

Masami Teraoka



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Masami, the Pope, and Pussy Riot

By Noe Tanigawa
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Masami Teraoka with Pussy Riot choreographer Viktoriya Naraxsa. Teraoka has combined cultural influences in his best known works. Early pieces featured Ukiyo-e images with Americana like golden arches, and his series on the AIDS epidemic brought national attention with its combination of eros, humor, and a safe sex message. For the last decade, Teraoka has used Catholic and Ukiyo-e derived imagery to comment on power and human rights.

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In the 1960's, internationally known artist Masami Teraoka made his reputation bridging cultures, blending classic Japanese Ukiyo-e subjects with golden arches, and other bits of Americana. On

the eve of a two part retrospective at Koa Gallery, HPR's Noe Tanigawa explains how Teraoka's fascination with American culture connected him to Russia's anti-Putin feminists, Pussy Riot.



Artist Masami Teraoka is the 2017 Koa Award recipient. His two-part retrospective will continue at Kapiolani Community College Koa Gallery through October 2017.
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"The Early Works of Masami Teraoka" opens at KCC's Koa Art Gallery on Saturday, August 26th, 3–6PM with The Artist's Ukiyo-e Print Collection.
Koa Gallery hours: Tuesday – Saturday – 10:00 am – 3:00 PM. Closed Sunday and Monday and all state holidays

Artist Masami Teraoka came to the U.S. in the 1960's, the age of flower power and free love. That's why the impeachment trial over President Clinton's affair in the 1990's just didn't seem to fit the liberal morality of Teraoka's adopted country.



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Masami Teraoka: I was wondering why Monica Lewinsky and Bill Clinton's impeachment trial became such a huge media circus. I said, I need to really study American culture. So I started going back to puritanical background, and the UK, I really needed to learn the history so I could understand what America culture is?

Teraoka got to Henry VIII who rebelled against the Catholic church, and dug further back to the influence of the Catholic church. That led him to the clergy sex abuse scandals.

Teraoka: When I looked at the clergy sex abuse issue, the basic idea is in fact, suppressor such as a pope or priest, cardinals, they are the ones who have authority to judge individuals. So if they have such authority, even individuals who were abused don't have much of a say because they can be suppressed. The institution can hide its own weakness, but victims are ignored or suppressed. History actually erases those documents and institutions are able to sustain whatever they want.

For a decade Teraoka has worked on intricate graphic images of popes and clerics entangled in various human endeavors with buxom geisha and others, inside massive gold leafed triptychs.

Teraoka: One day while working on the clergy sex abuse series, I was looking at Pussy Riot concert in the Russian Orthodox Church. I was thinking, oh this is totally perfect for me to go for it, because their concept seems to be going for freedom of expression, that means freedom of individual rights, also they were going to assert gay and same sex marriage, all these are individual rights.



Viktoria Naraxsa directed and choreographed a Pussy Riot video featuring Nadya Tolokonnikova. The video, "Chaika," focuses on allegations against Russia's prosecutor general, Yuri Chaika, who has been in the news lately as the possible man behind the controversial meeting between Russians and Donald Trump Jr.

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Teraoka: We should not really be confused by anything by labeling. Whenever you say the same sex marriage, or gay people you kind of side track or distract with labelling. Basically we are all human who have individual rights and should have free preference regarding sexuality. That should all be protected by the constitution.

Teraoka: It doesn't really matter what you're talking about if you don't respect individual rights and freedoms, civil rights. So to me, Pussy Riot, how they do their expression based on humanity, that's what they were going for. I said, Oh then, I'm on the same boat.

And there they are, right in an orthodox church,

Teraoka: I know! That's totally perfect! I couldn't believe it! This is exactly what I'm working on!

Teraoka eventually connected with Viktoria Naraxsa, a Russian artist and activist who has directed and choreographed a Pussy Riot video. Teraoka arranged for Naraxsa to stage a theater intervention at the Honolulu Museum School earlier this year, as he incorporated her in his current work. We met in Teraoka's Waimānalo studio, where Naraxsa talked about life and art under Putin. Luba Baydak was our interpreter.



Viktoria Naraxsa in Masami Teraoka's studio. Russian interpretation was kindly provided by Luba Baydak.
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Naraxsa: We're not going to straight up tell them we're protesting against Putin. You want to do it in an artistic way. If you say the direct message, it's not a play then, you don't get to use your artistic skills with that.

Do you feel oppression? What does it feel like?

Naraxsa: All I know how to live in Russia is with this oppression.

I'm afraid we won't know it's happening, it already is happening and we don't know it.

Naraxsa: Living in oppression is something you just have to learn to live with... for example, you don't wake up in Russia, the first thing that you think when you wake up, is oh my goodness, our president is Putin, we're under oppression. And when you're walking to work, you don't think that same thing, oh my goodness, we're under oppression.

Naraxsa: It's kind of like living with chronic pain. You learn to live with it, you don't notice it, you don't think about it every second of the day. You don't even understand the reality of the situation. You're kind of just living with it. You're unhappy but you don't know why.

Naraxsa: People have if we're talking about people, they have different problems to worry about. People have their kids to feed, they have their mom to take care of who is retired and disabled. They have transportation, all those needs, they don't think about that all the time. It's not just in Moscow, it's in the giant territory of Russia.



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This is great news though Masami, we'll get used to it.

Teraoka: I don't know. What really makes life important and interesting and enriching is if creativity is very intense and strong, you can't even think of politics. Forget politics! This creativity makes you feel so happy and uplifted, whatever you're doing, you need to have that strength in creativity. So I'm still exploring how I can make a stronger statement within the realm of poetry. So this is what I'm interested in and I wanted to see in Pussy Riot performance in a theatrical play.

Viktoria Naraxsa directed a performance of Shakespeare's *The Tempest* at the Honolulu Museum School in the Spring of 2017. See a two part retrospective of Masami Teraoka's work at KCC Koa Gallery, beginning with early work and prints from his collection of Ukiyo-e August 26 through September 27, 2017.