

Drifting Objects of Dreams: The Collection of Shuzo Takiguchi, Setagaya Art Museum, Tokyo, 3 February – 10 April 2005 The Museum of Modern Art, Toyama, Japan, 28 May – 3 July 2005

When Aube Elléouët took the fateful and difficult decision to auction her father's collection she was certainly aware that it would be controversial. The dispersal of such a magnificent collection, the sum of a lifetime's endeavour by one of the pivotal figures of twentieth-century culture, might seem to many an ultimate sacrilege.

There is undeniably something inexpressibly poignant about visiting the home of those departed who have helped to found our modern sensibility. In the homes of Freud, Keats or Victor Hugo, for instance, retained as museums, one feels a sense of direct communication with their ghosts. Breton's presence was even more apparent in those cramped rooms in which he had spent most of his life and for anyone who ever visited the apartment in rue Fontaine it is impossible not to feel a sense of loss in thinking that the collection no longer exists. There was never any chance of Breton's apartment being similarly maintained and made open to the public, however: its situation made that impossible. And the idea that it might be recreated in another place, or turned into a museum display, was enough to turn the stomach, because this wasn't simply a collection; it was also an atmosphere, an ambience that was inseparable from those mysterious rooms which you entered after ascending the rickety stairway that led to them. The mess the Beaubourg made of the 'wall' bequeathed to them is powerful evidence against any will to use Breton's life to satisfy the theme park mentality of today's world.

In the circumstances, it seemed far more appropriate for the collection to be dispersed, and Aube no doubt made the right decision, or at least one of which her father would have approved. It would have been nice to think the collection could have been given away or destroyed in a kind of potlatch, but the auction at Camels Cohen was probably as close to a potlatch as one could imagine in this materialistic age. At least, it might be seen to stand as a protest against one of the strangest obsessions of our age: the desire to hold on to everything at all costs. Breton's collection was at least well known, documented and catalogued. What has been lost is a material presence, a loss that simply marks the passing of time.

That bringing together such a collection for an exhibition can nevertheless be both moving and revelatory is shown by the exhibition in Tokyo of the collection of Takiguchi Shūzō (1903-79), the most significant figure of surrealism in Japan. Takiguchi's collection was in its way as remarkable as Breton's, as well as being similarly excessive in its extent. When Takiguchi died, his widow entrusted his books and manuscripts to the safekeeping of the Museum of Modern Art in Toyama, the west coast seaport where Takiguchi was born and lived during the latter part of his life. She kept the rest of his collection with her until her own death in 1999 (although one presumes she did not, like Elisa Breton, maintain the house as a living



museum). The collection has now been brought together again in an exhibition curated by Sugiyama Etsuko held first in Tokyo and travelling later to Toyama. Its real value lies in the quality of the evidence it provides of a life as veiled from history (even in Japan) as Breton's was open and inseparable from the surrealist movement he founded (surely the true import of that house of glass Breton insisted he inhabited). The history of surrealism in Japan is as inseparable from Takiguchi's life as surrealism in France was from Breton's, but this is a very different history and Takiguchi's life sheds light on only one facet of what is a complex story.

Japan was one of the first places to respond to the surrealist message. It had already been well prepared by a flourishing Dadaist movement and a Surrealist Group was established in 1926. The *Manifeste du surréalisme* was published in Japanese translation in 1929 and Takiguchi himself published translations of Aragon's *Traité du style* in 1929 and Breton's *Le Surréalisme et la peinture* in 1930; in addition, the Second International Surrealist Exhibition was held in Japan in 1937, travelling from Tokyo to Kyoto and Osaka. Surrealism has since remained a persistent, if shadowy, presence in Japanese culture. Miryam Sas claims that it made a greater impact in Japan than anywhere else except France, which is probably not strictly accurate (surrealism was surely more significant in Belgium and Czechoslovakia), but such a claim does highlight the neglect the Japanese surrealists have suffered.¹

In Europe we lack a comprehensive history of Japanese surrealism and it is difficult to discern its overall traces (the section devoted to Japan in Gérard Durozoi's *History of the Surrealist Movement* is almost wholly inaccurate even in its broad strokes).² The two books we do have – Véra Linhartova's *Dada et surréalisme au Japon* and Miryam Sas's *Fault Lines: Cultural Memory and Japanese Surrealism* – are both excellent (in fact Sas's book is exemplary in the effort it makes to understand surrealism in its own terms rather than, as too many commentators do, impose received ideas on it) and give a glimpse of the extent of surrealist activity in Japan and the way it has entered and affected Japanese sensibility.³ Given the complexity of surrealism in Japan, however, these two books do no more than provide starting points for our understanding of it, as both authors acknowledge.

From the little I have been able to glean, and what this exhibition above all tends to confirm, is how 'individualist' surrealism in Japan has been. The impression is that we see here less a surrealist movement than, in the felicitous phrase used by Alain Joubert to describe surrealist activity in France in the 1970s, 'surrealists in movement.' That is, we see a whole range of different artists responding to surrealism in individual ways, but without establishing the common ground necessary to found a basis for collective action. Even though a whole series of ephemeral groups have emerged over the years, none seems to have made much of a collective impact and the most important figures of Japanese surrealism (Takiguchi, Nishiwaka Junzaburō, Okamoto Tarō, Kitasono Katsue, Yamamoto Kansuke and Fukuzawa Ichirō) seem largely to have worked independently of one another. We might be tempted to



think that, where in Europe, surrealism was founded in a revolt against western individualism, the Japanese attraction to it realised its basis in an individual revolt against the collectivist structures of Japanese society. This may, however, be an ethnocentric conjecture, and in fact one of the themes Miryam Sas perceives in the surrealist poets she discusses is an assault on the concept of the individual that is if anything more acutely focused than in Europe. On the other hand, this assault on the individual took a particular shape in Japan, being simultaneously a protest against (or resistance towards) the incorporation of Western concepts and a re-assertion of Japanese traditions. It is in this respect that surrealism assumed necessarily an ambivalent position within the unfolding of modern Japan, representing a revolt against the strictures of both traditional and modern forms, while simultaneously offering a means for their reappraisal.

Surrealism entered Japan in the same way as futurism and dadaism, as an aspect of European modernism. However, it needs to be understood not as a reflection of a European form (the hoary old cliché about the Japanese genius for imitation certainly does not apply here) but as a response to the challenges of modernity and the violence it unfurled across Japanese society. For most of the Japanese attracted to it, the value of surrealism lay in the possibilities it offered to question their position in the world. It was, however, a surrealism largely perceived in aesthetic terms: it offered them tools they could use to chart out a new directions for their art and poetry, but it did not take the form of an adventure of the spirit as it did in Europe. Japanese surrealism appears never to have had the quality of negation that characterised it elsewhere, which no doubt partly reflects the fact that Japan in the 1920s was not suffering the sense of demoralisation that afflicted Europe. If anything it was in the opposite position (even Japanese dadaism was largely a positive movement) of being optimistic about the future but not knowing which direction it should take. As a result, for most of those drawn to it, their commitment to surrealism was subject to the vagaries of fashion and most ceased to consider themselves surrealists once it ceased to be fashionable.

Takiguchi was the exception. Surrealism entered his life in a violent way, causing him to question all of the things he had until then taken for granted. Miryam Sas emphasises this point, quoting the critic Tsuruoka Yoshihisa that 'Unlike Kitasono and the others, [Takiguchi] as a prerequisite for his acceptance of surrealism, had to pass through a state of spiritual turmoil, as a highly personal experience.'

This sense is certainly borne out by the exhibition, which reveals Takiguchi as a tireless magnetiser of energies throughout his life and indicates that while a sustained group may not have formed around him, he inspired (and was himself inspired by) a wealth of writers and artists throughout his life. Certainly, the collaborative aspect of his work is much in evidence throughout the exhibition. In fact, Takiguchi's life can doubtless be told in terms of a series of encounters with both Japanese and European artists. He made works in collaboration with



artists in both the West (Joan Miró, Sam Francis, Antoni Tàpies) and Japan (Abe Nobuya, Nonaka Yuri, Okazaki Kazuo), and also collaborated with musicians, notably the composer Takemitsu Toru.

Perhaps the most striking of these collaborations was that with Miró. Takiguchi had written the first ever monograph on Miró in any language in 1941. The two men met in 1958, when Takiguchi visited Europe and Miró later appears to have visited Japan on more than one occasion. On display here is a strange found object that Miró created for Takiguchi [Fig. 1] and several paintings he constructed around poems by Takiguchi, which raise the question of the extent to which communication was being effected across languages (not only between Japanese and Spanish, but also between those of the poet and the painter). Of course, there is always doubt as to the extent to which such collaborations are genuinely communicative rather than simply two artists combining their work, but one does get a sense here that as he responded to Takiguchi's poems (in Japanese script), Miró was responding at a different level of interaction than when he illustrated – say – Jacques Prévert's poems. Of course, in Western eyes, *kanji* characters, even though not understood, always have a greater visual impact than alphabetical letters, but there is a feeling in this work that Miró was responding to Takiguchi's script in a way that went beyond such a seduction of the exotic.



Figure 1: Miró's object for Takiguchi

During his 1958 journey to Europe, Takiguchi went to both Spain (where he met not only Miró, but also Duchamp and Dalí) and Paris, where he paid a long anticipated visit to Breton. Takiguchi had been in contact with Breton from the early years and, in the dedications he made to Takiguchi in the books he sent to him, Breton constantly regrets the distance that kept them from meeting personally. Despite the cultural and geographical distance between them, the two men seem to have had a rare rapport and Takiguchi must have felt at home in that rue Fontaine apartment as ramshackle and congested with objects, paintings and books as his own home.

In many ways, though, the presiding spirit of the exhibition is Marcel Duchamp, who seems to have exerted a fascination not only over Takiguchi, but also over those Japanese artists with



whom he worked or whose work he collected. Takiguchi himself seems to have been fascinated over a long period with the play Duchamp made on identity, something which carried over into the work of some of his friends such as Arakawa Shusaku, Nakanishi Natsuyuki, Akasegawa Genpei, Goda Sawako, and Tsubouchi Tazutada. With Okazaki Kazuo, Takiguchi also made a kind of table based on the principle of Duchamp's *Rotoreliefs*. The inspiration here is certainly very different from the way we have come to think of Duchamp in recent years, as the enemy of painting and father of conceptualism. In this exhibition we are made aware of the extent of Duchamp's presence as a surrealist, as the weaver of enigmas which serve to bring our existence into question and raise complex questions about the nature of identity, not simply in a personal sense but in its questioning of the very nature of objects and the material world.

Takiguchi was especially fascinated by the personality of Rose Sélavy, with which he played on several occasions. Seeing the way in which Japanese artists of the 1950s and 1960s responded to the challenges set up by Duchamp's work makes us all too aware of the poverty of imagination revealed by those more recent Western artists who have used the example of Duchamp's work as a pretext for conceptualist exercises in redundancy.

Takiguchi's own main art works were a series of decalcomanias. These intense, complicated works function more like visual poems than paintings, each one having a pungent taste that brings to mind the meticulousness of traditional Japanese poetry. He also used a range of other techniques to make drawings and designs in ink, as well as some appealing objects, which are often presented in the form of intimate gifts to spiritual accomplices.

Most of the artists and poets Takiguchi associated with were not formally surrealists, but these associations functioned by means of communicating vessels to extend and deepen the idea of surrealism in Japan and give evidence of the contagious and energetic quality it had over a long period of time. Takiguchi's sensibility was that of a poet finely attuned to the mood of the times. He appears never to have stood still but to have been quietly and unobtrusively present in twentieth-century Japanese culture and, principally through him, surrealism seems to have run often imperceptibly through contemporary Japanese culture like a vein, but without having taken a specific shape as a movement or an idea.

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¹ Miryam Sas, *Fault Lines: Cultural Memory and Japanese Surrealism*, Stanford 1999.

² Durozoi, *History of the Surrealist Movement*, Chicago 2002.

³ Linhartova, *Dada et surréalisme au Japon*, Paris 1987, Sas, *Fault Lines*.

