# TABOOS IN JAPANESE POSTWAR ART: MUTUALLY ASSURED DECORUM

**SATOSHI FURUI**, *Mushroom Cloud #02 (Plumbbob Fizeau)*, 1997, oil on wood, 30 × 30 cm. Courtesy Gallery Koyanagi, Tokyo.

FEATURES BY ASHLEY RAWLINGS FROM SEP/OCT 2009

JAPAN

“Although we don’t know what to do about nuclear weapons, or how to live with nuclear weapons, we are slowly learning how to write about them,” wrote British novelist and anti-nuclear campaigner Martin Amis in his 1990 essay “Unthinkability.” In his consideration of how language is rendered impotent in the face of the world’s vast nuclear arsenals and their collective potential for total destruction, Amis observes that “questions of decorum present themselves with a force not found elsewhere.” Though he is referring to the process of writing, these “questions of decorum” are equally relevant to the representation of atomic explosions in the visual arts. As Japanese artists have discovered, addressing the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki is a complex endeavor as

Photo documentation of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima, Japan, on August 6, 1945. Courtesy Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum, Hiroshima.

Japan continues to wrestle with its modern history and the legacy of its imperial ambitions during World War II.

At 8:15 am on August 6, 1945, Little Boy—the first atomic bomb used in an act of war—exploded over Hiroshima, instantly killing 70,000–80,000 people. Over the next ten minutes, a mushroom cloud rose more than 60,000 feet, showering the city with radioactive fallout, which pushed the death toll to an estimated 140,000 by the end of the year. In her testimony to journalist John Hersey from the *New Yorker* magazine the following summer, Toshiko Saeki, a 26-year-old tin factory worker, described watching three B-29 bombers flying over the city moments before the blast: "It seemed very, very strange. I was still wondering what would happen. Then suddenly there came a flash of light. I can't describe what it was like."

**At 7:30 am on October 21, 2008, Hiroshima residents witnessed a different kind of flash. A small plane spelled out the word PIKA [ピカッ] in white smoke in the clear blue sky above the city. Written in Japanese katakana script, this curt onomatopoeia—pronounced "p'kah!" and meaning "flash"—is an overt reference to atomic explosions. Later that morning, the writing reappeared four more times. Unlike the deafening bang and the blinding light of the original**

**explosion,the word floated silently in the sky. Written large, it appeared to hang low over the city, and yet the faint, thin letters dissipated quickly with the wind.**

**MAKOTO AIDA**, *mokomoko*, 2008, acrylic on canvas, 291 × 197 cm. Photo by Kei Miyajima. Courtesy the artist and Mizuma Art Gallery, Tokyo.

This act of skywriting was perpetrated by Chim ↑ Pom, a Tokyo-based, six-person artist collective—composed of Ryuta Ushiro, Yasutaka Hayashi, Toshinori Mizuno, Masataka Okada, Motomu Inaoka and Ellie (known only by her first name)—renowned for irreverent and often socially provocative actions. Reflecting the group's puerile, happy-go-lucky approach to art-making, Chim ↑ Pom's name is derived from the slang word *chimpo*, meaning "cock" or "prick." Their *PIKA* stunt was preparatory material for a video to be shown in their solo exhibition entitled "Hiroshima!", which was planned to open at the Hiroshima City Museum of Contemporary Art (Hiroshima MOCA) in November 2008. As the letters appeared in the sky, standing in the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Park in the city center, Chim ↑ Pom, accompanied by staff from their Tokyo gallery Mujin-to Production, and Shoko Kobashi, a curator at Hiroshima MOCA, filmed and photographed the event from an angle that framed the word directly above the skeletal ruins of a former industrial building now known as the Hiroshima Atom Bomb Dome—one of the few structures to have survived annihilation and thus a potent symbol of the city's trauma.

**CHIM↑POM**, *Making Hiroshima's Sky Pika*, 2009, a photograph showing the word *pika* ("flash")

written in white smoke above the Atom Bomb Dome in Hiroshima on October 21, 2008. Photo by Cactus Nakao. Courtesy the artists and Mujin-to Production, Tokyo.

**NOBUYUKI OURA**, *Holding Perspective*, 1982–85, from a series of 14 lithographs and silkscreen prints. Courtesy the artist.

The public reaction, as voiced in local media, was irate. In a series of reports from October 22, the regional newspaper *Chugoku Shimbun* criticized the artists and the museum for not giving prior warning of the performance. The newspaper quoted Chim ↑ Pom leader Ryuta Ushiro's claim that the work was intended as a "call for peace," but immediately followed this by quoting complaints from residents both young and old that the work made them feel "uncomfortable" and that it was "in bad taste." Ushiro told the newspaper: "We were anticipating problems and feel sad if we have hurt the feelings of the *hibakusha* [atom-bomb survivors], but we wanted to reach out to young people and others who do not know about the war."

Although Hiroshima MOCA gave its backing to Chim ↑ Pom's project on the grounds that it was ostensibly about the promotion of peace, the museum quickly became the focus of the controversy. From the outset, the *Chugoku Shimbun* focused on the fact that Kamiya, the museum's chief curator, was present at the filming in the Peace Park, quoting her as saying: "I don't believe it was just a prank. I cannot judge the validity of the artists' act, but it will be interesting to see what kind of debate comes out of this. The opinions of the *hibakusha* groups aren't the only ones that matter." In response to this, a local *hibakusha* leader denounced the performance as "self-indulgent" and asserted, "It has nothing to do with a call for peace," adding that "[the museum] should have given us appropriate advance notice." The inevitable public apology came three days later, on October 24, in a televised press conference at Hiroshima City Hall. In front of five of the city's seven *hibakusha* groups, Ushiro and Yasuo Harada, the director of Hiroshima MOCA (and a *hibakusha* himself), apologized for the

pain they had caused and announced the cancellation of Chim ↑ Pom's exhibition "out of self-restraint" (*jishuku*).

Claiming that it had been inundated with telephone calls from outraged locals, the local newspaper was instrumental in dictating what constitutes appropriate and acceptable art about the atom bomb. On October 23, the paper published an article by Kenji Oi, an art history professor at Hiroshima City University, commenting on Chim ↑ Pom's act. In its deployment of a respected senior art expert, the paper seemed to be countering any artistic license that Chim ↑ Pom might have claimed. In his essay, Oi declared Hiroshima to be "hallowed ground" and said: "To write *PIKA* in the sky without any warning is simply to upset the city's residents. Provoking anxiety in elderly people who have been emotionally traumatized by the experience of the atom bombing is tantamount to an act of violence against them"—as if it were a second bombing of the city. (Given the five appearances of the word, one could say the city had been symbolically bombed several times over.) Oi then suggested that an anti-war message such as "NO A-BOMB" would have been more appropriate. In his view Chim ↑ Pom's call for peace was not literal enough.

An opportunity to compare and contrast Chim ↑ Pom's *PIKA* with another artist's response to the Little Boy explosion appeared four days after their transgressive skywriting. To mark the opening of his solo exhibition at Hiroshima MOCA on October 25, Chinese artist Cai Guo-Qiang, renowned for his spectacular but nuanced use of gunpowder to create scorched paintings and massive explosion events, staged *Black Fireworks*. For one minute after 1:00 pm, crowds of city residents lining the banks of the Motoyasu River in front of the Atom Bomb Dome witnessed the firing of more than 1,000 small fireworks, which created an approximately 35-meter-tall cloud of dark-gray smoke that loomed over the river and the

Dome for several minutes before dissipating. Whereas Chim ↑ Pom's semantic allusion to the flash of the atomic explosion had incited indignation only days earlier, onlookers responded to Cai's visual approximation of a mushroom cloud with applause.

The public's positive reaction to Cai's artwork can be partly explained by the fact that it had received advance coverage in the local media. Cai had also left a good impression in the city in 1994 by consulting with the *hibakusha* before staging *The Earth Has Its Black Hole Too: Project For Extraterrestrials No.16* at Hiroshima Central Park, where he detonated 114 helium and gunpowder-filled balloons tethered in a spiral to create a swirling ribbon of fire that disappeared into a black hole dug in the ground—a visual metaphor for the implosion method used in nuclear weapons. In its reportage of Cai's *Black Fireworks*, the *Chugoku Shimbun* quoted Shoko Okamoto, a 65-year-old *hibakusha* woman, as saying: "The cloud looked like black rain [nuclear fallout] but if it conveys the tragedy of the atomic bombing to young people, then I suppose this kind of expression is okay." Okamoto's comment carried the implicit suggestion that, in addition to prior consultation with *hibakusha*groups, art about the bombing should contain an explicit anti-war or pro-peace "message," or else respond to the tragedy with a sufficient air of gravity.

In Hiroshima, artistic representation of the bombings is closely scrutinized by a shrinking generation of *hibakusha* who are increasingly concerned about ensuring that their trauma remains part of the collective memory. Whatever artistic license Chim ↑ Pom thought they had when they embarked on the *PIKA* project was overridden by codes of decorum that in Hiroshima, at least, are firmly entrenched.

∴

On the national level, in the relatively neutral spaces of museums and commercial galleries outside of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, artists appear not to be bound by any codes of conduct governing the representation of atomic explosions. Postwar Japanese art and pop culture is full of references to Japan's nuclear experience, ranging from the reverent to the absurd. The artist couple Iri and Toshi Maruki (1901–95, 1912–2000), who aided rescue workers in Hiroshima after the bombing, spent more than 30 years collaborating on the haunting series of expressionistic paintings "The Hiroshima Panels" (1950–82), which depict the casualties of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings in black and red *sumi* ink. Meanwhile, some artists have adopted a more emotionally detached approach to their exploration of nuclear issues. Since the 1990s, Satoshi Furui has made photorealistic oil paintings of mushroom clouds that depict the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings as well as US nuclear tests, dwelling on the paradox of the beauty in such destructive power.

Less than ten years after the bombings, themes of mutation crept into popular culture, and are overt in the film *Godzilla* (1954), in which a nuclear test awakens the giant fire-breathing monster from its slumber in the sea and incites it to rampage through Tokyo. During the 1950s and 1960s, Toho Company, the film studio behind Godzilla, became renowned for its use of special effects, with images of human mutation running through films such as*The H-Man* (1958) and *Matango* (1963), also known as *Attack of the Mushroom People*. In a more comical manner, at the end of each episode of*Time Bokan*, a popular mid-1970s TV anime series, the eruption of a skull-faced mushroom cloud signaled the villain's

death (*bokan* is an explosive onomatopoeia like “kaboom”). More recently, futuristic scenes of a post-apocalyptic Tokyo have appeared in anime such as Katsuhiro Otomo’s *Akira*(1988) and Hideaki Anno’s *Neon Genesis Evangelion* television series (1995–96).

Artist Takashi Murakami responded to this conflation of Japanese wartime history with pop culture in his own work, including his “Time Bokan” paintings (2001), which depict the same skull-faced mushroom clouds as the original anime series, but with rings of smiling flowers in their eyes. Murakami also explored the undercurrent of nuclear anxiety in Japan’s postwar art and pop culture in his curation of “Little Boy: The Arts of Japan’s Exploding Subculture,” an exhibition at New York’s Japan Society in 2005 that showcased the work of ten contemporary Japanese artists and surveyed everything from Godzilla figurines to Hello Kitty.

In the “Little Boy” exhibition, on a wall above the Godzilla figurines, Murakami placed Article 9 of Japan’s postwar constitution, which renounces the nation’s right to war as a means of settling international disputes. In the exhibition catalog, the artist posits that the postwar kitsch and childlike aesthetic of Japanese pop culture is the product of generations struggling to internalize and rationalize the unprecedented trauma of the atomic bombings followed by the United States’ 1945–52 occupation of the country, which infantilized the Japanese people. Murakami writes: “It would not be an exaggeration to say that the American-made constitution prevented the nation from taking an aggressive stance, and forced the Japanese people into a mindset of dependency under the protection of America’s military might. However just or unjust the American position may have been at the time, it cast Japan in the role of a ‘child’ obliged to follow America’s ‘adult’ guidance, and the nation willingly complied.”

In an apparent example of this trend, at his solo show at Mizuma Art Gallery in Tokyo in September 2008, Makoto Aida unveiled an absurd representation of an atomic explosion, entitled *mokomoko* (2008), a large-scale oil painting of a fiery mushroom cloud shaped like a penis and adorned with a cute, mouse-like face. In a similar vein to Chim ↑ Pom's *PIKA,* the *mokomoko* of the title is an onomatopoeia —meaning "fluffy." In an email interview with *ArtAsiaPacific* in July, Aida wrote: "I intended it to be a fusion of three images: the postwar cuteness of Japanese pop culture as symbolized by characters like Hello Kitty; an erect penis; and the atomic bomb's capacity for mass slaughter. I thought this combination would symbolize the distorted infantilism that characterizes contemporary Japan." However, when asked if *mokomoko* is a response to Murakami's "Little Boy" theory, Aida replied: "No, I've not read his writings from that show. I've known Takashi Murakami since around 1992, but I have consciously avoided being influenced by him."

Issues of infantilism aside, there is no doubt that Murakami's idea is based on the truth that as the first country to sustain nuclear attacks, Japan suffered an unprecedented national trauma that has been sublimated into its postwar art and pop culture. However, the theory is flawed in that it frames the atomic bombings and Article 9 solely in terms of a binary relationship with the United States, portraying Japan as the exclusive victim of World War II. It glosses over Japan's invasion and occupation of numerous Asian countries between 1894 and 1945—including Korea, Taiwan, large parts of China and Southeast Asia, the Philippines and several other Pacific island nations—in the name of liberating them from Western colonialism.

Murakami's theory may engage directly with Article 9 but it is rare

to find an artwork that does so. One example is Hiroshima-based artist Yukinori Yanagi's *The Forbidden Box* (1995), which consists of an open lead box with "Little Boy" engraved on its lid. Above it, two 17-foot-long translucent red voiles are suspended back to back, each with a faded image of a mushroom cloud on it. Overlaying the cloud on the front voile, in English and Japanese, is the original version of Article 9—drafted in 1945 by US general Douglas MacArthur, supreme commander of the Allied forces—which renounced the country's right to use military force for any reason, including defense. However, following a period of debate and negotiation between the US occupying forces and the Japanese government over the definition of national defense, the version of the article included in the 1947 constitution allows for military action that can be interpreted as self-defense. This later version is printed on the rear voile of Yanagi's installation. These translucent layers present viewers with a visualization of the ambiguities in the pacifist ideology that redefined Japan's position in the world.

*The Forbidden Box* alludes to the Greek myth of Pandora's Box, in which Pandora opens a box that contains all the world's evil and hope; when she realizes what she has unleashed she closes the lid to prevent hope from escaping. The work also references a well-known Japanese folk tale,*Urashima Taro*, in which Taro, a fisherman, stops some children from bullying a turtle. As a gesture of gratitude for his good deed, the turtle takes him to an underwater palace, where a princess gives him a jewel-encrusted box but tells him never to open it. Back in the real world, he realizes that time moved slowly in the palace and that several hundred years have passed. Dismayed that nobody remembers him, he opens the box. A white cloud emerges, causing him to age instantly and die.

In light of Japan's increasingly aggressive military expansion in Asia during the 1940s—believed at the time to be a "good deed" of

liberation and executed in the name of the divine emperor—the white cloud that ages Taro can be read as the atomic cloud that rendered the emperor human. Until Japan's defeat, the emperor was considered the descendant of the sun goddess Amaterasu, the most important Shinto deity. At noon on August 15, 1945, six days after the bombing of Nagasaki, emperor Hirohito announced Japan's surrender over public radio; this was the first time the Japanese public heard him speak, and the realization that he was human came as an immense shock. During the next few months, general MacArthur was concerned that to put the emperor on trial for war crimes could destroy Japan's sense of national unity in a time of crisis, and he insisted that Hirohito remain head of state and not be prosecuted. On January 1, 1946, the emperor formally renounced his divine status in an imperial rescript.

Although the atomic bombings are a pervasive theme in Japan's visual arts, artworks that engage with this theme escape criticism provided they are apolitical or at least not overtly critical of Japan's wartime past. *The Forbidden Box* is ambiguous enough in its connotations to have avoided controversy in either Japan or the US —it has been shown in Tokyo, Hiroshima, Tokushima, Okinawa, New York, Philadelphia and Miami without censorship.

∴

While most representations of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings are tolerated, providing that they adhere to certain rules of decorum, depictions of the emperor come under close scrutiny from right-wing organizations. When these portrayals are deemed unfavorable, they have been met with vicious backlashes. To right-

wing nationalists, the emperor embodies Japan's pre-1945 imperial glory and even mild criticism of his legacy can be interpreted as an attack on their ideals. Right-wing nationalists are a significant political force in Japan—in 1996, there were an estimated 800 groups with a total of 100,000 members, although the police estimated that only 50 groups and 23,000 individuals were active. They are frequently seen driving black vans around Tokyo and other cities, from which they blast military anthems and chilling recorded speeches, demanding an end to Japan's military dependence on the United States and a repudiation of Article 9.

During the early 1970s, Kikuji Yamashita was one of the first artists to encounter resistance for his portrayal of the emperor. Haunted by his experience of being a soldier in South China during World War II, in 1971 Yamashita began to make the "Anti-Emperor Series" of collages. The works were inspired by emperor Hirohito's trip to Europe that year—his first foreign engagement after the war. Feeling that the emperor should have visited neighboring countries first, Yamashita took news photographs from the European trip and copied them onto canvases. In *An Encounter*, the emperor is portrayed together with Jews persecuted in Nazi Germany and Asian victims of Japanese occupation. His black-and-white silkscreen print *Dannori No. 1* (1972) ["Riding Bullets"], is composed of three small images of emperor Hirohito standing on rifle rounds above a larger image of the emperor with Charlie Chaplin by his side, staring at him. Yamashita's use of Chaplin's image is believed to be inspired by the actor's satirical anti-Hitler film *The Great Dictator* (1940), first screened in Japan in 1960. In 1973, *Dannori No. 1* was shown in the "Japan Graphic Art" exhibition in London and Stockholm, but was rejected when it was taken to the Seibu Museum of Art in Tokyo.

The most notorious controversy over an artist's depiction of the

emperor was stirred by Nobuyuki Oura's series of lithographs, "Holding Perspective" (1982–85), which juxtaposes black-and-white photographs of Hirohito as a child, a young adult and an old man with images of the tattooed buttocks of a *yakuza* gangster, naked women, a Buddhist mandala, Biblical illustrations of angels, anatomical cross-sections, several landscapes and a mushroom cloud.

Oura made the works in New York, where he had been living since 1976, as a form of self-portraiture that used images of the emperor taken on both pre- and postwar visits to the US and Europe as a metaphor for his own sense of dislocation. Though Oura did not intend to mock or criticize Hirohito, the works are nevertheless loaded with nuances that stir right-wing anger. In his essay "The Emperor's New Clothes in Old Photos" (2008), art historian Kenji Kajiya explains that before and during the war, photographs of the emperor most often depicted him wearing military dress, whereas after the war, at the behest of the occupying forces, he appeared in Western civilian attire. For "Holding Perspective," Oura purposely chose some images that show Hirohito wearing Western clothes during the 1920s and 1930s, breaking down the prewar/postwar dichotomy in the perception of the emperor as a formerly traditional figure who was westernized only after 1945. Kajiya observes that this is "a point that right-wing conservatives refuse to examine."

Though Oura first exhibited the prints in a solo show at Gallery Yamaguchi in Tokyo in 1984, the troubles erupted in June 1986, two months after he exhibited ten works from the series in "Toyama no Bijutsu '86" [Art of Toyama '86], a group exhibition at the Toyama Prefectural Museum of Modern Art in northwestern Japan. Right-wing groups began to protest the work after a member of the prefectural assembly denounced them as "disagreeable." The

museum had purchased four pieces from Oura and arranged for the artist to donate the remaining six, but following the backlash withheld the acquisitions from public display and returned the gift to the artist.

The national mood grew tense in 1988, when it was announced that emperor Hirohito was critically ill. The media entered a period of *jishuku* "self-restraint," referring to the emperor in archaic honorific language, refraining from broadcasting programs or commercials with humorous content and urging the public to avoid all celebrations or festivities. The emperor's death in January 1989 was followed by a surge in right-wing extremism during the early 1990s. In one of the most violent episodes, a member of a Nagasaki-based right-wing group shot the mayor of Nagasaki, Hitoshi Motoshima, in January 1990 after he had stated his belief that the emperor bore responsibility for the war.

At this time, the dispute over Oura's works escalated. In response to the museum republishing the exhibition catalog a local right-wing Shinto priest tore up a copy in the Toyama Library. Following a sustained right-wing campaign against the museum's support of the work, in 1993 the museum burned its 470 remaining catalogs and sold the previously purchased lithographs to an anonymous buyer. In 1994, Oura filed a suit against Toyama prefecture, demanding that the museum repurchase the works and reprint the catalog. In 2000, the traditionally conservative Supreme Court rejected Oura's appeal.

The controversy reemerged this year when "Holding Perspective" was included in "Into the Atomic Sunshine: Post-War Art Under Japanese Peace Constitution Article 9," a group exhibition of 12 artists—eight Japanese and four international—that used Japan's pacifist constitution as a starting point to examine the country's

wartime past and the meaning of the nation state. Organized by the New York-based independent curator Shinya Watanabe, the exhibition contained several other works that address Japan's wartime history, including *The Forbidden Box*.

Though "Into the Atomic Sunshine" encountered no difficulties when it debuted at Puffin Room gallery in New York in January 2008, or when it was held in August that year at Daikanyama Hillside Forum in Tokyo, the Okinawa Prefectural Museum & Art Museum singled out Oura's works for exclusion two months before they hosted the exhibition in April 2009. In the *Japan Times*, the director of the museum, Hirotaka Makino, was quoted as saying that he barred the works on the grounds that "the museum is an educational facility run under the prefectural board of education, and such a facility is thus supposed to display works in a fair and neutral manner . . . There are no problems because the organizers have agreed with us."

When asked about the issue in a Skype interview with *AAP* in July, Watanabe explains that the issue is rooted in complex local historical sensitivities. Japan annexed the Okinawan islands in 1872 and officially declared them a part of the nation seven years later. Though the imperial soldiers stationed there were named the "Friendly Forces" (*yūgun*), as the three-month Battle of Okinawa concluded in June 1945, these forces ordered Okinawan civilians to commit suicide in the face of defeat. This matter—combined with the continued presence of US troops on the islands under the 1960 US-Japan Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security—is a source of ongoing tension between the Okinawan people and the central government; in March 2007, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology advised academic textbook publishers to soften their descriptions of the *yūgun*'s acts of coercion.

Watanabe also points to an earlier, related incident of historical revisionism involving Makino. In a May 2 report on the censorship of Oura's works, the Okinawan newspaper *Ryukyu Shimpo* referred to a dispute that erupted in 1999, while Makino was vice governor of Okinawa prefecture as a member of the ruling conservative Liberal Democratic Party (LDP). Two weeks before the opening of the Okinawa Prefectural Peace Memorial Museum, the governor's office ordered the alteration of a diorama of the Battle of Okinawa. The original diorama depicted the *yūgun* pointing their guns at Okinawan civilians, but the governor's office had them turn the guns towards US soldiers, glossing over the Japanese military's war crimes against its own people. "LDP government officials in Okinawa don't want to upset the conservative elements of Japan's central government. Without national funding, they are helpless," says Watanabe. "Had I known that public protest led to a reversal of this decision, I would not have submitted to Makino's unfair request to remove Oura's works from the exhibition."

The controversy over the censorship of Oura's work looks set to simmer for some time. In July, without Watanabe's involvement, Gallery Maki in Tokyo protested the decision by holding an exhibition of work by 25 Japanese artists, including three works from "Holding Perspective" and Kikuji Yamashita's *Dannori No. 1*. Among the show's organizers are some of those who assisted with the litigation against the Toyama Prefectural Museum of Modern Art in the early 1990s. At the time of publication, the online message-board set up for the event listed 262 names and messages of support from university professors, art critics and peace activists. The message-board has also attracted incendiary words from a number of far-left figures. Munehiro Yoshida of the group "Network of Workers Against War and Against the Emperor System" decries the censorship of Oura's works as an example of the state, and thus the emperor, suppressing free speech and democracy. He

concludes, “We have to strengthen the fight against the emperor system.”

Annoyed that Gallery Maki did not consult him during the organization of this show, Watanabe says: “I just hope that this controversy over Oura’s work doesn’t eclipse the broader issues I was trying to address in ‘Into the Atomic Sunshine.’ I included his work because I find it interesting that he used emperor Hirohito’s image as a self-portrait while living in New York. The beginning of modernity and the creation of the nation-state is related to the history of self-recognition and self-portraiture, so I wanted to connect this historical background to the story of postwar Japanese art.”

Japan is now in the 64th year of a turbulent process of national self-reflection and self-recognition. Although Article 21 of the constitution asserts the people’s right to freedom of expression and forbids censorship, in practice, artists and curators in Japan have to negotiate unwritten codes of decorum when exploring the atom bombings and the broader context of the country’s wartime past. The controversies surrounding Chim ↑ Pom’s skywriting over Hiroshima and the censorship of Nobuyuki Oura’s works in “Into the Atomic Sunshine” highlight still-raw sensitivities in two of the regions that bore the brunt of the nation’s defeat. When emperor Hirohito announced Japan’s surrender over the radio, he called on the people to “endure the unendurable.” It is sadly ironic that while he agreed to Japan’s surrender in order to preserve the unity of the nation and its people, what Japan continues to endure is the burden of his legacy. To question that legacy is to expose schisms in the very fabric and identity of the nation itself.

Related

REVIEWS Murakami Versailles: Takashi Murakami

JAPAN FRANCE MAR 2011

FEATURES No More War; Save Water; Don’t Pollute The Sea: Makoto Aida

JAPAN JUL 2008

NEWS Louis Vuitton’s Discriminating Support for Contemporary Art

JAPAN SEP 2010

Tools

More



Credits

Log In

ArtAsiaPacific

GPO Box 10084

Hong Kong

info@aapmag.com