

Masami Teraoka

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Denby Fawcett: Honolulu Museum of Art Takes a Walk on the Erotic Side

Famous Hawaii artist uses graphic sexual images to slam Catholic Church for gender discrimination and child sex abuse.

By Denby Fawcett

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One of the most beautiful exhibitions I have seen at the Honolulu Museum of Art is also one of its most sexually shocking.

The exhibit is Masami Teraoka's "Cloisters Last Supper — Triptych Series." Some museum docents are unwilling to lead tours of the exhibit.

"They think it is anti-Catholic Church or just too disturbing," says museum docent Bill Pearl. Pearl is a retired pediatric cardiologist who says he leads tours of Teraoka's paintings whenever he can.

Pearl says it's important to share information about the exhibit with museum visitors because "Teraoka is Hawaii's greatest artist and this show is his most recent work."



Masami Teraoka discusses some of his paintings at the Honolulu Museum of Art with his daughter, Eve, 8, nearby.

The works of Waimanalo resident Teraoka hang in many of the world's most prestigious museums, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, the Tate Modern in London and the Sackler Gallery at the Smithsonian in Washington, D.C., as well as in the collections of more than 400 private owners.

You might remember Teraoka for his earlier works in the Japanese ukiyo-e "Floating World" wood-block style from the Edo Period (1600-1886), depicting the culture clash of geishas savoring McDonald's hamburgers, snorkeling at Hanauma Bay or lustily licking Baskin-Robbins 31 flavors of ice cream.

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that does not mean it is not great art."
— Stephan Jost, museum director**

Teraoka also did a series on AIDS with 17th century style geishas opening packets of condoms, like images in today's posters urging safe sex.

Teraoka's unabashedly erotic images in the new series feature full frontal nudity, sexual orgies, bestiality, countless images of violence or raw sex, including a lesbian couple locked in an orgasm.

Teraoka says his goal is to call attention to the Roman Catholic Church's sexual abuse of young boys and girls and nuns and to question why the Catholic Church continues to treat women as lesser human beings.

Teraoka says the Catholic Church has not commented but "this is the reality it has to face. This is a social issue. The church has to deal with it."

I called the Catholic Diocese of Honolulu to get its opinion. Diocese spokesman Patrick Downes says, "I have not heard any discussion of, or even knowledge of, this exhibit so there wouldn't be any comment regarding it."

'Visitor Discretion Advised'

Teraoka says the feedback has been positive from church members and most movingly from one visitor who confided that when he was a child a priest sexually molested him.

Teraoka says he has tweeted Pope Francis about the exhibit. "I am still waiting for the Pope Francis to say, "Masami, I know what you are doing about clerical abuse and I think it would be a good idea to put your paintings in the Sistine Chapel."

Teraoka laughs that he is just joking about the Sistine Chapel but says he really did tweet Pope Francis, whom he calls brilliant and whom he says generates great hope for the future of the church.

The entrance door to Teraoka's exhibit warns "Adult content. Visitor discretion advised due to the graphic nature of the work."



Exhibit visitors are often surprised to find Masami Teraoka at work nearby.

A pope in one of the artworks is fondling the bulging breast of a naked blonde woman. In another painting, a geisha is about to have sex with an octopus. Even my normally unshockable husband was taken aback by the images. He left the exhibit shaking his head saying; "It's too in your face, over the top, something I wouldn't touch if I were running a museum."

Stephan Jost, director of the museum, admits some of Teraoka's images are difficult "It is a tough work, I don't dispute that. Teraoka doesn't have a simple narrative. His message is complicated."

**"What Teraoka has in his mind is very complicated."
— James Jensen, curator of contemporary art**

Jost says, "Even I am uncomfortable with it. But that does not mean it is not great art." Jost calls Teraoka's works grotesque and beautiful at the same time, traditional yet completely modern in its subject.

He says of the 79-year-old Teraoka: "He thinks like a 26-year-old radical. He makes me feel old and conservative."

But the 46-year-old Jost is anything but conservative. Since becoming director of the Honolulu Museum of Art in 2011 he has presented three different exhibits of Shunga, a Japanese form of erotic art.

Many of the sexual paintings in the museum's collection have never been seen before by visitors. Why now? I ask.

Jost says because there has never been such an intense and widespread interest in gender and sexuality. The time is right.

Part of Jost's mission is to attract a young audience to the museum. Since becoming director, he has made it a point to stage a mixture of edgy exhibits along with showings of more traditional art beloved by the museum's older members.

Jost says the museum's membership has increased by 48 percent in the last year with most of the new members under 40 years old.

Happening Upon the Artist

Back to Teraoka. A panel in one his triptychs features a priest sexually molesting a geisha whom the priest has impregnated. The head of a pope emerges from the molested geisha's pregnant womb.

In a side panel of the triptych, two nuns are getting revenge by torturing a pope wearing women's lingerie and high heels under his robes.

I ask Teraoka if the nuns tormenting the Pope aren't as mean and sexually violent as the male clergy he is criticizing.

He says, " No, the nuns are torturing the pope in a gentle way by making him wear women's underwear and high heels."



Teraoka's 8-year-old daughter, Eve, interjects: "But they are torturing him by hanging him upside down by his heels."

Masami Teraoka and his daughter Eve at the Honolulu Museum of Art.

His daughter is in some of the paintings. In one panel she is a little girl pope floating in the sky in red religious vestments; in

another she is a tiny baby bound in swaddling clothes like the infant Jesus.

Teraoka and his wife, artist Lynda Hess, are raising Eve in their world of political discourse and artistic creativity. Eve has just come from her summer school art lessons at the Linekona Art Center across the street from the museum.

Teraoka is in the exhibit gallery almost every day where he works and reworks one of his paintings to make the message clearer, more direct. Sometimes Eve sits by his side, adding a few of her own brush strokes to the painting.

Many visitors are surprised to have the opportunity to chat face to face with the world-famous Teraoka.

Eve says, “Almost all of them say the same thing, ‘I am so glad to meet you.’”

Museum security guard Michael Zimmel stands by watching. Zimmel calls Teraoka “a very sweet guy.”

Zimmel says he has watched some visitors stomp out of the gallery “momentarily stunned by the images.” He says others look baffled and then start laughing.

But Zimmel says the exhibit speaks directly to him as a Catholic who grew up faithfully attending Mass in Minnesota during the sexual abuse scandals in the Minneapolis-St. Paul diocese in the 1990s.

“After that, it felt strange to go into a big beautiful Catholic Church and to sense the wrong that had happened. If you don’t understand the context, you might not appreciate this show.”

Interestingly, none of Teraoka’s paintings in the series show sexual violence against children. Teraoka says, “I tried to paint it but I just couldn’t handle it. Every time I started, I ended up painting over what I began. I couldn’t finish it.”

The sexual violence in the pictures is most often against women, with many other images showing women getting their revenge against their oppressors or reveling in their own sexuality.

In the Triptych Style

What makes the erotic and sometimes pornographic images astounding is that Teraoka has painted them in the sacred form of Catholic Church art — the highly religious triptych style of Europe’s Medieval/Early Renaissance period.

Triptychs are paneled paintings, which can be opened and closed. Traditionally, the panels were placed on church altars to enclose the church's most sacred object, a cross or revered religious statue.

James Jensen, the museum's curator of contemporary art, says Teraoka "has taken the religious form and filled it with something that is totally the opposite, images that are not sacred and in some ways iconoclastic; figures that fly in the face of the Catholic Church."

Jensen interviewed Teraoka to write the captions that appear beside each triptych in the exhibit. Some of Teraoka's narratives for the captions are as fascinating as his painted images. "What Teraoka has in his mind is very complicated," says Jensen. And, this reporter would add, sometimes weirdly funny."

**"The idea is to make people stop, think and then start talking about topics normally hidden from discourse."
— Masami Teraoka**

The caption that describes a panel showing Adam instead of Eve eating the mythological apple says, "Adam in drag biting the apple. He is supported by his partner, the Pope, who is holding the child they have adopted."

Teraoka says his themes in the paintings start with reality but then branch out to the creative stories that are always floating in his mind. "They are fiction, like kabuki."

In one triptych, he paints the macho Russian president Vladimir Putin dancing ballet in an orange tutu as Putin rejoices in the arrest of the punk rock group Pussy Riot for criticizing him in Moscow's Church of Christ the Savior.

In another panel in the same triptych, a geisha named Momotaro (a real Japanese geisha) flies to the Vatican to give Pope Francis Sex 101 lessons.

Teraoka says his paintings are intended to be eye-catching, with curious images like Putin in the same triptych as the pope; images that you cannot easily walk away from in a few seconds. "The idea is to make people stop, think and then start talking about topics normally hidden from discourse."

Museum director Jost says, "This show is not appropriate for everyone. I don't recommend it for everyone but if you want to be challenged out of your comfort zone, come on down."

As a lapsed Catholic, the imagery in Teraoka's show grabs me, especially its hard-core political images in church art style.

“A strange mix of beautiful workmanship done on a startling subject,” says museum docent Talbert Fox.

There is so much to absorb. I have seen the show twice and will probably return many times more before it ends Aug. 30.