

Ai-Mitsu, National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo 30 March - 27 May, 2007, Miyagi Museum of Art, 9 June - 29 July 2007, Hiroshima Prefectural Art Museum, 10 August - 8 October 2007

Taro Okamoto and his contemporaries in the Post-War era, 1946-54, Setagaya Art Museum, Tokyo, 24 March - 27 May 2007

Taro Okamoto, 1954-1970: the Contemporary Arts Institute through Expo '70, Taro Okamoto Museum of Art, Kawasaki, Japan, 21 April - 1 July 2007

These three recent exhibitions devoted to two contrasting artists give a sense of the form and depth of integration of surrealism into Japanese culture in the twentieth century.

Ai-Mitsu was perhaps the most important of the painters in the milieu of surrealism in Japan in the thirties (or at least if he wasn't, any other claimant has a lot to live up to). Certainly he was the one who had most intuitively grasped the message of surrealism in its broadest extent, even if the direct influence of surrealism on his work may be open to question.

Born in 1907 in Hiroshima, his given name was Ishimura Nichiro. He assumed the name Ai-Mitsu when he began to become a serious artist, apparently an abbreviation of the first pseudonym he had taken, Aikawa Mitsuru. It is a name with a complex meaning, which both reveals something of his aims and of his surrealist affinity: 'Mitsu' means light, and 'Ai' most commonly means love. However, the Chinese character he used has a more complex, and obscure, sense. It means darkness, but in a very specific way; a darkness that is created by the elements, for instance on a cloudy day when there is no break in the clouds, or in the forest where light is blocked out by the profusion of trees. His intentions thus almost seem to be set out in this name he chose for himself, which intimates a contradictory thread that runs through all of his work, leading us along two directions at once, contrasting paths which lie within the light, but it is a light that is obscurely darkened or even closed out.

There is a kind of primary automatism at play in his mode of painting: the working through of observation until it becomes inspiration. The procedure appears analogous to that used by Raymond Roussel in the realm of words; where Roussel worked words over and over until they released an obscure secret, Ai-Mitsu excavated through the layers of projections by which personages and objects shield themselves from the surrounding world until the identity of the thing under scrutiny was brought into question and revealed new possibilities.

His natural medium was the still life, itself a peculiarly contradictory genre of painting, which seems to have attracted him precisely because of the life-death contradiction at its heart. His works are thus as far removed as one can imagine from most of what comes under that rubric



in modern art. The 'still-life' here is precisely that, a life that has been rendered still, fixed in motion, transfixed in a moment of transfiguration, caught between life and death, or vitally alive in death. This is where his affinity with surrealism is most apparent; we might see his work even as being a representation of the supreme point, or perhaps of the point of dissolution when life becomes more life than life due to the proximity of death; it is life asserted at the point of death. This is the moment associated by Bataille with the experience of eroticism (and one work of Ai-Mitsu's, *Lotus and the Sun* (1938 - 1939) might almost be an illustration of Bataille, although it is highly unlikely that he could have had any knowledge of Bataille's work), but Ai-Mitsu approaches it from the opposite point of view to Bataille; in fact it might be more accurate to say that his work reveals death to be present even within life. Furthermore, what for Bataille could only be imperfectly experienced (that is, until the actual moment of death), for Ai-Mitsu was already present in the life experience itself: all living matter is in a constant state of transformation, living and dying in each moment of its existence.

The painting for which he is best known, and which supposedly marks his link with surrealism, is *Landscape with an eye* (1938), which superficially recalls some of Max Ernst's paintings of the same period and doubtless Ai-Mitsu was aware of Ernst's work, but it is a painting that very much emerges from his own concerns and the resemblance to Ernst appears to lie more in a common concern to examine the materiality of things – probing their appearance until they reveal characteristics, or a destiny, that would otherwise be unknown – than in any shallow stylistic influence.

To see this painting, as critics tend to do, as being apart from the rest of his oeuvre, marking a point in his development which reveals a convergence with surrealism which he soon outgrew, appears to me to be a mistake. There is a common inspiration throughout his work that therefore needs to be considered in its own terms as a whole rather than as a concatenation of different influences.

Seen from this perspective, *Landscape with a Eye* stands as an obverse articulation of one of Ai-Mitsu's central themes. Here a landscape that appears dead is brought alive through the revelation within it of what appears to be a living eye. However, this startling effect appears to be little more than an explicit rendering of what is more subtly conveyed in works like *Flower Garden* (1940), in which a butterfly in flight, becomes the life force – even the soul – of a decaying panorama, or *Bird* (1942), in which, conversely, the skull of a bird seems to take nourishment from a fertile garden.

Ai-Mitsu might also be considered as a portrait painter and portraits of family and friends are something he returned to time and again. His very first work, a portrait of his father thought to



have been painted when he was only ten years old, already reveals a remarkable ability to enter the soul of the subject and to draw out part of its essence through painterly depiction. Even more remarkable is that we can discern in this juvenile work a continuity of affect and nuance with three complex self-portraits painted during 1943 and 1944, which are among the artist's last works. According to a note in the catalogue, these latter works were political statements, responses of the artist to the sacrificing of art to the mentality of war (in 1941, Takiguchi Shuzo and Fukuzawa Ichiro, the two main representatives of surrealism in Japan, had been arrested as subversives, and artists in general were required to display appropriately patriotic sentiments if not contribute directly to the war effort – the Ministry of War even issued a decree warning artists that they would be denied ration coupons if they continued to produce what it called 'painting for self-satisfaction'). In these three self-portraits, Ai-Mitsu forcefully portrays himself as closed in on himself, as though having been physically forced not to see. They are almost portraits of a man required to depart from himself. In this they contrast with the openness of the childhood portrait of his father, in which a different sort of departure is conveyed, a departure of the father away from the child (at the time the picture was made, Ai-Mitsu was no longer living with his parents but had been adopted by his father's brother, and one has a sense, as one looks at this painting, of the father in retreat from the child painting it). Indeed his portraits are uniformly expressive and replete with suggestive inferences of the relationship of the artist and his subject. Particular mention should be made of *Woman Knitting* (1930), a portrait of his wife of a loveliness not often found anywhere in modern art.

His portraits of family and friends hardly display any other attitude than that observable in his paintings of birds, animal or flowers which themselves may also be regarded as portraits with a comparable concentration and attention to detail as that which he devoted to human beings. Whether he was painting animals, birds, flowers or even fruits, we feel we are not looking at the generality of the object painted but at a configuration of its own particular qualities. His works of 1942 provide good examples, especially those of magnolias and gladiolis, and the very beautiful *Butterfly*. In contrast, in a series of pictures of a lion (1936) we have to struggle to discern the form of the animal as it becomes mimetically merged with its surroundings.

Stylistically, too, Ai-Mitsu's work is of enormous significance for its engagement with both Western and Eastern styles of painting. He had studied not only Japanese traditional art techniques, but also those of China, and he was remarkably aware of the dangers of subsuming his work to what he had at quite an early age already perceived as a hegemonic process of Western modernism, although at the same time he refused to reject those elements coming from the West which could be valuable to him in realising his own aims. His work thus retains importance as an example of a commitment to the re-examination of tradition in the context of invasive westernisation without surrendering to a pure continuance



of tradition.

Ai-Mitsu died in 1946 from a sickness he had contracted in Shanghai while at the front, where he had been sent after having been conscripted into the army in 1944. We only have part of his oeuvre, since those works he had stored in Hiroshima were all destroyed by the atom bomb. Even so, on the evidence of this wonderful exhibition he is one of the great, undiscovered artists of the twentieth century.¹

Although they are linked by their attraction to surrealism, it would be difficult to imagine an artist more different from Ai-Mitsu than Okamoto Tarô. But then it is difficult to imagine any other artist who is at all like Okamoto. If as a painter Ai-Mitsu had a dazzling array of styles, Okamoto's painting was stylistically constrained, all of his work seemingly emerging from the same surge of energy; his work was as much one with his life activity as that of any artist of whom I am aware. But what he lacked in stylistic versatility, he more than made up for in his amazing range of activities, of which his painting was just the tip of the iceberg. He was also a sculptor, a ceramicist, a designer, an architect, a photographer, an anthropologist and a writer with a substantial oeuvre devoted to a range of different subjects.

Taro (unusually in Japan, he is familiarly known by his first name) was born in 1911 into a family with a strong artistic tradition. His grandfather, Katei (1857 - 1919), had been a significant calligrapher; his father, Ippei (1886 - 1948), was a major cartoonist, while his mother, Kanoko (1889 - 1939), was a – somewhat notorious – novelist and poet with whom Taro had a tangled relationship. In 1929 he enrolled at the Tokyo Fine Arts School to study oil painting, but when his parents moved to Paris later in the year, he decided to join them. He stayed in Paris until 1940, when the entry of the Nazis into Paris forced him to return to Japan. While in Paris he studied anthropology under Marcel Mauss and became close to Georges Bataille and Roger Caillois, participating in both the College of Sociology and Acéphale (his own anthropological studies, based on extensive study of the survivals of ancient cultures, including fieldwork in Okinawa and Tohoku, were of considerable importance in helping the Japanese to re-connect with their own traditions in the repressive post-war environment). Of his artistic genesis we have only sketchy details. It is said that seeing Picasso's works was a turning point for him, and one can certainly see that Picasso's example must have been elemental to his attitude towards painting, although stylistically Okamoto appears to owe little to any other artist. We know that he joined the Creation-Abstraction group around 1932, but soon afterwards gravitated towards surrealism and participated in the 1938 Surrealist exhibition in Paris. It is, however, difficult to chart his artistic evolution as almost all of his pre-war work was destroyed in the firebombing of Tokyo and is only known at all from copies Okamoto made after the war. In 1946, then, it is almost as though he suddenly appears as a fully formed artist, which is where the exhibition at



Setagaya Art Museum begins.

Okamoto takes the dictum 'poetry must be made by all' in its most literal sense. No occultation here: Okamoto shamelessly promoted himself and his art throughout his life and increasingly towards the end when he became a television personality. He was not even above lending himself to advertising, appearing in several television commercials, one of which – for Maxell tapes – must have claims to being among the finest adverts ever made. In it, Okamoto performs a raucous tune on a piano whose sounds as he plays construct one of his art works on the piano lid before exploding into an array of colours typical of Okamoto's paintings. The matching of music to painting and colour here is remarkable and emphasises the continuity of Okamoto's life and work as it extended to what most artists would have considered to be nothing but a commercial chore. He also participated in events which, in most artists, would be seen as nothing but publicity stunts: painting a picture in the sky from a helicopter, decorating a car or taking up a challenge to create, in public, a complete work of art in one hour (as a bizarre conjunction we might perhaps consider him as a kind of cross between Picasso and Rolf Harris!).

Self-promotion this might be considered to be, but there was no narcissism here. In promoting himself, Okamoto was being true to his conviction that art should not be precious but should be available to all.

In this respect, seeing Okamoto's work in relation to that of Ai-Mitsu raises questions about the nature of art and the relation of the artist to his audience. Ai-Mitsu made no compromises; he was harsh with himself and with his art work. Okamoto was equally true to himself, but unlike Ai-Mitsu he recognised no responsibility to the revelation of art itself. In this we might say that he renounced an aspect of surrealism, since his work appears to be a pure 'means of expression' and can rarely be seen as an 'activity of the spirit' as demanded by surrealism. Indeed, taken as a whole, his work might even be dismissed as superficial and devoid of real content. Certainly it reveals few secrets. A careful examination of the thousands of paintings he left would be unlikely to deliver up any more meaning than a close examination of one of them. To see them in these terms, however, would be to miss the point.

Okamoto was unconcerned about the destiny of art, which for him was not a means of exploration, but a pure explosion of energy. In this sense, he collapsed the distinction between 'means of expression' and 'activity of the spirit': his means of expression was his activity of the spirit. What emerged at the end of the process was of less importance than the fact of the activity itself, and Okamoto seems to have been largely uninterested in whether his works survived or not (at least specific works: the fact that he desired to have his work preserved in a museum after his death shows that he was well aware of his own overall



importance as an artist). Okamoto is even distinguished by having not one but two museums devoted to his work. The more modest, in Tokyo, is at the studio he had specially built for him in 1954; the other is at an impressive purpose built site in Kawasaki, Kanagawa, the town in which he was born, which opened in 1999 and in which the second of these exhibitions was held.

The two recent exhibitions display different aspects of Okamoto's activity. The first, at Setagaya Museum, concentrates on his situation within the art world following the Second World War until 1954 and reveals the extent to which he participated in and encouraged a flowering of art during this period, both among Japanese artists and as part of international collaboration. This reflects Okamoto's view that tradition is what is constantly invented. Here again, the comparison with Ai-Mitsu is instructive. For both artists, tradition was not what had immemorial value and should be preserved, but was rather something to be discovered through penetrating into it. It had an immediate and dynamic quality which could not be directly grasped but only revealed in the moment. Yet, what for Ai-Mitsu was discovered at the instant of its death – or its transformation into something else – emerged for Okamoto through the expression of pure energy.

Dominated as it is by Okamoto's own work and by the sheer range of work included in it (30 European artists are represented along with 17 Japanese), the exhibition lives up to its title by the fact that it shows the extent to which the energy with which Okamoto participated in and encouraged the development of the art scene in Japan during this period.

During the war, Okamoto had also been forced to join the army and sent to China to fight. If the experience had less tragic consequences for him than for Ai-Mitsu, it was still formative; witnessing the horrors and waste of the war appears to have been primarily responsible for his surrender to the life force and perhaps cemented something he had learned from Bataille: the determination to refuse the tragic and say 'yes' to everything, even in the wake of the American carpet bombing of Japan and the dropping of the A bombs. In many of his canvases the memory of war is clearly visible, but the impression conveyed by what is depicted is one of universal energy in motion rather than a concern for the human consequences of the carnage. His attitude may appear to have something in common with that of the Italian futurists, but in fact it was diametrically opposed to it: Okamoto celebrated neither war nor technology but the fact of life as such, irrespective of whatever consequences it might have for humans, or even for life itself. Okamoto in fact was commissioned to commemorate the dropping of the atom bombs in a monumental mural made in Mexico City, which was believed lost and has only recently been re-discovered. It is a work that refuses to sentimentalise the event even as it depicts its horror, presenting it as an elemental human tragedy, but a tragedy that goes beyond the fact of the destruction of life to reveal human



powerlessness in the face of life's own destructive energy, something which completely obviates the human achievement that the splitting of the atom appeared to represent. There is indeed a sense throughout Okamoto's work that the energy source of life may be so powerful that it has to destroy the very thing it has given birth to; even that life depends on the destruction of life, which is the only way in which it can renew itself.

After the desolation of the war artistic activity in Japan was renewed and revitalised with the foundation of new groups and the re-formulation of others. The Avant-garde Artists' Club, founded by Takiguchi Shuzo, Yoshihara Jiro and Hasegawa Suburo in 1936, was re-organised in 1947. In 1948, Okamoto founded the Night Encounter Group, whose title at least appears to represent a desire to continue the activities of Acéphale, and which brought together artists with writers of the Seiki (Century) group. He was also the key figure in a group founded in 1953, the International Art Club. Another pre-war organisation, the Ninth Rooms Group, originally dating from 1938 but re-organised in 1950, included a Tarô Room, for which Okamoto chose the material, often the works of European artists he felt close to, such as Sam Francis, Jean-Michel Atlan and Pierre Alechinsky. Okamoto was linked in one way or another with all of these groups, whose works were placed in evidence by numerous exhibitions during the forties and fifties, and are brought back into the frame by the organisation of the current exhibition which offers a wide panorama and gives a sense of the artistic context of Japan in the decades following the war. The very range of material on display, and the preponderance of Okamoto's work, does not fully allow us to evaluate the contribution made by individual artists other than Okamoto to this outpouring of creativity, nor does it allow us fully to grasp the determinants involved in the cross-fertilisation of ideas which must have been at play during the period. It does, however, suggest that it was a rich period.

The second of Okamoto's exhibitions, at his own Museum, took up the story from 1954 until 1970, although its focus was somewhat different, concentrating on Okamoto's design activity rather than his work in fine art. In 1954, he established the Contemporary Arts Institute in order to bring together and share ideas with other Japanese designers, from which emerged some innovative design work, the most notable perhaps being Okamoto's non-functional furniture. His work as an architect should also be noted, especially the very fine house he built. His work in design and architecture was brought together in 1970 when he was appointed artistic director of Expo '70 and created the 'Tower of the Sun,' a monumental structure celebrating universal creativity which stands as the symbol of his work as a whole and is the culminating point of the current exhibition.

Seeing these two exhibitions – together with the other work on show in the permanent collection at the Okamoto Museum – gives an amazing sense of the dynamism of this man



who seems never to have been short of vigour. It is difficult to believe that he ever suffered from depression or melancholy since all of his work displays the same surrender to the life force, whether it was a matter of his own painting, the establishment of a design group or mountaineering.

Both of these artists deserve to be better known, especially outside of Japan, and all three of these exhibitions made a valuable contribution to the understanding of the respective artists' work.

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¹ Most of the information about Ai-Mitsu in this review comes from the exemplary catalogue of the exhibition: *Ai-Mitsu*, Shogo Otani, Tohru Matsumoto, Ikiro Arikawa, Koichi Wada, Aya Fujisaki and Arata Kakuda, National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo, 2007. Everything about this exhibition was exemplary – it is a rare thing to find an exhibition that so perfectly introduced and expanded the viewers' understanding of an artist's work. It was quite clearly a labour of love that did full justice to the work of a painter of extraordinary power. Please, provide bibliographic details for the exhibition catalogue.

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