

Masami Teraoka
Allegories of an Anarchic World
by Doug Hall AM

Masami Teraoka is a fascinating example of the inter-connectedness between the appreciation of tradition and an all-encompassing interest in universal ideas. For the greater part of the second half of the 20th century, the art of Japan was regarded as true to itself, occasionally flirting with ideas from the West, but essentially remaining a self-contained tradition. Despite the Meiji era (1868-1912) which saw Japan remove itself from self-imposed isolation, end Tokugawa Shogunate power and return to Imperial rule, Japan was viewed as a single-minded culture, moving ever-slowly to embrace ideas from outside. We admired, as we always had, its various art forms and collected them – woodblock Ukiyo-e prints, screens, scrolls and pottery; and we admired its gardens and architecture.

It's now self-evident that Japan became inseparable from the full account of modern and contemporary art and, indeed, was critical to major western artists and movements. The richly coloured Ukiyo-e prints with their flat colours and disregard for perspective had a profound influence on artists as varied as van Gogh, Whistler and Gauguin. American artists such as Robert Motherwell, Franz Kline and Sam Francis were influenced by the immediacy that underpinned Japanese calligraphic gestures, and John Cage was absorbed in the profundity of emptiness in Zen thinking. More recently the tables have turned further, with Japanese Anime remaining a pervasive influence in global popular culture.

Teraoka's early years were not particularly unusual. He was born into a small town conventional household which encouraged in him an appreciation of time-honoured Japanese aesthetics. His father owned a kimono store.

East meets West became something of a late 20th century catch-cry, nonetheless it's a description which remains well-suited to Teraoka's early work. The large watercolour, New Wave Series/Christine at Hanauma Bay 1992, is one of his finest examples in revealing his depiction of the lyrical beauty in Japanese design and his idiosyncratic interleaving of western elements.



New Wave Series / Christine at Hanauma Bay 1992

His paintings from the past decade have embraced aspects of Western art history – they no longer emerge from a traditional Japanese aesthetic, but incorporate European iconography, invoking both its stylistic elements as well as allegory as he tackles social, gender, moral and political issues that transcend geography and cultures. But Teraoka is not a lingering echo from Post Modernism’s interest in the disparate and fragmented images of ironic quotation and appropriation; rather he is an artist who synthesizes art historical references, Japanese and European, in the tradition of western painting as we might know it.



US Inquisition / Pope of Thong 2003

In works such as *US Inquisition/Pope of Thong 2003*, and *Virtual Inquisition/Tower of Babel 2002-2003* there is a

passionate, violent and moral intensity. We are reminded of Northern European painting from the late 15th century, perhaps Hieronymus Bosch and his masterwork, *The Garden of Earthly Delights*. Teraoka's chaotic and surreal narratives reveal and mimic the reach and complexity of human conflict. In many works we find his epic and dramatic imagination, similar to high Romanticism and the disquieting beauty in terror, where the large scale of the paintings heighten the viewer's sensory involvement with his themes and expansive narratives.



Virtual Inquisition / Tower of Babel 2000 - 2003

The earliest works in this exhibition might, at first sight, appear as a beguiling latter-day tribute to the Japanese Ukiyo-e – or ‘floating world’ – woodcuts of unabashed pleasure and delight. But they’re very much of their time and allude to more than the clichéd representation of Hawaii, his home of more than 30 years, as a place of vapid hedonism.

Teraoka attended art school in Los Angeles in the early 1960s, encountering the burgeoning counter culture of sexual liberation and fully-fledged American consumerism. He became increasingly fascinated with the circumstances of the individual living under powerful and entrenched influences that affected private lives: political, corporate, and those of organised religion. Observations of deceitful conduct and the desire to regulate thinking provided ideas which fashioned the future of his work.

His paintings became larger, lyrical and often strangely unnerving starting with his AIDS series in the 1980s. Metaphorical references abound: women become icons for sexual liberation and consumers of commodified lifestyles. As with all his figures, they have a finely tuned Kabuki quality, where poses and expressions accentuate his pictorial characterisation.



AIDS Series / Geisha in Bath 2008

Ukiyo-e celebrated the depiction of sex with shunga its admired genre. Teraoka takes shunga's explicitness and applies it to a modern crisis. In his response to the AIDS epidemic we see geishas tearing open packets of condoms. His composite narratives are not clumsily didactic and are seldom literal. This approach recurs throughout his work – girls with punk hairdos, androgynous figures and pleasure-seekers morph from Edo period sophistication and arrive into the anxiety of the late 20th century. Fallen priests, business-types, zealots and wounded bodies writhe in a debauched carousel of desire and downfall.

From the early 1990s subtle stylistic shifts unfold – the lineal quality of Ukiyo-e is more discreet as hybrid forms become an enduring characteristic - and Teraoka's themes of globalisation in its many vicissitudes continue to his most recent work. The personal and sexual are seldom far from the fore; the relentless obfuscation by the church in response to clerical sexual abuse continues to generate a formidable series of work. While these paintings and others have quasi-religious pictorial elements, they are not all necessarily about religion – they are emblematic of the application of corrupt and duplicitous authority.



Cloning Eve/ Viagra Falls

Cloning Eve/Viagra Falls 1999 is a pictorial cacophony whose subject appears to represent circumstances which are entirely of our own making – a statement, perhaps, of our benign complicity. Fantasy and otherworldliness dominate and Teraoka creates a new order out of incongruent imagery that becomes his very own 20th century fin de siècle moment of exasperation and despair. This and other later works offer up moments of art historical serendipity, for they remind me of the way in which many so-called social conscience paintings from the 19th century should be understood – where the depiction is, in one sense, self-evident. Yet they are paintings which are required to be ‘read’, where certain subjects have double-meanings and symbolic associations which require our understanding to complete a complex narrative.



The Last Supper / Inversion of the Sacred 2010

Teraoka's art is not a gratuitous or impulsive reaction to our times. It remains an evolving commentary of human conduct which is keenly observed. As he delves into history and crosses cultures, his images coalesce into a case for humanist idealism. Teraoka respects tradition – that's the way he makes his art – but his quirky and provocative iconography is deadly serious and tells us that we should never uncritically accept those things which ought to unsettle us.

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