

Masami Teraoka

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Trios of twists, turns

Artist Masami Teraoka addresses provocative topics and current events in his paintings

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Artist Masami Teraoka in his Waimanalo studio, where he created his “The Cloisters Last Supper — The Triptych Series,” on display at the Hono-lulu Museum of Art.

In his monumental project “The Cloisters Last Supper — Triptych Series,” artist Masami Teraoka takes on the role of political satirist, human rights advocate and voice for artistic freedom. As noble as all that sounds, there also is ample evidence of the naughty jokester he’s been since childhood.

But to Teraoka, whose paintings have given him international stature and made him one of Hawaii’s most prominent artists, he is a writer of Kabuki, composing tortuous tales for the classical Japanese theater form.

“Kabuki narratives have so many twists,” said Teraoka, a Japanese native who has lived in Hawaii for 35 years. “You think the story’s going to go this way, but no way, it just twists here and there, and eventually it gets to the focused goal line — eventually.

“But in between just twists, twists, and it makes the story so interesting.”

For the oil-on-wood “Last Supper” series, 10 years in the making and now on display at the Honolulu Museum of Art, there are plenty of head-spinning twists addressing such topics as the sexual abuse scandal in the Roman Catholic Church, women’s rights, freedom of expression and Russian expansionism and repression. It’s a daring melodrama for our confused, sexually infused times.

The artist resembles a cross between a Beat poet and Ghandi with his casual attire, slight stature, wire-framed eyeglasses, and graying ponytail and goatee. During a visit to his airy Waimanalo studio, he regaled a reporter with his artistic scenarios, spinning them out in softly accented English.

One of them features Momotaro — a well-known geisha, not the Japanese folk hero. Teraoka said he contacted the entertainer online after learning of her interest in traditional Japanese performance arts. His pitch: a co-starring role in a “Kabuki story” artwork featuring Pope Francis, Russian President Vladimir Putin and the dissident punk rockers Pussy Riot.

“I’m (building) this narrative from this cast: Pussy Riot is going to fly to the Vatican to work with Momotaro-san. Momotaro-san flies to Vatican to give Sexuality 101 to Pope Francis. And then since Pussy Riot and Momotaro-san go to Vatican, Pussy Riot and Momotaro-san fall in love, and they marry — so, same-sex marriage. And Pope Francis says, ‘Oh no!’”

Momotaro was so intrigued that she will be coming to Hawaii to perform Sunday at the museum and model for Teraoka.

The paintings themselves, which went on display Saturday, are no less eye-popping than his erotic story lines, and will likely necessitate adult supervision for underage visitors.

Dozens of scantily clad women lie about in X-rated poses, surrounded by Roman Catholic clergy identified by their white cassocks and peaked papal headwear. Putin pops up here and there as a scowling figure who seems to scorn his situation while not quite being able to tear himself away from it. With many of the paintings reaching floor to ceiling, it’s decadence on an epic scale.

The triptych's irreverent, anarchic quality is something Teraoka, 79, has been bringing to his work for decades. In the 1970s, while living in Los Angeles after completing his studies there, he

addressed globalism with depictions of the “invasion” of Japan by McDonald’s and the Baskin-Robbins ice cream chain. He took on Hawaii’s cultural blend — or clash, depending on how one views his work — with his Hawaii Snorkel Series. Later topics included the AIDS crisis.

“Masami is a particularly interesting artist because he reacts very directly, very deeply to things that are going on in the world,” said James Jensen, curator of contemporary art for the Honolulu Museum of Art and a longtime friend of the artist. “He follows current events pretty closely and he has strong beliefs. Whenever something happens that he feels is wrong, he is not afraid to incorporate that into his art in a way that’s both critical on the one hand, in the sense of criticizing, but also aesthetic on the other.”



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Teraoka’s “Cloisters Last Supper” series takes a satirical jab at the Catholic Church’s stance on morality by depicting clergy in sexually compromising situations.

Teraoka’s work has been featured in more than 70 solo exhibitions around the world in prominent venues such as the Smithsonian Institution, the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York and the Pompidou Center in Paris. His work is in permanent collections at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, the National Portrait Gallery in Washington, D.C., the Tate Modern in London and the Queensland Art Gallery in Australia, among many others.

The Genesis of the “Last Supper” series was the Monica Lewinsky-Bill Clinton sex scandal of the late 1990s. Teraoka found himself wondering why church officials would be so concerned about an American president’s conduct when they should have been worrying about the clergy sex abuse scandal.

“I started thinking, ‘That’s weird, the Vatican country is, like, 800 people population. It’s a little country and yet still it has so much weight on American culture and complaining about what we do,’” he said.

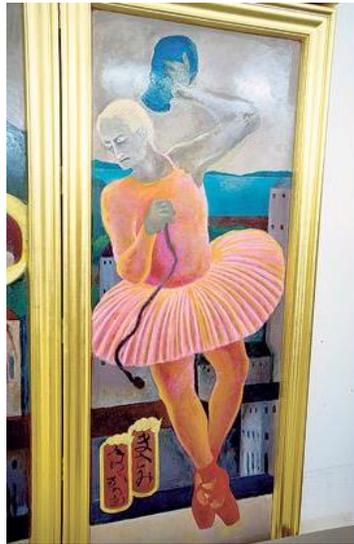
His concerns coincided with an extended trip to Europe, which became a turning point. Visiting a church in Venice, Italy, that was full of triptych paintings, Teraoka was inspired by the notion of consecration as a unifying theme for his ideas about individual rights in the face of authoritarian and repressive institutions.

“That’s the way I conceived the whole concept,” he said.

The European trip had another impact on Teraoka. He was overseas during the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the U.S. and was stuck in London for a while before he could get back, arriving first in New York.

“He suddenly realized how this was an entirely different world,” said Jensen. “A lot of things came together in his head about historical influences of medieval and Renaissance painting and wanting to paint on canvas and paint in a looser style and use subject matter that was very, very serious in a way, compared to the more lighthearted things he’d been doing in the past.”

That doesn’t mean there isn’t plenty of kinky humor in “The Cloisters Last Supper.” For one painting, Teraoka started painting a Pussy Riot member, but when the character turned out looking like Putin, he painted Pope Francis kissing the Russian leader’s feet, a reference to the pontiff washing and kissing the feet of young convicts in Rome in 2013. Because the pontiff appears confused about why he’s doing this, he has another clergyman Googling on a tablet computer to figure things out.



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Another target of Teraoka's work is Russian President Vladimir Putin and his manipulative, authoritarian rule. Putin is depicted above as a ballerina.

Putin is portrayed as a woman in some paintings — in one case a ballet dancer wearing an orange tutu. It's a comment on how cunning and "poker-faced" Putin can be, Teraoka said.

"A woman's body with his face? You cannot figure him out."

Teraoka has exhibited this type of off-kilter humor since he was a boy who was considered a "clown."

"When I played with my buddies, often my mind was always floating somewhere else," he said.

As a 9-year-old, he witnessed the atomic bombing of Hiroshima from his hometown, Onomichi, which was 45 miles away from the industrial city.

"I felt that day was very unusual because I saw two suns that day," he said.

Reflecting on that time, Teraoka said everyone was tired of the war. "I think my sentiment at that time was, 'I'm so glad the war was over.'"

His family, which ran a kimono shop, had a difficult time reviving the business after the war. This effectively gave Teraoka the freedom to pursue his interest in art. He studied art history and aesthetics at Kwansei Gakuin University, graduating in 1959, and went on to study at the Otis Art Institute in Los Angeles, graduating in 1968.

The exhibition at the Honolulu Museum of Art, titled “Feast of Fools: The Triptych Paintings of Masami Teraoka” and featuring 11 triptychs, will give visitors the rare opportunity to watch the artist at work. Teraoka plans to go to the museum to put finishing touches on several of the paintings.

Working on the triptychs, created in the spacious studio behind his Waimanalo home, has been unlike his previous work, which was mostly watercolor inspired by the Japanese ukiyo-e woodblock style. For one thing, triptychs have given him a lot of creative space to work with. Some of the pieces, when open, measure 10 feet tall by 10 feet wide, and with the side panels closed, there is an additional 50 square feet of painting surface.

The vast space allowed him to introduce new themes as they came along. Pussy Riot, for example, is a fairly late addition to the work, resulting from a film documentary he saw recently. Teraoka follows the news closely and has tried to contact Pope Francis on Twitter.

“He should know I’m watching him,” Teraoka said.

He considers his triptych paintings as an expression of today’s digital, international culture where “we can communicate everything in a second globally.”

“Introducing Pussy Riot and Putin and Pope Francis and geisha, these are all reflecting a transparent social-network culture,” he said.

Visitors might want to plan to visit the museum twice to see the triptychs in their open and closed positions. It would not be unlike Teraoka’s own experience working on the paintings: He worked on one for a while, then closed it to work on another. Upon opening it again, he saw the painting with fresh eyes.

“It’s like, ‘Oh, this is the weak spot that I haven’t seen,’” Teraoka said.

He likened the process to playing Go, the Japanese board game.

“If there’s a weak space, somehow the Go player uses that weak space to capture the rest of the whole game,” he said. “It’s an interesting sort of psychology there. So I’m trying to embrace the weakest point and make it (the) strongest point in the composition.”

The explicit nature of his paintings will certainly tweak the sensitivities of some people — and makes it difficult to show his artwork in this newspaper — but Jensen said he thinks Hawaii audiences in general will be tolerant. There are ample warnings throughout the museum about their graphic nature, he said.

Teraoka, who lives in Waimanalo with his wife, artist Lynda Hess, and daughter Eve, thinks Hawaii has an especially open-minded attitude about such things.

“Hawaii is such a wonderful, welcoming, hospitality-oriented culture,” he said. “I really appreciate it. I don’t see any other city or towns or countries like this. This place is very special.”

Teraoka will be at the gallery from 2 to 3 p.m. on the second and last Sunday of each month through August to work on the paintings. At that time he will close the paintings to allow visitors to view the outside of the panels.