

Masami Teraoka

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Enticing Historic Aesthetic Vocabularies: An Interview with Masami Teraoka

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Masami Teraoka, *The Cloisters Last Supper / Eve and the Pope's Walking Stick*, c. 2009-2015, oil on panel in gold-leaf frame, 119 1/8 × 112 1/2 × 2 3/4 in. (302.6 × 285.8 × 7 cm), Courtesy of the artist and Catharine Clark Gallery

By ISABELLA ELLAHEH HUGHES, July 23, 2015

Masami Teraoka is an artist who is inherently compelled to break barriers and push beyond borders – both through his medium and artistic style, as well as the heady subject matter – most recently the history of sexual abuse the Catholic Church. Born in 1936 in the Hiroshima prefecture, Teraoka left Japan to study in the US in the 1960s and since 1980, has called the sleepy, unassuming country town of Waimanalo, Hawaii his home, where he lives and works.

Speaking with Isabella Ellaheh Hughes about his life, work, and newest solo exhibition, *Feast of Fools: The Triptych Paintings of Masami Teraoka*, which opened at the Honolulu Museum of Art on May 30. Teraoka shares his interest in reworking art history, what it means to be based in Hawai'i as a globally-operating contemporary artist. He also shares the intimate confession

he was privy to from an abused former Sister in the Catholic Church, who recently opened up to Teraoka after visiting his exhibition.

IEH: You've been a longtime Hawai'i resident. When did you move here and what led you to settle in the islands?

MT: I moved to Hawai'i in 1980. I had health issues caused by the intense smog in Los Angeles. The clean air and beautiful ocean were irresistible.

IEH: Over the years, you've worked in a variety of styles, often referencing historic periods in art history, whether it was Japanese Ukiyo-e or for the past decade or so, encaustic on wood works associated with Byzantine and Renaissance Christian iconography. Can you speak about your interest in reworking these historic art forms into contemporary creations?

MT: Enticing historic aesthetic vocabularies such as iconographic Renaissance painting and Ukiyo-e to address contemporary issues has inspired me in the last several decades. I was originally curious about what it would look like to rework these ancient artistic styles to create contemporary narrative paintings. I'm drawn to compelling historical and socio-cultural issues. I have always felt beautiful vocabularies can create fantastic contemporary narratives in a most engaging way -- especially via reworking the powerful beauty of Renaissance painting, which I felt was going against the general contemporary art attitude and style preferences of today. I believe these historic and highly evolved aesthetics have so much potential to create something powerful. This premise became highly charged when addressing challenging subject matter, such as the Roman Catholic Church's history of clergy sex abuse that became a big media circus around 2002.

Another big challenge for me was a decade earlier, in the early 90s, when I departed from Ukiyo-e style watercolor, as I had established my career working in this style in the 70's. Ukiyo-e wood block print had given me great inspiration. After I finished my AIDS series working in Ukiyo-e style, I decided to address my life in America, rather focusing on an artistic style and theme very related to my own Japanese cultural background. Although I have been working on triptych paintings, I continue to be inspired by Ukiyo-e compositions.

IEH: You studied in California in the 1960s at Otis College of the Arts in LA. Was this a particularly inspiring time for you as a student and how did your time in art school in LA impact the development of your distinctive artistic oeuvre?

MT: Otis was strictly a fine arts institution in the 60's. The students were inspired; Barry Le Va had his random pieces displayed on the floor and Le Va and I had had the same drawing teacher. Le Va and I realized our drawings were so similar in style that we had wanted to trade our drawings. One day my Otis student buddies had to occupy the Otis' dean's office to rescue me from being kicked out from school six months before graduation because I had hardly attended

classes. At the time, I was focused on creating fiberglass resin sculptures, which you can't do in a closed studio environment, which is why I wasn't going to class.



Masami Teraoka, *The Cloisters Last Supper / Tuscan Wild Boar Feast*, c. 2009-2015, oil on panel in gold-leaf frame, 119 1/8 × 112 1/2 × 2 3/4 in. (302.6 × 285.8 × 7 cm), Courtesy of the artist and Catharine Clark Gallery

IEH: In the 1970s and 1980s you were working in primarily watercolors, addressing pressing contemporary issues, related to politics, the economy, and world events and crises, such as the AIDS epidemic, but then in the 1990s shifted towards a much darker color palette where we see a more Christian-influenced encaustic and Byzantine-Renaissance style. What led to the shift?

MT: During the Whitewater scandal and Monica Lewinsky and Bill Clinton's impeachment trial, I created *Virtual Inquisition* and the *US Inquisition* series. I felt a sense of clarity to address social issues and their implication in a creative space where aesthetics and narratives are occupied. This became a new obsession and also a new challenge. Initially, political or other compelling contemporary issues of the time inspired my work, but in the end, something organic in terms of creativity takes place. Visual poetry is what I'm pursuing and I feel my work is successful if it articulates this.

IEH: What do you hope viewers get out of viewing your work? Do you create your paintings thinking conscientiously about the reaction you hope to provoke from your audience and society?

MT: No, actually... I focus on how I can express my vision aesthetically and creating visual poetry. To create my work is living life and this gives me a surprise gift to myself.



Masami Teraoka

IEH: You are inarguably one of, if not the most, well-known and critically regarded artists working in Hawai'i today, a location that is much-removed from the wider global arts infrastructure. Is this a challenge?

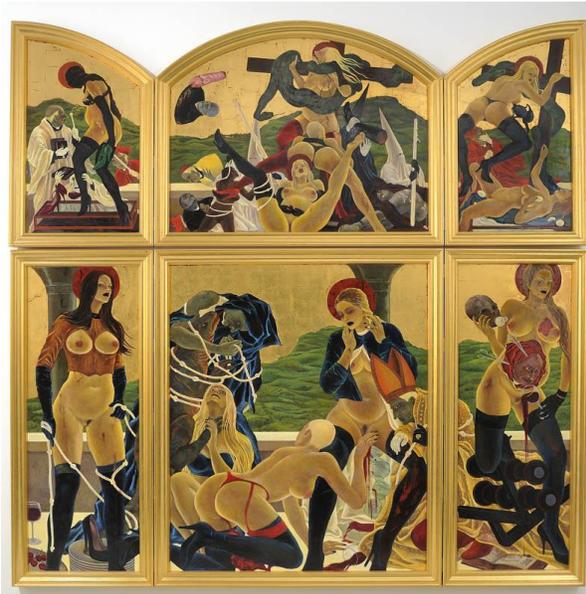
MT: It seems that the Internet has narrowed a sense of distance between art world centers. I used to think the art world and the major centers were so far away from where I live, but this online, digital world has resolved my concern of such alienation from the larger art world. What if Google is now considered the center of the art world? While I cannot physically visit all these centers and artists, through Google I can conceptually understand what other artists are creating today.

IEH: You recently had an opening for a new solo show at the Honolulu Museum of Art, 'Feast of Fools,' which is all triptych paintings. For the opening you notably had Geisha Momotaro present and perform. Can you speak about this?

MT: When I was Tweeting to Pope Francis, Geisha Momotaro's Twitter posting popped up, which led me to become curious about her. This geisha named herself after a boy geisha, Momotaro, which means 'peach boy' in Japan and is a well-known kids story. Geisha Momotaro is a graduate from Kanazawa Art College and is an articulate, modern geisha. The audience responded so favorably and passionately to her and loved her performance at the Honolulu Museum of Art Doris Duke Theater during my opening.

IEH: The triptychs in 'Feast of Fools' are momentous in scale and also in breadth and depth of their content, including references to Pussy Riot, Pope Francis and controversial world events from the past decade. What is the larger narrative that links this body of work, and what led you to move to the triptych format?

MT: During the Renaissance, many narrative paintings were mounted as triptych paintings. The gold leaf frame to me is an over-the-top sort of frame setting. The gold leaf frame symbolically can also imply the wealth of religious institutions that frame their ethics and moral standards. Containing the content of narrative paintings in such a rigid format itself made sense in terms of the content I am exploring in my thematic series. The gold leaf can really be read as a symbol for establishment, this over-the-top wealth, authoritative institutions, or the oppressor. I'm interested in addressing compelling, contemporary social issues, so the restricted gold leaf frame is a contrast to the current issues I am addressing within the triptych, mixing this ancient frame to bring out the thematic series that is confronting the Catholic clergy sexual issues.



Masami Teraoka, *The Last Supper / Inversion of the Sacred*, c. 2009-2015, oil on panel in gold-leaf frame, 119 1/8 × 112 1/2 × 2 3/4 in. (302.6 × 285.8 × 7 cm), Courtesy of the artist and Catharine Clark Gallery

IEH: Something very interesting I found when I visited the exhibition at HMA is you are actually painting and working on one of the triptychs during the duration of the exhibition. How did this come to be?

MT: Jay Jensen, the curator, was taken and so moved by the unpainted triptych in my studio and mentioned a few times that he wanted to show it blank. I felt that it was better to start the composition in the studio, and then the rest I can tweak in the museum, which is what I am

working on while the exhibit is up. The great thing about this is that I can come into the museum any day to paint. I am still tweaking details in the gallery. This has also led me to engage with people and hear more stories about their own experiences in the church.

One former nun told me about her clergy's sexual abuse experience and this nun left the covenant because of this sexual abuse. When she was a teenager she was a nun for three years in Europe. After she exposed her Superior's sexual wrongdoings to his Provincial, she was re-assigned to another convent. She encountered many disturbing things, such as having her breasts touched in the confession room and then she was given, even more disturbingly by her Superior, a Flagella rope with about 10 strings, approximately 40 centimeters long, to use on her back in the clock tower for the world's sins -- since she didn't have sins of her own to report. She only knows of one other nun who did that. Up until now she had kept her secret. She learned that he had also fondled other young nuns.

As much as I see how Hieronymus Bosch's work presents a space for a dialogue among the viewers, it has been fantastic to see what the visitors in the museum feel and having them initiate dialogue both amongst themselves, as well as with me, the artist. My primary hope is to present the social issues as compelling visual poetry on the Cloisters Last Supper Table.

IEH: Are you personally a religious person?

MT: I'm afraid not. To create is a life I am inspired to live.

IEH: Where do you hope to go next in terms of projects and context of your works?

MT: I'm focusing on a narrative work, perhaps influenced by Kabuki plays. I hope that the series will reach out to humanity through its creative visual poetry. Unbending powerful aesthetics should be rife with addressing compelling issues.

Masami Teraoka's work is currently on display in his solo exhibition, "Feast of Fools: The Triptych Paintings of Masami Teraoka" at the Honolulu Museum of Art until August 30, 2015. In January 2016 Teraoka will be showing his work at the Catharine Clark Gallery, San Francisco, Koa Gallery at Kapiolani Community College, Honolulu, California State University Fullerton, and in 2017 at the Crocker Art Museum in Sacramento. WM

Isabella Ellaheh Hughes is the Artistic Director and Co-founder of the Honolulu Biennial Foundation, in addition to being a curator, editor and critic focused on art from the Asian continent, Pacific and their Diasporas. She's written for a variety of printed and online publications, including: ArtAsiaPacific, Brownbook, Contemporary Practices, Frieze, Harper's Art Bazaar Arabia and Ibraaz. A frequent contributor to and editor of books and exhibition catalogues, she is the editor of the monograph, Sama Alshaibi: Sand Rushes In (Aperture Foundation, 2015) and Barjeel Art Foundation's 5th anniversary exhibition catalogue, aide-mémoire: footnotes (Part II) (Barjeel Art Foundation, 2015). Hughes has an MA in Museum Studies from Johns Hopkins University and a BA in Art History from Boston University. She's served as a nominator for the Smithsonian Artist Research Fellowship Program and Abraaj Capital Art Prize, as well as a juror for the YICCA 2013 International Contest of Contemporary Art and Art Omi International 2015's visual artist residency program.