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Tadanori YOKOO

An interview
with Japan's
pop art icon

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Man of the rising sun

Graphic design guru Tadanori Yokoo's poster art has made him a cult figure in the international art scene. Matt Wilce gets to the source of this pop art icon's inspiration.

Courtesy of Lapnet



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Survival

Dubbed the Andy Warhol of Japan by the West, pop art genius Tadanori Yokoo has spent a lot more than 15 minutes in the artistic spotlight. For over 40 years, his vibrant, kinetic posters, full of sex, death and humor have dominated the international contemporary art scene and his commercial ads, album and magazine covers have been on the cutting edge of design since the '60s, when he took the graphic world by storm with his radical departure from the prevalent Japanese modernist style. Bold montages of cutout figures from both Eastern and Western popular culture floating on a bright rising sun background are the art director extraordinaire's signature.

This spry Einstein-haired guru, who on an average day sports suspenders and red sneakers, has been cavorting with the avant-garde art world since his silk screens made an impression on Tokyo's '60s maverick Shinjuku set that included the likes of internationally celebrated director Nagisa Oshima (*Merry Christmas Mr Lawrence*, *In the Realm of the Senses*), poet Matsuro Takahashi, prize-winning novelist and cult figure Yukio Mishima, writer Tatsuhiko Shibusawa and dancer Tatsumi Hijikata.

His first big break came in 1965 with the silk screen, "Tadanori Yokoo," which combined black and white photos of himself, English text and a hanging man against the rising sun that would soon become his most famous leitmotif. Through the years celebrities, many of whom became his friends, crowded his clientele. He's done everything from designing the album covers of famous rock stars and sumo wrestler's belts to playing the lead in Oshima's classic, *Diary of a Shinjuku Thief*. Although he started making posters and magazine covers the old fashioned way—he studied painting and illustration—Yokoo has kept up with graphic design technology. Today, he's on the verge of launching a collection of household goods and accessories on the Internet and has already put out many digitally morphed art pieces.

Swinging sixties

A regular guest at Mishima's famous Christmas parties, where radical politics was a frequent topic, Yokoo contributed to their rebellion through posters and other art. Art critics talk about Yokoo, and how this group of radical artists rejected and reacted against Japan's sterile, de-eroticized rational post-war society. The critics' claim that the artists' use of traditional images, the influence of late 19th century advertisements (Meiji *bijin ga*), and their erotic sensibility were by themselves a politicized anti-modernist statement, but Yokoo rejects such an analysis. Unlike his admirers he feels the sexual content in some of his work holds no political agenda. "I produce erotic images because that is part of my being. Some people repress their erotic side, mine surfaces in my work," claims Yokoo.

Yokoo's association with the jet-set extended beyond his Japanese cohorts. He was introduced to John Lennon at Jasper Johns' home in New York, and one of Warhol's famous silk-screen prints of Marilyn Monroe still hangs in his living room as a reminder of those days. When he talks about his album and poster designs for Western musicians such as The Beatles in 1972 and Santana's triple album *Lotus* in 1974, he is typically self-effacing. "I was really happy to work for them as they were all so talented and gifted. It meant a lot to me that they were moved by my work and asked me to work with them directly," he says.

Pop goes the artist

Although Yokoo's work has been mostly commercial—posters for major ad campaigns such as Nissan and Rado, album covers for Cat Stevens and Earth, Wind and Fire, and the goods he's producing for an Internet venture—its brilliance has been recognized in hundreds of formal museum exhibitions and is in the permanent collections of over 80 museums worldwide, including the Museums of Modern Art in Tokyo and New York, the Pompidou Centre in Paris and the Venice Biennial.

While the media has crowned him king of Japanese pop art, he is more of a contemporary expressionist; his intuitive and often spiritual style shows the state of his own complex psyche much more vividly than the work of traditional pop artists. Reacting to his dreams and his environment, Yokoo produces art as a way to express and cope with life. And unlike Warhol and Lichtenstein, who drew on mass-produced everyday images and turned them into art which was in turn mass-produced, Yokoo's work is designed to be part of popular culture as well as drawing creative influence from it.

Yokoo's range as an artist is also much more diverse than most people realize. In addition to illustrations and sketches, he has produced three-dimensional works such as his successful *mayoke neko* cat sculptures, ceramics and installations, not to mention being an author, stage director and actor. Originally studying painting, it wasn't until the '80s that Yokoo began to apply his artistic genius to the canvas, and in the near future he will once again make this his focus. "So many museums have asked me for paintings recently that after this exhibition I am going to concentrate on painting for the next year or two."

Motif montage

His work also has a much more spiritual aspect to it than most pop art. Born in rural Hyogo Prefecture in 1934, Yokoo's spiritual side grew out of his childhood and surroundings. "I grew up in an environment where nature and religion were basically together. So whether you knew it or not you were doing something spiritual," he says.

The recurring images of Japanese religious figures that appear in his work, such as his series of "Luck Gods" posters in 1997, are recollections of the shrines and temples of his childhood. But Yokoo also draws on other religions, freely mixing images of reclining Thai Buddhas with flying angels and cutouts from the Sistine Chapel.

His series of angel pictures, collected in the best selling book "Angel Love," were inspired by his own belief in guardian angels. Yokoo often puts himself in the picture, usually in a religious context. In "Pleasant Arts Kingdom" (1998), he shows himself reclining in a seashell about to enter nirvana. "I think most people's main focus is themselves, before they consider other people. Maybe that is why I often appear in my own posters," says the artist.

His fascination with the "rising sun" image, also comes from his early childhood. "My family used to run a kimono and fabric shop. Those triangular images on the labels turned into the rising sun. Also, growing up, I saw the Imperial Army's flag. I guess that it was unconsciously implanted into my memory," explains Yokoo. Other motifs, such as Tarzan, also came from childhood fascinations, and continue to reappear in new forms throughout his body of work.

"All these images come from physical images that my body has retained... They were images I saw growing up which struck me as important, and now every time I begin to work and picture them, they change their shape and form in my head," says the poster child for graphic design.

Yokoo also draws on a deep—characteristically Japanese—sense of nostalgia: "When I was a little boy these kinds of design posters were simply called *zuan*," he says. A term which loses a lot in translation, *zuan* means a design, often simple and stylized (imagine a cosmetics ad with a woman in a kimono, holding the product and lots of bold lettering). "Those images come from my father's generation, and that is the sense I try to express in my work," says Yokoo.

Daydream believer

One other important motif in Yokoo's work, the waterfall, didn't originate in his childhood. There were no waterfalls in the area where he grew up, but they flowed from another major source of influence—his dreams. "I became interested in them because I began to dream about them almost daily," he says.

Yokoo became fascinated by waterfalls and their impact on his work was even recognized in *Absolut Yokoo* (1992)—part of the popular long running ad campaign for Absolut vodka—which shows a bottle surrounded by waterfalls. Although during our interview Yokoo claims that waterfalls have "no special meaning," he has previously said they are very spiritual places, which he believes have an age, name and sex (although some, he claims, are hermaphrodites). He has also talked about there being waterfalls in the afterlife. He has collected more than 10,000 images of them for one project, and visited all of the world's highest falls. Another one of his eccentric and obsessive interests, which also originated in his dreams, is his fascination with UFOs, to which art critics pay little lip service. For seven years straight during the '70s, Yokoo dreamed of UFOs each night, at first not knowing what they were. "After a while I also began to dream about aliens." Keeping his dreams secret, the nightly alien images continued, until one day, he says he began to see UFOs while he was awake, wherever he went in Japan and overseas. "For most people UFOs are something that cannot be seen. For me they are a reality and part of my life," Yokoo claims.

Critics suggest that the trauma of a serious accident and the suicide of his friend Mishima Yukio in 1970 triggered Yokoo's fascination with alternative spirituality in the '70s, but this is not a connection he makes himself. The alien visitations have helped to expand his idea of "space," the waterfall dreams led to a major project and a new recurrent motif, but he offers no attempt at self-analysis.

Yokoo thinks his work speaks for itself, and he seems reluctant to go into detailed explanations. After all, impact is the key to good graphic design. "In Japan you get recognition and success after someone established has noticed and approved of your work," he says. In a way, artists such as Mishima provided this function for Yokoo. "Outside of Japan people respond directly to your work, and if they like it they tell you," he says.

Perhaps that is the key to understanding Yokoo, and his posters in particular. Ignore the "art-speak," the labels, reputation, the eccentric preoccupations and look at the work for what it is: brilliant graphic design with the power to move everyone from The Beatles to your average Tanaka-san. ☀



"Tadanori Yokoo", 1965

Tadanori Yokoo's posters are currently on exhibition at Laforet Museum (Laforet Harajuku 6F, 1-11-6 Jingumae, 03-3475-0411) through Aug 17, 11am-8pm. The exhibition includes works from his private collection (some are "secret" ones never exhibited before), more famous works and preliminary sketches that demonstrate Yokoo's design process.

For more information on Tadanori Yokoo, check out his website: www.tadanoriyokoo.com



Gohatto, 1999