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Entertainment

Where Woodstock meets woodblock

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A traditional artistic style from Japan has become a platform to critique of the West, writes Wendy Frew.



Liberated ... Masami Teraoka's style produces works as vivid and varied as a condom-bearing geisha and a traditional beauty snorkelling. *Photo: Lee Besford*

The atomic bomb, hippie culture; McDonald's, woodblock prints; family duty, defiance; the power of the church, sexual abuse; AIDS, confession; earthly delights and the flames of hell.

The clash of Japanese and American culture make up the world of Japanese-born, US artist Masami Teraoka. As a child, Teraoka witnessed the dropping of the bomb on Hiroshima; as a young man in Los Angeles he experienced the freedom and sexual liberation of hippie culture and the Summer of Love; as he matured, he became increasingly political, with issues such as pollution, American cultural imperialism, AIDS, and sexual abuse in the church pushing their way into this work.

In a solo exhibition that opens today at the New Albion Gallery, the vivid images seared on his memory during his early years in Japan and later, as an adult in the US, burst forth from his paintings. He draws upon the fleeting beauty of the "floating world" depicted in Japanese Ukiyo woodblock prints as well as the more corporal images and realistic perspective of Renaissance art. The Netherlands master Hieronymous Bosch is there too in the blood, guts and flames of Teraoka's most recent paintings, which comment on both present abuses in the church and its history of power and influence, especially in the arts. At university in Japan, Teraoka studied Western art history and architecture as well as Japanese aesthetics but he didn't plan on becoming a professional artist. It was his father, a thwarted musician and oldest son who had taken over the family's kimono store on the insistence of his father, who pushed Teraoka towards a life of art.

The young Teraoka went to Los Angeles where he studied life drawing, painting and English while letting loose in a hippie culture.

"Everybody was making love every day, the complete opposite of life in Japan. It was so much fun," he says from his home in Hawaii, describing the environment, which welcomed other cultures, as "a liberating phase of my life". "It was OK to admit you were Japanese or African or Chinese."

But Teraoka wasn't swept up in the abstract and minimalist art movement of his US contemporaries. He drew upon Japan's woodblock tradition for paintings that juxtaposed the beauty of kimono-clad courtesans with ice-cream slurping Western women, or bathing beauties holding snorkels and masks in Hokusai-style waves.

"I was almost ashamed to go into Ukiyo style because of the way it was perceived in the Japanese tradition of art as a craft rather than a fine art," he says. "I was fascinated with how Ukiyo artists interpreted space in a very abstract way."

As Teraoka became more political, his paintings adopted more American cultural symbols: a McDonald's hamburger placed next to a Japanese fan or a bathing geisha peeling open a condom.

The artist had abandoned the kimono for Levis and eventually he abandoned the Ukiyo style, adopting what he calls a more Western vocabulary while digging into Western traditions such as Renaissance paintings.

"I realised I had spent longer in the US than in Japan. It was time for me to get into American culture and say something about American culture. No one was talking about the issue of priests abusing people," he says, explaining some of his more powerful and sexually violent paintings.

In the 1990s, he travelled regularly to Europe, visiting Catholic churches where, alongside the art, he became fascinated with the confessional booth and all it implied about sex and sin in the church.

Bosch was an earlier inspiration and re-emerged in Teraoka's paintings in the wake of the former US president Bill Clinton's impeachment and the Monica Lewinsky scandal. Teraoka's *Confessional Series*, many done as triptychs, depict priests engaging in sexual antics in gymnasiums, in confessional boxes, in sight of TV crews, and against flaming backdrops. It is a world of torture, deflowering, rape, death and humiliation.

"How come the Catholic Church teaches celibacy? I thought it was torture, torturing the priests. You have all these beautiful nudes around the church but then you are taught you cannot be sexual. I did not understand how that worked," says Teraoka.

Masami Teraoka's exhibition is at New Albion Gallery in Surry Hills until June 16.



Masami Teraoka

Japanese artist Masami Teraoka with his exhibition of work. May 22, 2012. *Photo: Lee Besford*



Sushi Ghost Tales / Falling Hair and Flying Sushi 1979. Watercolour and pencil on paper. 35.5 x 102.5 cm. Masami Teraoka.



31 Flavors Invading Japan / Today's Special 1980-1982. 35 colour woodcut on hosho paper. 28.0 x 42.0 cm. Masami Teraoka.



Semana Santa / Cloisters Workout 2004. Oil and gold leaf on board in gold leaf frame. 97.0 x 112.0 cm. Masami Teraoka.



AIDS Series / Geisha in Ofuro 2010. Cotton Jacquard tapestry. 282.5 x 193.0 cm. Masami Teraoka.



Waves and Rocks 1986. Watercolour on paper. 30.0 x 151.0 cm. Masami Teraoka.



Japanese artists Masami Teraoaka with his exhibition of work. May 22, 2012. Photo: Lee Besford



New Wave Series / Christine at Hanauma Bay 1992. Watercolour on paper. 56.5 x 75.0 cm. Masami Teraoaka.



The Cloisters / Pilgrim 2010. Oil and gold leaf on board in a gold leaf frame. 116.0 x 127.5 cm. Masami Teraoka.



New York Restaurant Series / St. Lucie 1992. Watercolour and gold leaf on paper. 61.0 x 44.5 cm. Masami Teraoka.



Namiyo at Hanauma Bay 1985. Colour lithograph. 63.5 x 91.5cm. Masami Teraoka.



Virtual Inquisition / Tower of Babel 2000 - 2003. Oil on canvas, linen and paper. 210.0 x 635.0 cm. Masami Teraoka.



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