

Master of Mysterious Images

KNOWN FOR HIS DISTINCTIVE POSTER DESIGNS, THE VETERAN JAPANESE ARTIST TADANORI YOKOO IS EARNING BELATED ATTENTION OVERSEAS FOR HIS WORK AS A PAINTER, TOO. BY EDWARD M. GÓMEZ



Tadanori Yokoo, *Swimming at Dawn*, 2015, acrylic on canvas, 18 x 21 inches.

THE TOKYO-BASED graphic designer and painter Tadanori Yokoo is regarded as one of the most accomplished doyens of modern art in Japan, even if, for all his renown, the scope and diversity of his oeuvre are still not very well known in the West. However, Yokoo's work in the field of poster design, for which he won acclaim earlier in his long career, still boasts a cult following among design mavens and specialists around the world. Meanwhile, in recent decades the artist has devoted his energy primarily to painting, a development that may have confounded Yokoo-watchers both inside and outside Japan who thought they had his work

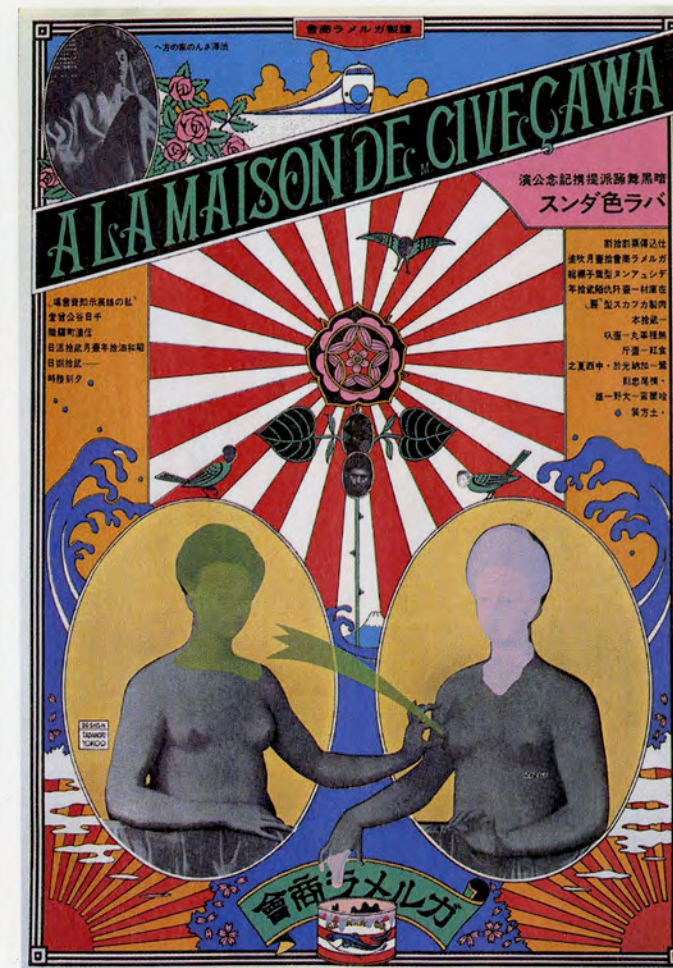


neatly pegged and placed somewhere in the Eastern division of modern art's complex, global history.

In fact, as the artist's most recent series of paintings, which New York's Albertz Benda Gallery has been showcasing over the past several years, have demonstrated, Yokoo is not only an artist whose moves are unpredictable but also one who mines his own life's history for thematic reference points in enigmatic ways.

Yokoo was born in 1936 in Nishiwaki, a town with a long history as a textile-producing center in Hyōgo Prefecture, in the southwestern part of Honshu, the main island in the Japanese archipelago. He was brought up by elderly adoptive parents who had run a kimono-fabric company. He grew up at a time when Japan was militarizing and then during the years of World War II in the Pacific. In the decades leading up to the right-wing militarist takeover of the government and the outbreak of war, Japanese art, culture, fashion, and intellectual life had been influenced by waves of incoming Western styles and democratic ideas. In his novels and essays, the contemporary writer Junichirō Tanizaki identified the sense of nostalgia mixed with anxiety that his people and their tradition-embracing society felt in the face of modernity's seemingly unstoppable approach.

Even as a child, Yokoo loved to draw. After finishing high school, he went to work at a printing company, then at a newspaper in the port city of Kobe. He soaked up the colors, textures, and ambience of the fading world in which he had grown up and, after



Clockwise from top left: *no goal for art*, 2015, acrylic on canvas, 46 x 35 3/4 inches; *A La Maison de M. Civecawa*, 1965, silkscreen on paper, 41 x 29 inches; *A Swimmer in the Night*, 2011, painting on canvas, 19.69 x 23.62 inches.





moving to Tokyo in 1960, worked for an advertising agency and then as a graphic designer at Nippon Design Center. That company was run by Ikko Tanaka, an innovator who profoundly influenced modern graphic design in Japan. At the time, the Japanese capital was undergoing rapid reconstruction, as war-devastated neighborhoods of old wooden structures and cozy back streets gave way to high-rise concrete apartment blocks and commercial centers.

Yokoo fell in with underground avant-garde artists, including Tatsumi Hijikata, the creator of the psychologically intense *butō* dance form, and Shuji Terayama, a poet, dramatist and filmmaker. Yokoo began creating collage-like posters to promote their performances and events. In developing such projects—and, through them, a signature look and aesthetic that imitated no known style—Yokoo, who as a child had enjoyed classic warrior tales, evoked the look and character of such indigenous, pre-modern source material as printed *menko* game cards, with their images of samurai, movie stars, or famous athletes; old kimono-fabric labels; Hokusai-style waves; antique typography; and the Hinomaru, Japan's traditional Rising Sun flag, with its bold rays extending out from a red disc.

Breaking with the uncluttered approach to modernist design that prevailed in cutting-edge poster, book, and advertising design

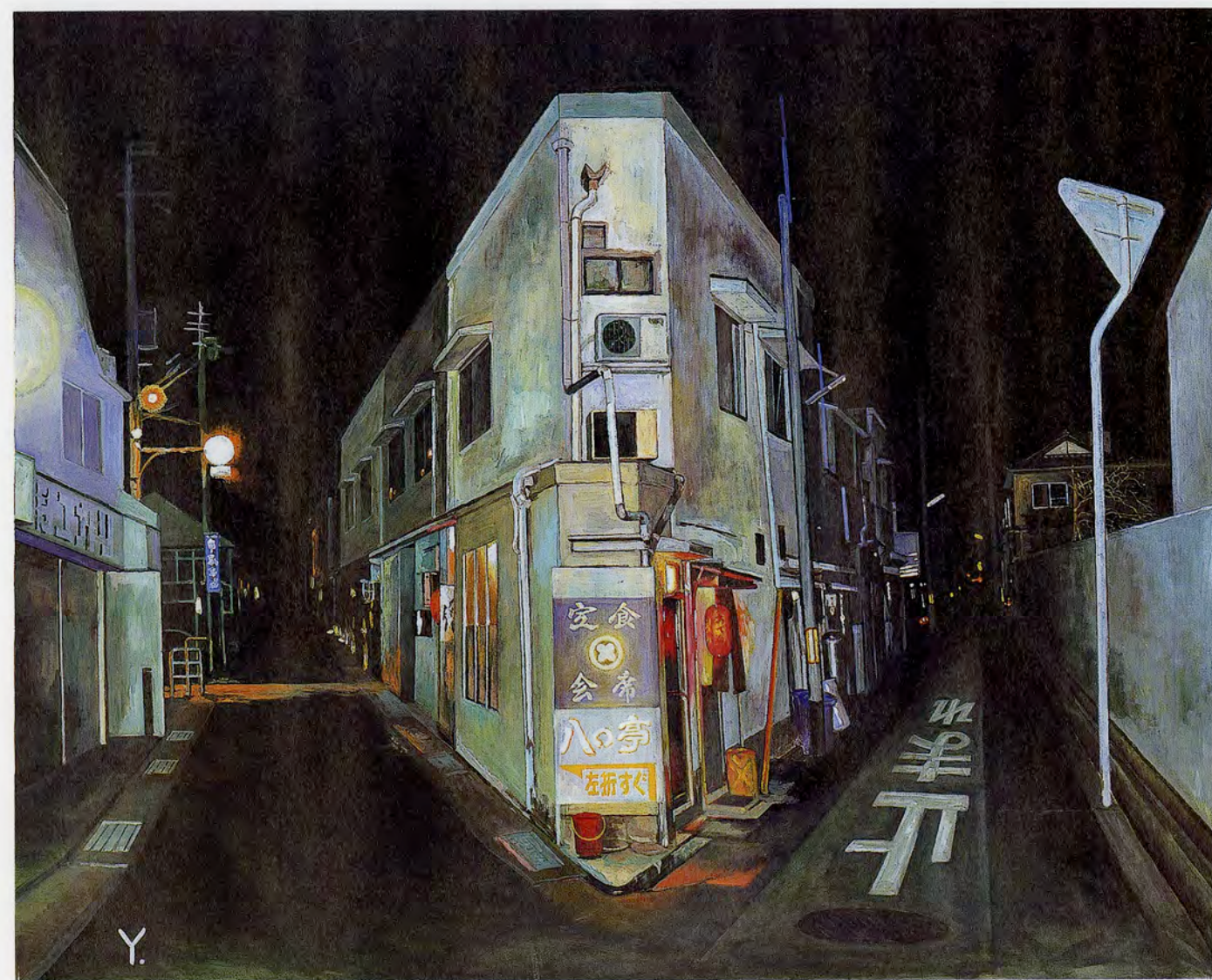


From left: *Having Reached a Climax at the Age of 29, I Was Dead*, 1965, silkscreen on paper, 40.55 x 28.66 inches; *Arabian Dream A Desert under the Moon*, 2015, acrylic on canvas, 46 x 35 3/4 inches.

in Japan in the 1960s (and which typified Tanaka's own spare, elegant style), Yokoo packed his poster designs with allusions to a pre-modern past, but with all the verve and some of the irony of the emerging Pop Art style. A few years ago, in an interview published in a newspaper in Japan, Yokoo recalled that his work "constituted quite a critique of design as it existed" at that time.

Eventually, professionally, he set out on his own. He became friendly with well-known sports stars and performers, his own celebrity rising in tandem with the power and influence of postwar mass media. In 1966, Yokoo presented his first solo exhibition at a Tokyo gallery, and as his unusual work became known overseas, foreign critics were quick to tag it "Pop Art." In 1968, he designed a poster for the "Word and Image" survey of poster art at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. It featured Hinomaru-style sun rays shooting out from a giant eyeball. Four years later, MoMA mounted a solo exhibition of Yokoo's work, consolidating his stature at home and abroad.

Since that time, outside Japan Yokoo has often been called a Pop artist, referred to as a Japanese counterpart to such iconic American artists of the 1960s as Andy Warhol or Peter Max. However, in Yokoo's case, that label has never been completely



A Dark Night's Flashing: N City-V, 2000, acrylic on canvas, 51.3 x 63.82 inches.

accurate. Certainly American pop-cultural influences could be strongly felt in Japan after the war years, but for all their bold color and impact, thematically, Yokoo's posters looked back, not ahead to some fantasy of a high-tech future, nor did they celebrate the emerging postwar consumer culture. (One of his most famous posters mockingly announced the artist's own death at the age of 29.) At the same time, Yokoo carefully balanced the emotional temperature of the potentially nostalgia-provoking elements of his poster designs in a way that prevented them from becoming kitsch.

Even as he produced a vast body of work and developed friendships with such leading cultural figures as the fashion designer Issey Miyake (for whom he has routinely created runway-show invitations for many decades) or the writer Yukio Mishima (a nationalist who famously committed ritual suicide after a failed *coup d'état* attempt in 1970), there were periods in his career during which he

made paintings. And in 1981, after visiting a Picasso exhibition at MoMA, Yokoo declared that he had given up graphic design in order to devote himself to painting. "When I entered that exhibition, I was a graphic designer and when I left I was a painter," he recalled many years later.

In fact, Yokoo told *Art & Antiques* in a recent written interview, "I started creating my first paintings in 1966. My motifs in those early works were young girls in seductive poses in various situations." He made about 20 such pictures in acrylic on canvas, including some depicting women with pink-red skin and bathing caps swimming in a moat surrounding a medieval Japanese castle. Yokoo did not exhibit those paintings outside Japan around that time. Instead, as he grew his hair long, savored the Beatles' music, assimilated the hippie and psychedelic trends of the 1960s and early '70s, and traveled to India, it was his distinctive posters that attracted the attention of fans and collectors.



From left: *Arabian Dream A Desert under the Moon*, 2015, acrylic on canvas, 46 x 35 3/4 inches;
Arabian Dream A-N, 2015, acrylic on canvas, 46 x 35 3/4 inches.



When Yokoo switched his focus to painting in the 1980s, in Western Europe and the U.S., the aesthetics of so-called bad painting were in the air. In 1978, the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York had presented “Bad’ Painting,” a controversial exhibition curated by the late Marcia Tucker. It examined the notion of taste, at which certain contemporary artists had begun taking aim in a postmodernist critical spirit that questioned canonical art history’s assumptions and narratives. Tucker wrote of the “bad” painting genre (which would in some instances find fuller expression in the 1980s in such movements as New Expressionism), “The freedom with which these artists mix classical and popular art-historical sources, kitsch and traditional images, archetypal and personal fantasies, constitutes a rejection of the concept of progress per se. [...] Bypassing the idea of progress implies an extraordinary freedom to do and to be whatever you want.”

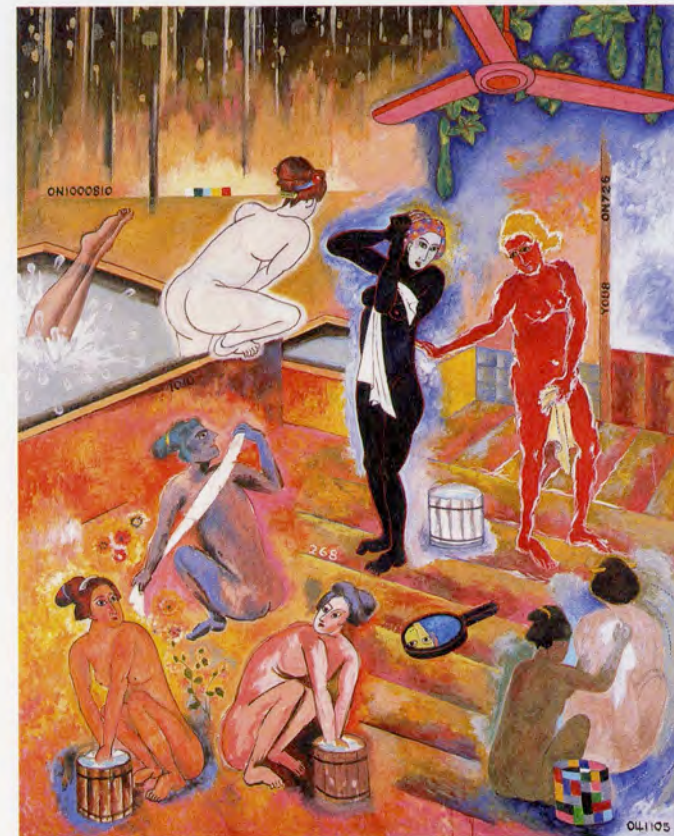
In that pre-Internet age, such ideas reached Japanese artists mainly through art magazines. Whether or not Yokoo was directly influenced by the “bad” painting trend, when he first started exhibiting his pictures in Japan, some critics and viewers did not know what to make of his big career turn. Animals, starbursts, ectoplasmic garlands of color, dramatically lit figures like characters in movie posters, old buildings, assorted motifs from traditional

Japanese art, whole panels of abstract patterns, and fragments of words written in Japanese or in Roman letters—Yokoo’s compositions could accommodate just about anything. Sometimes, in an atmospheric manner, they suggested recognizable narratives but mostly their intended meanings, if any, were anybody’s guess.

In a more recent development that echoes similar late-career gestures by such well-known modern artists as Picasso and Jasper Johns, in the past few years Yokoo has been dipping back into his own catalogue of emblematic images and reconsidering them in all-new works. He has shown them at Albertz Benda, calling renewed attention to his painting and to the variety within his broader oeuvre. In 2002, for a retrospective of his work at the Tokyo Museum of Contemporary Art, Yokoo recreated two paintings from what he calls his “Pink Girls” series of the 1960s (the originals, in private collections in the U.S., were not loaned to the exhibition at that time). The artist told *Art & Antiques*, “That was the beginning of my recreated works. Through the process of copying my own paintings, I felt a strange sense of excitement. They were copies but they were original works as well.”

Yokoo explained that, as he has continued to revisit and rework some of his earlier pictures, the process “has developed into something like conceptual art.” As it turns out, it was only last year, in

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Fun Time, 2004, oil on canvas, 89.49 x 71.57 inches; *Chinsetsu Yumihari-zuki*, 1969, silkscreen on paper, 40.75 x 28.94 inches.

the “International Pop” exhibition that opened at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis and was more recently presented at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, that Yokoo’s “Pink Girls” from the mid-’60s were first shown in the U.S. “I wonder what would have happened if these works had been shown in the U.S. in 1966,” he said.

In his more recent pictures, Yokoo’s swimmers are still pink and can still be seen splashing about in a moat—but he paints them blue, orange, or black, too, in pools or other bodies of water, their transparent heads sometimes overlapping to form faces filled with eyes and mouths like images from Cubist-Surrealist dreams. He has also created compositions resembling jigsaw puzzles, in which random patterns and fractured dancers’ bodies play tug-of-war in densely packed pictorial space. His sources for such images, he told *Art & Antiques*, were “parody photos” of movie actors he had found in old issues of *Life* magazine. “The original actor was Rudolph Valentino,” he explained, “but Tony Curtis was dancing with Natalie Wood in the *Life* version. I made a kind of parody painting out of the parody photograph. I decided to create various versions in different styles.”

In a posthumously published essay, Mishima observed that in Yokoo’s work “there is a direct line connecting the sadness of Japanese local customs and the demented, blatant nihilism of



American Pop Art.” For Mishima, who was no fan of modernity’s fast-advancing forces of change, Yokoo’s art offered a kind of “spiritual exchange along a grim path to and from the deepest places in the mind in opposition” to such phenomena as “tourism, world trends, industrialized society [and] urbanization.” (The broader arc of Yokoo’s lifelong creative journey may be examined in depth in the collection that is on view at the Tadanori Yokoo Museum of Contemporary Art in Kobe, which opened in 2012.)

In Yokoo’s paintings, as in his poster designs, which bring together so many seemingly disparate elements, whose individual or collective meanings, if any, he leaves wide open to interpretation, he has created an art of mystery and strange allure. In it, he carefully balances his own emotion regarding his subject matter somewhere between fond engagement and cool detachment. Still, his spirit is inescapably very present in each of his productions. That’s because, for Yokoo, the source and ongoing flow of his creative energy are as real and enduring as a mountain is illusive to a sensitive Buddhist monk. As this prolific artist once observed, “I guess the real foundation [of my work] is my own experience, my own memories.” In his art, he said, “The past and the present become one.”

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