



REVIEWS TOKYO

Aida Makoto

Mori Art Museum

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Aida Makoto, *Art and Philosophy #2 "French, German, English,"* 2011, three-channel HD video, color, sound, 15 minutes 26 seconds (French), 15 minutes 23 seconds (German), 13 minutes 50 seconds (English).

Japanese artist Aida Makoto plays the devil's advocate, tweaking his nation's collective conscience by opening a Pandora's box of issues from which most of his compatriots typically avert their eyes. For example, his "War Picture Returns" series, 1995–2003, resuscitates gruesome events from the Pacific War, such as the Japanese occupation of Korea, the crushing imperialism imposed on regional neighbors under the fantastical guise of the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere, and the waste of countless young lives in a hopeless war effort. These paintings allude to the genre of "war pictures" exemplified by Léonard Foujita's famous *Last Stand at Attu*, 1943, totalitarian propaganda meant to raise morale on the home front and glorify the deaths of Japanese fighting men as noble self-sacrifice. Unsurprisingly, this genre vanished after Japan's defeat, and existing works were mostly banished to storage. Breaking the taboo, Aida's revival is ambiguously positioned between the patriotic and the critical, haphazardly mimicking caricature, manga, and realism all at once.

Mi-Ni-Ma-Ru (Minimal), 1999, a painting referring to kamikaze flyers, probably the sorest point in Japanese war memories, is a simple horizontal surface coated in silver with a few yellow brushstrokes making a torii, the gate of a shrine, and text written in a young man's blood, reading in Japanese, LONG LIVE THE EMPEROR. The title alludes to the brief time on earth of young kamikaze flyers, many of whom left behind testaments honoring Emperor Hirohito, to whom they dedicated their tragically short lives. Elsewhere, Aida uses traditional materials and craftsmanship in unexpected ways. In the diptych *Beautiful Flag*, 1995, two manga-style heroines, one holding a Japanese and the other a Korean flag, confront each other, standing in what seems to be the aftermath of a battle. The series is uniformly on *fusuma*, screen doors traditionally decorated with pleasant and lucky images. Aida's unexpected use of this support shows the cynical twist he wants to give to conventionally complacent views of history.

Addressing more contemporary concerns is *Jumble of 100 Flowers*, 2012, a nearly sixty-foot-long depiction of a surreal scene of more than fifty naked girls being shot and ripped to pieces; instead of blood, flowers and confetti burst out from their bodies as they run smiling and rejoicing in dancing motions. The pixelated background and overlapping concentric targets on the girls' bodies show that Aida is depicting the massacre as a video game, one of Japan's great exports. The work is also a reflection on the Lolita complex, a fantasy deeply rooted in Japanese society with which Aida is openly fascinated. Violence against women has also been a theme in previous works, some portraying amputated women on leashes ("DOG" series, 1989-) or miniature girls cut open and suitable for eating ("Edible Artificial Girls, Mi-Mi Chan," 2001). In these manifestations of abnormal indulgence, Aida seeks both affirmation and criticism of his own perverted interests.

Aida's acute self-awareness about his possibly "exotic" identity in the global art scene is not so much a complex as an inspiration: In the three-channel video *Art and Philosophy #2 "French, German, English,"* 2011, he parodies the typical painting styles of each nation on panes of glass, murmuring philosophical quotations in each language. Via his provocative romanticization of what he imagines to be the authentic roots of oil painters, Aida lampoons the Western culture to which the Japanese tend to overreact with both admiration and fear; overcoming the West has been a historic challenge for the country. Aida's own attitudes seem as ambivalent as anyone else's; his own position on the sociopolitical themes he raises so provocatively is polemical but unresolved.

—Shinyoung Chung