

Christina Ulowitz

Visual Essay

Japanese Modernism across Media (EALC 335)

Professor Schoneveld

15 May, 2015

More Real than Reality:

How the Human Body Functions in Japanese Surreal Art

The human body is frequently the subject of visual art and the basis of metaphor in written; such a universal and relatable symbol functions understandably well across all eras and genres of art. A fundamental part of the human experience, the body, as well as its functions and capabilities, establish a common ground between artist and viewer. Japanese surreal art saw a novel change, however, in the treatment of the body in visual art. The groundbreaking art movement paid no heed to the limits of reality and depicted the body in a variety of shocking, unnatural situations and positions. Surrealism saw the human body combined with other bodies in bizarre ways, appearing in impossible contexts, and even incorporated into inorganic matter like machinery. The manipulation of the body fit aesthetically into surrealism's strange and unsettling atmosphere. Yet the deliberately unsettling choices function well to communicate complex themes. By perverting and changing the body in recognizable ways, surreal artists explored the changing perspective of the Japanese people both on an individual and national level.

Japanese surrealism reflects a long history of disparate influences, culminating in a unique artistic experience. In fact, the very linguistic origin of Japanese surrealism reveals a unique and significant approach to the international avant-garde movement. The English word

"surrealism" comes from the Latin roots meaning "below reality", as if the idea were something primitive or basic. But the Japanese word for surrealism, "chou-genjitsushugi", uses an emphatic prefix meaning "ultra" or "super". Surrealism is *extra* real, more so than any other art movement, because it speaks freely and uninhibited. The sincerity and truth of surrealism seem shocking and disturbing in the art's unapologetic disregard of convention and boundaries. Blending disparate themes and subjects into unusual situations wholly impossible in reality, the surreal artist can create truly unique and unseen pieces that are more real than reality.

The spread of surrealism in Japan gathered extremely passionate artists very quickly. Literature on Japanese Surrealism often refers to the movement in the past tense, as if it were phenomenon solely contained to its rise and fall. The reality is that this movement cannot be contained to a neat, simple phase of art. A movement that "challenges and breaks" assumptions about art, language, and consciousness, surrealism established its foothold as a boundary-crossing area of art in both creative and literal ways.¹ As French surrealism flourished at the turn of the twentieth century, Japanese artists studying in Europe returned with influences from abroad. The concepts exemplified and explored in surrealism—including unique juxtaposition of disparate themes—had always existed in Japanese visual culture. Yet the precedent of European surrealism—and prominent Japanese artists setting the precedent—provided an outlet for Japanese artists to streamline their ideas into a recognizable movement.² The rise of Japan's surreal art saw no true beginning or end, as artists continue to experiment with singular combinations of form, subject, and medium.

¹ Miryam Sas. *Fault Lines: Cultural Memory and Japanese Surrealism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 17.

² Miryam Sas. *Fault Lines: Cultural Memory and Japanese Surrealism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 9.

The concept of the human body as a microcosm of society at large has been explored mainly in literature, at the whims of the writer's creativity and metaphors. Yet the development of surrealism allows artists to depict such ideas on a more literal scale, showing the body interacting and merging with objects and creatures in a way completely impossible in reality. The visual aspect of surreal art allows the artist to explore form and function, blending human with non-human in grotesque but thought-provoking methods.

The manipulation of the human body in surreal art has countless different manifestations, but the effect is generally two-fold: to explore national identity and to evoke interaction with the art. The rapid industrialization and modernization of Japan during the Meiji restoration resulted in a nation simultaneously overwhelmed by, yet dependent on, technology. The introduction of Western industry and culture changed nearly every aspect of Japanese life, catapulting the previously isolated nation to a major economic and political power. The rapid growth of technology left no room for the Japanese people to prepare, no space for the nation to psychologically "clear out" for such massive innovations. The result, as depicted in Japanese surreal art, shows technology as literal invaders and parasites, entwining itself with the people who could not move out of the way. Artists depict people literally incorporated into machinery, buildings, and inorganic structures; they must survive as part of the technology because there is no alternative and no place else to go.

The second function of the manipulation of the body draws upon its relatability. As every viewer has a body, all can relate to the abstract and metaphorical implications. The frightening shock value certainly evokes a strong emotional reaction; seeing the familiar perverted but still recognizable is a fundamentally disturbing experience to behold. Yet this is a powerful emotional reaction challenges the viewer to investigate the changes made and notice every aspect of this

impossible spectacle. Avant-garde playwright Terayama Shuji explains that engagement and encounter with the piece is a crucial part of the viewing experience, and surreal art seeks to “reject the hierarchical thinking that separates ‘audience’ and ‘actor,’ and instead build a collaborative, mutual connection.” The unusual nature of surrealism, however, does so “sometimes in violent ways.”³



4

The manipulation of the body as a means of artistic exploration existed in Japanese culture far before the introduction of surrealism. Woodblock prints covered a vast range of artistic topics and subjects, yet prints concerning health and medical issues often featured creative interpretations of bodily processes. The internal organs and systems were considered a society of their own; quite literally, the human body represented a microcosm of society at large.

³ Miryam Sars. *Experimental Arts in Postwar Japan*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2011), 42.

⁴ Ichiro Fukuzawa, “Untitled,” *Japanese Modernism Across Media*, accessed May 9, 2015, <http://ds.haverford.edu/japanesemodernism/items/show/399>.

Below left, titled “Internal bodily functions dramatized by popular Kabuki actors” attempts to establish a wide appeal by relating a fairly educational piece to celebrities.



5



6

⁵ “Internal bodily functions dramatized by popular Kabuki actors,” *Japanese Modernism Across Media*, accessed May 9, 2015, <http://ds.haverford.edu/japanesemodernism/items/show/344>.

⁶ Tayohara Kunitaru, “The Ten Worlds Inside the Body,” *Japanese Modernism Across Media*, accessed May 9, 2015, <http://ds.haverford.edu/japanesemodernism/items/show/403>.

Pregnancy in particular elicited creative manipulations of the female body, perhaps due to its already grotesque reality. The woodblock print representations seek more to explain and amuse than to shock or amplify reality, however. While surrealism uses its perversions to make drastic statements, the woodblock prints aim to make clever visual puns and patterns with the body. The female body is humorously depicted as an “apparatus operated by a host of tiny female workers”.⁷



The above, titled “Pregnant women playing in the summer heat – 5 heads with ten bodies” is a cleverly deceiving image. What apparently looks like five women doing some sort of

⁷ Laura W. Allen. “Introduction,” *UCSF Japanese Woodblock Print Collection*. Last modified 2007. <http://asian.library.ucsf.edu/introduction>

⁸ Kunitoshi Otagawa, “Pregnant women playing in summer heat - 5 heads with 10 bodies.” *UCSF Japanese Woodblock Collection*, accessed May 6th, 2015, <http://content.cdlib.org/ark:/13030/hb0g5005wm/?order=1&brand=woodblock>.

gymnastics changes upon further viewing: each head belongs to two bodies. The red ribbons that seem to join two women's bodies together each double as the pregnant abdomen of a completely separate body. Such playful imagery is not initially visible or shocking, though it offers a clever parallel to pregnancy. What appears to be one person is actually two, though one is dependent on the other for form and structure. Japanese visual art has long used the human body as a subject for modifying and amplifying, exploring beyond what is visible and natural. Yet the history of woodblock prints tends to not push boundaries in the way surreal art does. Simply highlighting natural tendencies, the exploration of form does not evoke discomfort or thoughtful questioning, but mere fascination or curiosity.

Influential surreal painter Ishida Tetsuya lived in the latter half of the twentieth century and used the human body as a metaphor for the experience and dependence of the Japanese people as a whole. His works feature melancholic looking Japanese men (posited, although denied by the artist, to be self-portraits) in dreary, washed out colors. Ishida's paintings show people interacting with machinery and human-made structures like buildings, radiators, and sinks. The dejected but defeated faces of his subjects show an acceptance of their fate, literally incorporated into their modern society.



The rise of surreal painting in Japan followed well after the Meiji Restoration, yet the medium echoed the complex reactions to the rapid industrialization of the nation and its rapid rise to modernity. Ishida does not celebrate the intricacy with which technology has invaded daily life, but treats it as such: invaders. The subjects of his paintings look overwhelmed but accepting of their fate. As “deeply unhappy characters”, the people depicted are given agency in their expressions, showing emotion about Japan as a “soul-less, mechanized society.”¹¹

⁹ Tetsuya Ishida, “No Name,” *Japanese Modernism Across Media*, accessed May 9, 2015, <http://ds.haverford.edu/japanesemodernism/items/show/92>.

¹⁰ Tetsuya Ishida, “Waiting for a Chance,” *Japanese Modernism Across Media*, accessed May 9, 2015, <http://ds.haverford.edu/japanesemodernism/items/show/79>.

¹¹ “The Dark Surrealism of Tetsuya Ishida,” *The Art Junkie*, April 28, 2014. <https://theartjunkie.wordpress.com/2014/04/28/the-dark-surrealism-of-tetsuya-ishida/>



The above work depicts salarymen as literal packages, neatly uniform and ready to be unpacked and put to work. The setting of a train car acknowledges Japanese workers' daily commute, as well. Commenting on the work force and education system, Ishida's painting implies that adulthood in Japan sucks all individuality from its constituent: growing up simply means becoming another salaryman, another piece of cargo to be peeled out of a packed Tokyo train.

Surrealist representations of the body expanded into the performance sphere during the 1960's; experimental theatre grew alongside surreal art, drawing from surrealism in its exploration of the bizarre and extraneous. Although performance art was a collaborative effort involving live actors, creative playwrights still found a way to manipulate and display the body in humane but thought-provoking ways. Mikami Seiko's 1997 performance piece, "World, Membrane, and the Dismembered Body" evokes grotesque and horrifying images by its title alone. Yet this piece reflects the linguistic origins of Japanese surrealism: amplifying reality until

¹² Tetsuya Ishida, "Untitled," *Art Junkie*, accessed May 8th, 2015.

<https://theartjunkie.wordpress.com/2014/04/28/the-dark-surrealism-of-tetsuya-ishida/>

it can adequately display the truth. Participants of Mikami's piece enter a pristine, echoless chamber—pictured below, and equipped with an emergency panic button—for brief five-minute sessions. Inside, they sit in total darkness and listen to their own heartbeats, magnified by a computer.



While the “membrane” clearly refers to the shell in which the act takes place, the dismemberment to which the title refers is not so much of the body, but of the roles involved with the performance.¹³ The “disorienting and detached” act of participation is completely isolating, anticipating feelings of claustrophobia and panic. Yet in this sensory and stimulatory deprivation, one's own body *becomes* the performer, as “one's own heartbeat and organs are painfully loud”.¹⁴ Director Suzuki Tadashi, who carried out the installation at the Waseda Little Theater in Shinjuku, commented on the revealing nature of the piece; the isolation of one's body

¹³Miryam Sars. *Experimental Arts in Postwar Japan*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2011), 234.

¹⁴ Miryam Sars. *Experimental Arts in Postwar Japan*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2011), 250.

functioning independently is more “real” than most perceived reality. To notice one’s body is to know “the flow of time within [oneself]...your measure is properly taken only when you get into bed. That’s why being in bed is reality and getting up from it is a dream”.¹⁵ In this experimental piece, the simple functions of human form become augmented into hyper-reality, emphasized by the deprivation of other stimuli. The viewer becomes aware of the fundamental being of their body and “its violent changes”; as they listen to their own heartbeat, they observe how “the physical body transforms itself endlessly into the objects of the world”, more true and significant than perceived reality.

The manipulation of the human body for artistic purposes is far from unheard of in Japanese visual culture. Japanese woodblock prints long made use of the concept to create amusing and clever distortions. The outright distortion of the body, however, appeared prominently in the works of surrealist and avant-garde artists in both the visual and performance spheres. The changes inflicted upon such a familiar, fundamental shared human experience is thought-provoking and unsettling. Just as surrealism provokes thoughts and seeks to produce a true, hyper-real experience, the changes are made for a reason. The personal, relatable nature of the manipulations invites the viewer to engage directly with the art, sometimes literally, as in Mikami’s performative piece. Additionally, the jarring blend of human and inorganic in Ishida’s works represents Japan’s discomfort and resignation to rapid industrialization. The disturbing nature of surrealism’s treatment of the human body hides a deeper, more nuanced history than what appears on the surface.

¹⁵ Miryam Sars. *Experimental Arts in Postwar Japan*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2011), 252.

References

“About FUKUZAWA Ichiro.” *Fukuzawa Ichiro Memorial Museum*. Last modified 2011.

<https://fukuzmm.wordpress.com/english/>

Allen, Laura W. “Introduction.” *UCSF Japanese Woodblock Print Collection*. Last modified 2007. <http://asian.library.ucsf.edu/introduction>

“The Dark Surrealism of Tetsuya Ishida.” *The Art Junkie*, April 28, 2014.

<https://theartjunkie.wordpress.com/2014/04/28/the-dark-surrealism-of-tetsuya-ishida/>

Goodall, Hollis. “Origins and Influences of Surrealism in Japanese Art.” *LACMA Unframed*.

Last modified January 3, 2013. <http://unframed.lacma.org/2013/01/03/origins-and-influence-of-surrealism-in-japanese-art>

Gori, Jennifer. “YDK Morimoe, Smells like Teen Spirit.” *Beautiful Bizarre*, January 23, 2015.

<https://beautifulbizarre.net/2015/01/23/ydk-morimoe-smells-like-teen-spirit/>

“Ichiro Fukuzawa.” *The Legacy Project Visual Arts Library*. Last modified 2008.

http://www.legacy-project.org/index.php?page=artist_detail&artistID=61

Liddell, C.B. “Best when Grotesque.” *Japan Times*, April 12, 2007.

<http://www.japantimes.co.jp/culture/2007/04/12/arts/best-when-grotesque/#.VU1py5PVs8C>

Liddell, C.B. “When Followers Outdo the Master.” *Japan Times*, December 10, 2010.

<http://www.japantimes.co.jp/culture/2010/12/10/arts/when-followers-outdo-the-master/#.VU1pqZPVs8D>

Richardson, Michael. “Exhibition Reviews.” *Papers on Surrealism*, Spring 2010, 8. Waseda University.

Sas, Miryam. *Experimental Arts in Postwar Japan*. Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2011.

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

“Toyohara Kunichika – About the Artist.” *Kunichika*. Last modified 2013.

http://kunichika.net/pages/Toyohara_Kunichika.php