

BOOK REVIEW

Bert Winther-Tamaki

Art in the Encounter of Nations, Japanese and American Artists in the Early Postwar Years, Honolulu : University of Hawai'i Press, 2001, 207 pp; 45 b/w ill.

Pbk (08248 2400 8)

©Susan Platt first published online caa.reviews.org April 4, 2002

Following on the crushing defeat of Japan in World War II, and the devastating destruction of its major cities by bombing, both conventional and atomic, the United States then occupied the country for many years. It had a prolonged presence and deep effect on Japanese culture at the same time that Japanese culture became prominent in the United States, partially as a result of servicemen who brought it back to the United States with them. *Art in the Encounter of Nations, Japanese and American Artists in the Early Postwar Years* addresses one aspect of this intersection, the changes in aesthetic culture or high art, in Japan and the surprisingly convoluted relationship of that culture to its counterpart, Abstract Expressionism, in the United States.

Hybridity as a subversive practice that challenges cultural divisions is one of the themes of this thoughtful book by Bert Winther-Tamaki. Looking closely at just a few carefully selected topics, Winther-Tamaki provides new insights into the relationship of Japanese and American painting, the changing position and practice of calligraphy and pottery in Japan, and his primary theme, the multinational career of Isamu Noguchi. His real fascination is clearly with the contradictions of Noguchi's career, the subject of his 1992 dissertation "Isamu Noguchi: Conflicts of Japanese Culture in the Early Post-War Years" (NYU) and the book emerges from those contradictions as it expands the complexities of cultural nationalism into other media. Winther-Tamaki has carved out the early post-war years in Japan as his specialty: he contributed an important chapter on that subject to the major exhibition catalog *Scream Against the Sky*" *Japanese Art After 1945*.

Artistic nationalism is the model for developing an alternative to the out-of-date simplistic oppositional cold war rhetoric of East and West. Winther-Tamaki claims that "the rubric of East and West was a heterogeneous and multivocal discourse" (p. 11). His purpose is to demonstrate that it was challenged by various types of nationalisms that construct a more complicated model. He counters first with a brief discussion of early twentieth century perspectives and the importance of Europe as a dominating reference for both Americans and Japanese until the advent of Ernest Fenellosa and Okakura Kakuzo. Fenellosa urged the Japanese to embrace their own traditions, rather than those of Europe in the late nineteenth century. As he did so he exported a huge amount of Japanese culture to the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. Okakura, Fenellosa's protégé foregrounded his Japanese identity in Boston by wearing kimonos and writing on Japanese culture.

During the war there was, inevitably, an increase in both nationalism and artistic nationalism in both Japan and the United States, and turmoil in international cultural circles as artists in Europe were chased from one country to another, many of them

ultimately coming to New York City. The synergy that resulted in New York between the émigré surrealists from Paris and the abstract artists of the Bauhaus with the still provincial American art scene, set the stage for the confident outburst of Abstract Expressionism, a curious mixture of nationalism and imperialism trumpeted by Clement Greenberg. During these same years though, Japanese artists struggled to catch up, after years of being cut off from international developments. As American soldiers occupied Japanese soil, their commanders sought to rebuild Japan according to the American capitalist/consumer model. Forms of negotiation and resistance to this second American invasion is an undercurrent of Winther-Tamaki's book. One aspect of that is that Americans began to embrace Japan, both literally and figuratively, with interracial marriage and an increasing interest in Japanese literature, film and other types of culture.

In the second chapter "The Japanese Margins of American Abstract Expressionism" Winther-Tamaki provides an important contribution to the on-going process of expanding the readings of Abstract Expressionism beyond the rhetoric of Clement Greenberg's declarations of the 1940s and 1950s. Scholars like Ann Gibson's *Abstract Expressionism: Other Politics* (1997) as well as others, have been demonstrating over the last decade that the movement included women and people of color, complex political agendas and much more diversity than the original Greenbergian declarations suggested. Winther-Tamaki explores the career of Okada Kenzo who moved to New York in 1950, and became an American citizen in 1960. In one of the many subtle discussions of the book, he deftly points out the artist's negotiations with his Japanese identity after he arrived in New York "the much remarked upon Japanese expressivity of Okada's art was born not in Japan, but in the United States." (p. 27)

In the context of revising abstract expressionism, its relationship to Japanese calligraphy is a crucial issue and the treatment of this topic here emphasizes an erratic reciprocity between Japan and the United States. For example, Hasegawa Saburo, an oil painter by training who had previously focused on Paris, embraced black and white ink on paper and calligraphic strokes. He was partly inspired by Isamu Noguchi when he visited Japan in 1950. Saburo, in turn, served as Noguchi's mentor into the Japanese past.

Mark Tobey and Franz Kline's interest in Japanese calligraphy is well known. What has not been carefully examined before is the way in which the rhetoric of abstract expressionism led the artists to deny their own sources. Both artists eagerly studied Asian culture early in their careers, only to assert their American identities in order to fit into the agenda of the hegemonic New York school of abstraction. Winther-Tamaki outlines this contradiction carefully, juxtaposing the facts of Tobey's and Kline's engagement with Japan and their declarations. (pp. 51,58). What I was looking for though was more emphatic analysis of the contradiction in the context of racism in both the United States and Japan. The analysis is a little more detached than is really necessary as we now all know that the Greenberg analysis was deeply flawed in so many ways.

While this nationalism is a predictable narrative, more unusual is the book's discussion of the changing status of traditional calligraphic artists and pottery masters. The new

emphasis on exhibitions, rather than day to day utility, left these artists without a logical reason for their work. While calligraphy has always been regarded as a great artistic expression, in post world two Japan, descendents of ancient calligraphic families began to move into images that suggest an interest in form and brushwork for their own sake. The debate centered around whether the calligraphic character could be presented without completion of the meaning in the traditional sense. The author's insights into Japanese culture are valuable here.

Likewise in the discussion of Yagi Kazuo, a leading pottery artist, who initiated the idea of the kiln-fired object that was to be experienced visually, rather than physically, Winther-Tamaki demonstrates his understanding of that art form in Japan. The fact that Yagi preceded a similar shift among potters in California under the leadership of Peter Voulkos. could have been further discussed. Noguchi also worked with clay in a radical sculptural manner in Japan in 1950, although the clay that he used came from a traditional kiln site. Noguchi leaped the distance between historic tradition and contemporary abstraction. This crucial position for Noguchi could have been further elaborated, because it demonstrates Noguchi's differences from the Abstract Expressionism, a theme discussed in the last chapter

In the last chapter the book finally focuses completely on Noguchi and his intriguing and contradictory negotiation of artistic nationalisms. Noguchi has been widely written about, so Winther-Tamaki's work is carefully situated in the ambiguity of his artistic and national identity. Since Noguchi was half Japanese, raised partly in Japan and partly in the United States, worked in Paris with Brancusi and revisited Japan at certain critical moments in his career, the importance of digging into his own position is crucial in order to move beyond the usual grand master superficialities. Dore Ashton has written an important book on his relationship to Japan (*Isamu Noguchi, East and West* New York, 1992), but Winther-Tamaki's narrative peels away the surface events to reveal the tensions lying just underneath. For example, in Noguchi's visit in 1950 he offered to design the Hiroshima Memorial, but his proposal was rejected. In working in the United States and Paris his work was subjected to criticisms from both Japanese and Americans. His ability to continue to work in the midst of rejections and racist insults (like those of Alexander Calder, (p. 155) is remarkable. Winther-Tamaki effectively reveals the depth of the difficulties of simple East West polarities through the lens of Noguchi's career.

This book provides important new perspectives into the Japanese-American in the post World War II era. It takes the magnifying glass approach to the subject, with a deeper understanding of Japanese culture than that of any historian of American art. On the other hand, because of this engagement with the Japanese side of the equation, the author does miss important opportunities to truly mainstream his subject. There is only one brief reference to Gutai, in the context of the rejection by Yoshihara Jiro of the work of Morita Shiryu, who was a calligrapher practicing *moji-sei* (characters appreciated aesthetically). The author refers to Yoshihara as "a major figure in twentieth century Japanese painting though probably best known in Anglophonic art history as the leader of Gutai" (p. 82,83). Since Yoshihara Jiro is an artist of Japan who is really well-known

internationally, it would have been helpful to pursue this discussion further and to explore why the artists that are treated here are not as prominent, as well as to explore Yosihara himself much further.

On another note, the exhibition catalog *The New Japanese Painting and Sculpture* (1967) at the Museum of Modern Art, includes none of the artists discussed in this book except for Yagi Kazuo, the ceramic artist. In fact, in looking at other publications on Japanese art from this period published in the United States, there seems to be a significant disconnect with Winther Tamaki's book. I would have liked an historiographic summary positioning his own research with respect to these early publications. He did that theoretically, with his emphasis on nationalisms, but by referring to these earlier publications as well as current scholarship on Abstract Expressionism, he would have only strengthened the importance of this book and his subject. Aside from these minor historiographic omissions, Bert Winther Tamaki's *Art in the Encounter of Nations, Japanese and American Artists in the Early Postwar Years*, is a valuable cross cultural perspective on post World War II art and a significant addition to the literature for scholars in both Asian and American art.