

## Makoto Aida

### ALL TOO HUMAN

By Andrew Maerkle



The video of a man calling himself Bin Laden staying in Japan (2005), video, 8 min, 14 sec. All Images: Courtesy Mizuma Art Gallery, Tokyo.

### Interview:

**ART iT:** Your work is often discussed in terms of “simulation art,” or the appropriation of existing works and styles. What does simulation art mean to you?

**MA:** Simulation art was one of the trends when I was studying at university and just starting my career, and I think that’s where it influenced me the most. I don’t have any great need to express my “inner voice,” so the idea of starting from nothing with a blank canvas and putting my soul into the work doesn’t appeal to me. Rather, I am better suited to starting with a preexisting form or work, and mixing that premise with my impressions of contemporary society to reconstitute a new image, as it allows me to establish some distance from myself and to work in a more objective way. It could be classical art or contemporary manga or advertising, but as long as I have some kind of base or springboard then it’s easier for me to make something.

**ART iT:** Yet, reflecting on the more than 20 years of your career, I would say that you have taken a decidedly unique approach to simulation art.

**MA:** When I was young, Nihonga Japanese-style painting had an authoritative social status – this was also during the bubble economy – and I heard that such works were being sold for ridiculously high sums of money. Perhaps out of youthful insolence, I wanted to shake up the value of Nihonga, and made all kinds of works challenging that establishment. Works like those from the Dog (1989- ) series, depicting girls with amputated limbs, emerged from this mentality: one point was to use an established cultural genre like Nihonga to depict crass and shocking images. Now that Nihonga is no longer so dominant, my interest has gradually shifted elsewhere, and my desire to upend the values of the system, or, say, the art establishment, has weakened. Recently I made a painting with heaps of dead salaryman figures, Ash Color Mountains (2009-11), but rather than being motivated by a desire to overturn the traditional values of East Asian ink painting, it was simply the method that I used for the work.



**Top:** Installation view of works from "War Picture Returns" series in the exhibition "Aida Makoto: Monument for Nothing" at the Mori Art Museum, Tokyo, November 2012 to March 2013. Photo Watanabe Osamu, courtesy Mori Art Museum, Tokyo. **Bottom:** Beautiful Flag (War Picture Returns) (1995), Pair of two-panel folding screens / charcoal, self-made paint with Japanese glue, acrylic on fusuma (sliding door), hinges, 174 x 170 cm (each). Takahashi Collection, Tokyo (Deposit Museum of Contemporary Art Tokyo).

**ART IT:** For many people, this exhibition has been the first opportunity to see the entire “War Picture Returns” series exhibited together in one room, and it underscores how precisely you reference historical genres of painting like Nihonga, Bijinga pictures of young women and the Sensoga genre of propagandistic “war pictures” made in Japan during World War II. When you make such works – for example, the war pictures series – how much research do you put into the styles you reference?

**MA:** I don’t really do much research. Regarding genres like Nihonga, when I was young I would visit places like the National Museum in Tokyo or the Yamatane Museum, which specializes in Nihonga, or I would look at art books. But I never read the captions, so I never had a precise idea of the artist names or the work dates. I absorbed whatever I did simply from looking in a casual way, but nothing so serious as the way a researcher might have viewed the works.

In the case of “War Picture Returns,” I came up with the title of the series after I had already started making the works. The theme of the series is the Pacific War, so really a more appropriate title would have been something like “The Pacific War Series.” It’s just that I didn’t want to put too much effort into coming up with a title, so I thought that if I added “Returns” to “War Picture,” then I could give it a contemporary twist. And then it was after I came up with the title that I decided I should have a proper look at the “war pictures” genre. At the time, there were no war pictures on public view, but at the museum library I found a number of black-and-white catalogs that had been published during the war era. There were about four massive volumes, among which were the catalogs from the so-called “Seisen (Holy War) Art Exhibition” series organized during the war years, and they probably contained just about everything there is of the war pictures genre. I was looking for some kind of idea or an existing painting that I could turn into my own, although ultimately there wasn’t so much to work with. Rather than depictions of fierce fighting, most of the works were fairly reserved depictions, most likely painted after black-and-white photographs sent from the front, of soldiers resting in the jungle or something like that. Of the few truly characteristic works, the most powerful was Léonard Tsuguharu Foujita’s *Final Fighting on Attu* (1943), with its messy depiction of a final banzai charge. This painting was completely distinct from the rest of the genre. For me, it provided the base for *Ohkimi no henikoso shiname – Let’s Die at the Emperor’s Feet (War Picture Returns)* (1996), and also served as a reference for the works *Zaku (War Picture Returns – Side B)* (2005) and *Ash Color Mountains*.



MONUMENT FOR NOTHING IV (2012), acrylic, paper on plywood, wood bolt, 570 x 750 cm. Installation view, “Aida Makoto: Monument for Nothing” at the Mori Art Museum, Tokyo, 2012-13. Photo Watanabe Osamu, courtesy Mori Art Museum, Tokyo.

**ART IT:** “War Picture Returns” deals with themes that have not been fully discussed in post-war Japanese society, and which have not really been represented in postwar Japanese art, and perhaps it is the framework of the war pictures genre, which itself has been suppressed, that makes this possible. Yet, your works also maintain a politically ambiguous position in regard to the politically sensitive issues they address.

In that sense I would like to know more about one of the works you made for this exhibition, Monument for Nothing IV (2013), a massive collage made from printouts of Twitter commentary on the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear disaster and its social repercussions. On the one hand the title and format of the work suggest that you do not take such popular expressions of political sentiment seriously. On the other hand, many visitors to the exhibition take time to read the Twitter messages, creating an opportunity to reflect on the state of political expression in Japan. Can you discuss why you wanted to make this work?

**MA:** One characteristic of my work is that it deals with social themes, but is not intended as a tool or medium for instigating specific social action, nor does it seek to bring about social change. Clearly, this stance is quite different from that of artists like Joseph Beuys, who did seek to shake up society. It's not that I think this is necessarily a good disposition on my part, but I strongly believe it is best when a work is fixed and “unmoving.”

With this work dealing with the March 11 disaster, there are a number of people who are angry that I used their Twitter messages without any permission, but it doesn't bother me at all. First, I had no grand aspirations for this work. It's just that I thought this was something that had to be in the exhibition. Basically, I thought it would be strange if a Japanese artist having a major exhibition in Japan so soon after this kind of disaster did not address it in some way. At the same time, I don't like to follow blindly, nor am I the type to go to the disaster area and volunteer or anything like that. I have received a high proportion of my information about the earthquake, tsunami and, in particular, the nuclear disaster from Twitter. Of course this necessarily includes disinformation, abusive invectives and rifts between people, but in any case the core of my experience of the nuclear disaster has been mediated by Twitter. So I think it's possible to say that the work is a self-portrait, or a reflection and document of the impressions regarding the Fukushima nuclear disaster of a Japanese man who has never been there in person. I think many other Japanese people can relate to it. That's why I avoided making judgments on the tweets that I selected, and avoided applying my personal opinions or original aesthetic sensibility to the work.

With the uproar about it on Twitter, I'm not sure when I would next display the work, but simply in having exhibited it on this occasion, I think it's perfectly fine if it isn't seen for the next 10 or 20 years. There's no way to tell how people might feel 20 or 30 years from now, but I think it's reasonable to expect it will be quite different from today, and this was also one of the considerations in making the work.

**ART IT:** You mentioned that simulation provides a means for you to make art in an objective way, although your works deal with different social issues. How do you feel about the political potential of art in general?

**MA:** Maybe I'm shirking my responsibility, but I'm a kind of Pierrot. I make people upset, I make them laugh, I annoy them, and that's what I'm good at. There are artists who take a more serious position in attempting to effect social change, and I think they provide a necessary balance to what I do. I am fully committed to my role as a Pierrot, and I hope the other artists also fully apply themselves to what they do.





**Top:** Dog (Snow) (1998), mineral pigments and acrylic on Japanese paper and board, 73 × 100 cm. Photo Kei Miyajima, © Makoto Aida. **Bottom:** Uguisudani-zu (Picture of Uguisudani) (1990), Japanese mineral pigment, acrylic on sex phone calling cards mounted on panel, 190 x 245 cm. Collection of Watai Yuki.

**ART iT:** Perverse sexuality is a recurring theme in your works, but as the sex chirashi in Uguisudani-zu (1990) and the video I-DE-A (2000) suggest, a large part of sexuality is tied up in mechanisms of false advertising and fantastic idealizations that are never realized, or can be quite disappointing when they are realized. In art, sex is perhaps the ultimate conceptual motif. Can you discuss more about your attraction to sexual topics in your works?

**MA:** I want for all my works to respond in some way to the reality of contemporary Japan. Sexuality in Japan has changed over the 20-plus years between when I started my career and

the present, but one consistent characteristic of Japanese sexuality in comparison to those of other countries is, as you say, the fantastic element. I was already aware of this to a certain extent from a relatively young age, and more than simply making erotic drawings or paintings, I wanted to reflect the characteristics of Japanese sexuality, including those that are pathological. To this end, I took up an almost ethnographic perspective on the Japanese people, although I myself grew up with images from erotic manga comics and shojo youth idols, just like anybody else, so I can also relate in that sense. When I see a manga drawing of a girl with huge eyes, it's not out of the question that I too would get excited. It's a love-hate thing: sometimes I'm drawn to it and other times disgusted by it, or, in relation to the rest of the world, ashamed by it, but I'm also proud of it. Perhaps it's thanks to these two-dimensional fantasies that the incidence of rape is lower than it would be otherwise. If everybody can even more unashamedly jack off to these fantasies, then maybe that's for the greater good, although of course we also have to think about population decline as well. In any case, even when I think about these sexual issues, I am also thinking about the real problems in Japan. To be sure, when I use sexual imagery, it's not like I'm really thinking earnestly about how to incorporate some kind of idea into it. I try to work by impulse and intuition. With the protests about the sensitive nature of some of the works in the Mori exhibition, maybe I will have to start thinking earnestly about it. But ultimately sex is simply a major theme in the history of civilization, and is one of the most important characteristics that distinguishes humans from other animals, so it's natural for it to be a theme in art. Not that it's 100 percent necessary, but I think it's far stranger still to avoid sex altogether, and I will continue dealing with it in my work.

Makoto Aida's work was on view in the exhibition "Monument for Nothing" at the Mori Art Museum, Tokyo, from November 17, 2012, to March 31, 2013.

## Makoto Aida: All Too Human

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