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Aida Makoto: Far-Sighted Visions of Near-Sighted Japan

Artist enfant terrible Aida Makoto spoke with The Diplomat about his provocative Tokyo exhibition and whether there is hope for Japan.

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Since his highly provocative [Monument for Nothing](#) exhibition opened at Tokyo's prestigious Mori Art Museum last November and ran through this March, Japanese artist Aida Makoto has been generating attention and stoking [heated debate](#). He has been called a rebel, a "[hellraiser](#)" and controversial more times than he would like to count.

Among his works are images of an overtly phallic mushroom cloud drawn in a cutesy *manga*-style, a massive wall plastered with tweets sent by real people following the 3/11 triple disaster that devastated Japan's Tohoku region, a sprawling tent filled with a jumble of dolls, pink plastic toys and other ultra *kawaii* ("cute") items, a suicide machine that is rigged to fail no matter how many attempts are made, and an apocalyptic scene rendered in the style of a Japanese traditional landscape painting.

While these works may suggest for some a dark, tormented man, in person Aida is down-to-earth, "bearish more than bullish. Many people are surprised to discover this," he told *The Diplomat*. In response to the controversy that his works have sparked, he added, "There are so many motifs in my work that could infuriate people, but they only focus on a handful (mostly sexual). I think this reveals an immature society."

Controversy aside and kitted out in khaki cargo pants, a brown double breast pocketed shirt and paint-splotted rubber clogs, Aida sat down for an exclusive interview with *The Diplomat* to share his thoughts on the creative process, his art and the state of Japan—a subject ever present in his work.

Born in Niigata in 1965 to a sociologist father and a mother who was a science teacher, then young Aida dreamed of becoming a manga artist. His creative gumption was evident early on to his teachers, who would often scold him for doodling in class. During junior high school, by which point he was a self-described "leftist", he became fascinated by WWII and read avidly on the atrocities committed by the Imperial Japanese Army overseas.

Around that time, the young Aida took up oil painting. At 16, he was switched on to various

subculture luminaries and devoured literature, with Mishima Yukio at the top of his list, followed closely by Western giants like Dostoyevsky. He was also drawn to the new wave of Japanese manga that broke through cracks in the nation's pop cultural edifice in the 1980s.

"When I became a high school student I wanted to be an author. But when I compared whether I was better at writing or painting, it was clearly the latter. This is why I joined an art class," Aida said. Driven by his urge to become "a creator," Aida moved to Tokyo to study oil painting at the Tokyo University of the Arts, graduating in 1989 and going on to earn an MFA from the same school. He was gradually subsumed by the city's avant garde.

According to Kataoka Mami, who penned an essay titled *Japan, the Chaotic, and Aida Makoto* for the Mori exhibition's official catalog, it was during this time that Aida developed a taste for parody and became acquainted with traditional Japanese artistic traditions such as *honkadori* (the recycling of older songs or poems in poetry forms like *tanka* and *renga*). All of these influences, including ancient traditions, would later manifest in his work to powerful effect.

According to Dr. Hirayama Mikiko, professor of Asian art history at the University of Cincinnati, this trend can be seen across Asia. "Even if they do not create an explicit pastiche of traditional images, artists often reference their culture by using iconic objects" such as Ai Weiwei's *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn* (1995) and Cai Guoqiang's gunpowder projects (1990s-present), Hirayama told *The Diplomat*. "My thoughts are that in today's globalized world Asian artists are faced more acutely than ever with the challenge of redefining their identity."

Hirayama added, "But the way Aida references Japanese traditional art seems somewhat different. His reference to tradition is more playful and, at the same time, he is not afraid of rubbing his audience the wrong way with his sometimes politically incorrect or sexually deviant images. To me it seems he is trying to prompt the viewer into taking a fresh look at everyday life by presenting commonplace images and scenes in a provocative manner."

Armed with a myriad of techniques and influences, Aida has developed an idiosyncratic manner of exploring a plethora of prickly themes across a vast range of media, from painting and photography to sculpture, installation, video, and even graphic novels. With so many influences, many view his opus as a jumbled mess.

"Aida Makoto is a man of chaos and disorder," Kataoka writes. "The confusion and complexity found in his work eludes simple explanations... Topics related to Japanese society and history, references to political issues, iconic works from Japanese art history, lithe, nubile young girls, erotic and grotesque themes, the nonsensical and absurd, brutality, ennui—all these and more are incorporated into his practice in a seemingly random fashion."

From Aida's point of view, the hodgepodge of themes and modes of expression is par for the creative course. "It's not so much that you are interested in something and then those things become your focus," he said. "You have to wait. And when the right thing comes you know. It just falls on you... Normally the images come when I'm drinking sake or relaxing. Many of the images from my works even connect back to my childhood."

According to Kataoka, Aida's works point to an underlying ambiguity resulting from Japan's tumultuous 20th century history, which includes no small list of events: Japan's modernization during the Meiji Restoration, its military incursions in Asia and defeat in WWII, followed by the post-war Allied occupation. Next was the nation's "economic miracle," which created the bubble economy that promptly burst with the ending of the 1980s, and has been followed by more than two decades of

profound malaise characterized by a vague sense of unease and lack of direction, reflecting the nation's dearth of leadership.

Kataoka explained that this dramatic epoch has created a schism in Japan's national psyche between two competing impulses: the drive to Westernize (*datsu-a ron*, or "de-Asianize") and the yearning to cling to tradition. As Kataoka points out, American anthropologist Ruth Benedict made similar claims in her famous book *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*. The rift has in turn led to a pervasive ambiguity in Japanese society. This collective haziness characterizes much of Aida's work. This is not by accident.

"My first target audience is Japan," Aida said. "After that of course I'm also interested in sharing my work to others around the world, but some of the nuance may be lost on those who are not Japanese. It may seem that I'm objective and looking at society from the outside and then commenting on it in my work."

"But that's not true," he added. "I'm also part of the society I am responding to in my work. I feel that contemporary Japanese society is becoming near-sighted." A quick rundown of the images from *Monument for Nothing* reveals this so-called near-sightedness in a startling light.

The manga-fied *Harakiri Schoolgirls* depicts adolescent girls in school uniforms disemboweling and beheading themselves in samurai fashion, winking and smiling at the viewer as they do so.

In *Gate Ball*, grotesque caricatures of Japanese retirees play croquet with severed heads, presumably taken during Japan's WWII conquest. One of the old men is wearing a jumper with "Team Great East Asia" emblazoned on the back – harkening back to the dream of Imperial Japan embodied in the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere.

Shinjuku Castle is a prototypical medieval Japanese castle built from cardboard boxes, which originally stood near Shinjuku station where many homeless built cardboard homes of their own. While an element of social commentary is evident in the work, Aida also intended the work to serve as a piece of "nonsense humor," looking back to his own as a starving artist struggling to pay taxes and rent.

In the official exhibition catalog, Aida wrote: "In Japan, people sometimes describe their houses they have built after great toil as 'castles.'... I think a human being (or a nation) should keep having a sense of humor even in the hardest time."

Moving on, in the massive painting *Jumble of 100 Flowers* – at 2 x 17.5 meters, it is still a work in progress – nude young women appear to be giddily running towards the viewer, being blown to bits as if they are characters in a video game. Instead of gore, however, jewels, candy, butterflies and flowers spray forth.

What to make of the frenzied onslaught of images conceived by Aida? While there is no inherent organization to *Monument for Nothing* per se, one way to view the works is chronologically, from Japan's past to its present.

Aida's main historical focus lies with Japan's troubled history surrounding its involvement in WWII, explored in his *War Picture Returns* series of paintings. In particular, Aida has cast his gaze over Japan's troubled relations with the U.S. and China. Having lived for a time in both New York and Beijing, Aida's first-hand experiences have colored his complex feelings towards both countries.

During a stint in New York, he developed ambivalent feelings towards the city's position at the top of the contemporary art world. "The epicenter of the contemporary art world is New York City. That is a fact," he told *The Diplomat*. "But I think the work I have exhibited in this show is a kind of rebellion against the New York-centric art world."

One point of rebellion inspired by his time in New York was his work involving the English language, as seen notably in a humorous performance piece titled *Your pronunciation is wrong!*, Aida led a group of mock protestors through the streets of New York, who demanded that others speak broken English with a Japanese accent.

Similarly, Aida's six months in Beijing caused his feelings towards China to shift. "Compared with people who have never been to China, I think I am sympathetic towards the Chinese," he said.

Alongside developing sympathy, Aida also developed a unique bond to Japan's artistic roots during his time in Beijing. "I would say that I'm heavily influenced by old Japanese painting styles, which ultimately originated in China," he said. "So I have a deep respect for China in terms of its artistic contributions."

During his residency in Beijing, he painted his famous *Ash Color Mountains*. At a distance, the work appears to be a traditional Chinese or Japanese landscape painting of mountains gently shrouded in mist. Up close, however, viewers see that the mountains are in fact vast piles of dead *salarymen*, still wearing their suits and ties and surrounded by briefcases and other artifacts of Japan's stifling business culture.

Ash Color Mountains is but one of Aida's many works to offer strong commentary on contemporary Japanese society, which Aida sees as being in decline. In *Blender*, a multitude of women are stuffed into a giant blender and are being whipped into a pulp. In *Louis Vuitton*, an exaggeratedly rustic farmer is seen pulling Louis Vuitton purses from the dirt in a field.

The darker painting *Electric Poles, Crows and Others* offers a grim depiction of what could become of Japan (or anywhere) following a truly apocalyptic disaster. On the canvas, which is ten meters across, crows are perched atop electric wires and fly across the scene, carrying in their beaks the remnants of human habitation – a scarf, a finger.

While the image is bleak, it is not fair to consider it representative of Aida's body of work. On balance, the message contained in the exhibition is more ambiguous than that. To get a better idea of where Aida sees Japan heading, his statue, *The Non-Thinker*, is a safer bet.

The nonsensical figure offers a mixed parody of Buddhist sculpture and Auguste Rodin's *The Thinker*. With a hand held in a *mudra* and eyes half-closed as if in meditation, *The Non-Thinker* wears a green form-fitting suit and has a giant *oni-giri* (rice ball) for a head. Appropriately, it sits atop a heaping pile of golden dung – doing and thinking absolutely nothing. Nonsense, yes, but Aida sees the indolent statue as something of a humorous ideal and an unlikely symbol of hope for Japan.

"This will not be a popular opinion, but I think Japan needs to become more humble," Aida said. "The decline in Japan's GDP is actually a good sign in my opinion."

He continued, "On a material, economic level, I don't think we should try to reclaim our position from the 1980s – Japan Inc., 'Japan as number one.' Instead, I think we should accept the point we are at now. Japan needs to learn to live with less and have simpler lives like the ones we lived before the bubble. It's not bad to look up to the stars and aim higher. But Japan doesn't have to."