

AIDA MAKOTO: MONUMENT FOR NOTHING

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Ash Color Mountains, 2009-2011, acrylic on canvas, 300 x 700 cm

Aida Makoto's reputation has always been confined within Japan— that he has never been taken under the wings of some international curator cements his status as an “underrated artist.” This retrospective can be regarded as fair payment for his life's work, collecting a large number of Makoto's works from the early 1990s to the present. In his earliest representative work, *A Path Between Rice Fields*, he takes Kaii Higashiyama's famous *The Path* and unfathomably collages it with the part in a high school girl's hair. Indeed, Makoto's greatest talent is in deconstructing and reassembling source material. But regardless if sampling from art history or Japanese subculture, the various concrete forms in his work do not appear as appropriations, but are direct expressions or symbols that express the artist's own formulated ideas.

Aida Makoto is not the kind of artist who likes to carry out explorations of medium or form. He has always been deeply suspicious of intellectual rhetoric in art, sometimes even openly ridiculing it: in his “Art and Philosophy” series, Makoto completely disassembles a copy of Emmanuel Kant's *Critique of Judgement*, scrawling graffiti on each page; in another piece, he impersonates three artists— one German, one French, and one American— and stands reading philosophical works aloud while painting onto glass plates in each nation's signature abstract style. Valuing ideas over intrinsic qualities, rejecting the formal explorations of Modernism— all of these characteristics point towards Makoto as the quintessential post-modern artist. But much more important is the collective unconscious that hovers behind his works. Those who lived through the economic boom of 1980s Japan will remember well the jubilant atmosphere that pervaded society during that period. They will also equally remember the 1995 Subway Sarin Incident, which punctured all such illusions of cheerfulness. In Makoto's the “War Picture Returns” series, hundreds of miniature young girls are turned to bloody liquid in a fruit blender, and a girl with stumps for arms and legs is pulled by a dog-

collar around her neck— all emerging from the collective subconscious. In fact, some even correspond directly to, even chillingly predicted, certain real-life events (see Makoto's *Dog* and the murders committed by serial killer Tsutomu Miyazaki).

Considering that in Makoto's works, the role played by the unconscious is greater than that of the conscious, and that of the collective greater than the individual, and also that the artist is now fully adept at the techniques of sampling and assemblage, the manifestation of both can be found in the ridiculous image of his *Rice-Ball Mask Man* defecating into a Japanese-style toilet. Makoto's own explanation for this image is as follows: a person sitting on a Western-style toilet always becomes Rodin's *The Thinker*, lost in thought, whereas the rice-ball mask man squatting over a Japanese-style toilet is always innocent: "He's not thinking about anything!" But, as Makoto himself knows, when one uses irrationality to disassemble theory, one may inadvertently end up reconfirming an even older theory— in this case, Kant's writings on intuition. With this in mind, the title of this exhibition (In Japanese and Chinese: "I'm a Genius, Apologies") might in fact carry a slightly self-mocking, contradictory tone.

In the gallery, opposite this giant, Buddha-like sculpture is Makoto's new work *Monument For Nothing IV*. Made after the 3.11 Earthquake, this work, which covers almost an entire wall, is a compilation of countless tweets. Twitter users' views on the continued use of nuclear power are unanimous. However, the liberals who gather on the site were recently given a ruthless slap in the face by the recently elected Japanese Liberal Democratic Party, who stated that they would reconsider phasing out nuclear power in Japan. Facing this giant "monument to nothing," it is difficult to tell whether Rice-Ball Man is laughing or crying.

In both theme and medium, the most grabbing quality of Aida Makoto's work is its subtle humor, which stems from a tension between reality and the works themselves, as well as the artist's rebellion against the outside world. But Japan today is quite different from the 1990s: enduring stagflation, the 2011 earthquake, and the Fukushima Nuclear disaster have all intensified a general feeling of insecurity; the Liberal Democratic Party's landslide victory in 2012 is good evidence of this. It seems that the instability always found in Makoto's work is now slowly creeping into reality. And after the distance between reality and fantasy has disappeared, the humor will turn to cynicism and embitterment. (Translated by Dominik Salter Dvorak)