City” (1986) depicts a squadron of World War II ‘Zero’ planes attacking burning downtown Manhattan, in a startling artistic premonition of 9.11.

Just in case that failed to offend New Yorkers, “Imagine” (designed in the style of the famous John Lennon scrawled lyric) shows the doomed Twin Towers from the cockpit of a plane. Not surprisingly, perhaps, one review of his work is dubbed “Monuments to Misanthropy.” His own Japanese title for the Mori exhibition, “Sorry For Being a Genius” gives perhaps a more apt flavor of the 47-year-old’s boyish, provocative sense of humor.

Is he a purveyor of right-wing Japanese revenge fantasies? Hardly – Aida is an equal opportunity offender. In “Gate Ball (1999), a group of smiling, wrinkly Japanese pensioners play croquet with the severed heads of Asian children. Just in case we miss the message, the croquet team is called “Great East Asia,” a nod to wartime Japan’s bloody imperialist project, the Great East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere.”

Drawn in the style of a traditional folding screen painting, meanwhile, “Minimaru” depicts a Shinto *torii* gate, clearly reminiscent of the entrance to Yasukuni Shrine, Tokyo’s controversial war memorial. In the corner is the legend: *“tenno-heika banzai”* (Long Live the Emperor!), the slogan on the dying lips of millions of wartime Japanese soldiers. It might be a joke, simultaneously using the codes of wartime propaganda while undermining them. But a very dark one: the slogan is written in the actual blood of a young man – as close to a direct antiwar statement as he gets.

Aida denies having any clear political intent in his work and says he doesn’t like “simple left or right” polemic – or what he calls “political correctness.” “I’m not the type of person who thinks about politically stimulating or shocking people into changing society,” he explains during an interview at the Mori. “I didn’t create those pieces to announce that I’m simply antiwar.” But he accepts that the two great blocs of recent Japanese history – the hubristic, decedent decade until 1990 and the near quarter century of decline, dislocation and social ennui that has followed – have profoundly shaped him.

For a start, he says, he’s surrounded in Japan by a subculture of Otaku fan-boys and what he calls “real” perverts.” “Compared to them I’m quite refined. I was raised in that culture, I read manga and so in a sense I’m one of them – I was influenced by that. But I try to be a serious artist so I have to honestly reflect it.” That’s partly the thinking behind his sometimes puerile depictions of the fairer sex, such as another manga-style painting called “A Little or a Lot, Every Woman Has Pubic Hair,” showing women in strategically revealing underwear. “Young boys can be quite sick,” he says, smiling again. “They hate girls, in a way, and those are the images that go through their minds.”

The post-bubble years are satirised in a number of pieces that are at once inane, witty and cruel. A 2007 oil-on-canvas shows a gap-toothed farmer joyfully pulling a bumper crop of Louis Vuitton bags from the soil. In “People in business suits”, salary-men fire themselves up for the day ahead with pep drinks and futile pledges to *gambaru* (keep going) before vomiting in drunken disarray. One of his most famous pieces, “Ash Color Mountains’”(2009-11) depicts mountains of dead salary-men, Holocaust style – a shocking if vulgar mediation on Japan’s post-bubble decline.

“The world probably seemed brighter during the bubble years, and it seems darker now, especially since the nuclear accident,” says Aida, referring to the Fukushima disaster of 2011. “But I don’t think the bubble years were especially great, or the last few years especially bad. I think a lot of the problems that didn’t stand out in the postwar years have become visible, and that might be a good thing.”

Not surprisingly for a Japanese artist, disaster also fills his imagination. Aida says he recalls the older generation discussing the war, and the constant threat of earthquakes in his native Niigata Prefecture, long before the Tohoku disaster of March 11, 2011. He says he’s especially aware the disaster seems to have accelerated the sense among many of his contemporaries that the old certainties in Japan are crumbling.

“The 1955 system (meaning the postwar political and economic settlement that laid the foundations for the Japanese miracle) wasn’t great, but it seemed secure to many Japanese. There

was a dependency there for many, so its not entirely bad that people now sense this system is broken and can't continue forever."

One of the largest pieces at the Mori exhibition, the 5-meter-high "Monument to Nothing IV" features hundreds of tweets pasted in the shape of a ruined Fukushima reactor building. Neither exclusively pro- nor anti-nuclear, the tweets embrace and amplify the confusion felt by millions of post-disaster Japanese. Typically, Aida will not be pinned down on his own position, only conceding that he has been "overwhelmed" by the flood of information and argument that followed Fukushima, and that "Monument" is partly an expression of "powerlessness."

"So many Japanese are talking about the radiation and I suppose I've been caught up in that," he muses, again struggling for words. "There are times when we can't take our eyes off what has been happening and I thought I should just show this situation as it is," (rather than judge it.)

Like so many of his pieces, Aida's "Monument" is almost a work of social conscience, but one that refuses to take clear sides. It is, perhaps, the embodiment of his artistic philosophy: Embrace the chaos, there's plenty more to come.

Aida Makoto: Monument for Nothing" runs at Mori Art Museum until March. 31,2013. For more details, call (03) 5777-8600 or visit www.mori.art.museum.

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