

Protest Art in 1950s Japan

The Forgotten Reportage Painters

by Linda Hoaglund

Japan in
the 1950s

Nakamura
Hiroshi

Ikeda
Tatsuo

Yamashita
Kikuji

Ishii
Shigeo

Sources
& Credits



The 1950s have become something of a lost decade in historical recollections of postwar Japan. It is not difficult to understand why. The “50s” were overshadowed by the dramatic U.S. occupation that followed the country’s defeat in World War II, lasting until 1952. And they were eclipsed by what followed: the “income doubling” policies initiated in 1960 that, for the first time, drew international attention to Japan’s economic reconstruction.

In fact, this was a tortured and tumultuous decade. Bitter memories of the recent war that ended in Hiroshima and Nagasaki folded into the spectacle of a cold-war nuclear arms race and a hot war next door in Korea (extending from 1950 to 1953). The continued post-occupation presence of a massive network of U.S. military bases provoked enormous controversy, as did the conservative government’s commitment to rearm Japan under the U.S. military aegis. Former leaders of Japan’s recent aggression returned to the political helm—symbolized most dramatically by the 1957 elevation to the premiership of Kishi Nobusuke, an accused (but never indicted) war criminal.

If the Japan of the 1950s in general has fallen into a black hole of memory, all the more so is this true of the vigorous grassroots protests that opposed Japan’s incorporation into U.S. cold-war policy. As one artist introduced here observed, to many Japanese the 1950s seemed like an era of “civil war”—if not literally in

a military sense, then certainly politically and ideologically. This was a far cry from the consensual and harmonious place mythologized by later exponents of a monolithic “Japan Inc.”

“Reportage painters” was a loose label attached to left-wing artists of the time who rejected conventional aesthetics, while bearing witness to unfolding military and political events. The artwork they produced in the 1950s and early 1960s is now largely buried in museums, and even in their own time they had few opportunities to exhibit their work, and found few patrons willing to buy it. Yet their vigor, vision, integrity, and originality are extraordinary. In their distinctive ways, the four reportage artists introduced here open a stunning window onto these turbulent, neglected years.

This Visualizing Cultures unit complements Linda Hoaglund’s prize-winning 2010 documentary film “ANPO: Art X War.” The acronym ANPO, familiar to all Japanese of a certain age, derives from the Japanese name of the bilateral U.S.-Japan Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security, under which Japan committed itself to rearm and host U.S. military bases. In Japanese parlance, reference to the “ANPO struggle” usually focuses on the protests against renewal of the security treaty that convulsed the nation in 1960, culminating in riots in Tokyo. The “forgotten reportage painters”—this unit’s subtitle—convey the deeper history of this passionate anti-base, anti-rearmament, anti-corruption protest movement.

“ANPO: Art X War” was screened in numerous international forums in 2010 and 2011. The documentary was honored in Japan with a nomination by the Agency for Cultural Affairs for the 2011 Best Cultural Documentary Prize, and in the United States by the 2012 Erik Barnouw Award of the Organization of American Historians (for “significant visual contribution to the history of American international relations”).

JAPAN IN THE 1950s

In 1958, Nakamura Hiroshi, one of the artists featured in this essay, produced a surreal painting titled “The Civil War Era,” referring to the situation in Japan. His original title had been “Postwar Revolution,” but Nakamura decided this exaggerated the situation. “Civil war,” on the other hand, suggested a kind of purgatory between war and peace, in which the struggle involved nothing less than whether Japan could become a truly peaceful and democratic nation if it remained locked in the military embrace of the United States.

Like many of his compatriots, Nakamura was severely critical of the conservative governments that had dominated Japanese politics since 1948 and negotiated the terms under which Japan regained sovereignty in 1952, after six years and eight months of

being occupied by the U.S.-led victors in World War II. As the political left saw it, the price paid for nominal sovereignty was bogus independence. Under the bilateral U.S.-Japan security treaty that was Washington's quid pro quo for ending the Occupation, Japan agreed (1) to rearm under the American aegis; (2) to allow U.S. military bases throughout the country; (3) to surrender de-facto sovereignty over Okinawa, which had become America's major "forward" projection of military power in Asia; (4) to rely on the U.S. "nuclear umbrella" for security; and (5) to acquiesce in the economic and political "containment" of China, where the Communists had emerged victorious in 1949.

Most of the conservatives who endorsed these conditions agreed that the security treaty and its supplementary bilateral agreements (extending into 1954) were inequitable. It was widely acknowledged that the United States obtained more extensive military rights and privileges in sovereign Japan than it had demanded from any of its other cold-war partners. Given the global situation, however, the conservatives saw no alternative to paying a high price to escape the humiliation of protracted occupation. The Soviet Union had tested its first nuclear weapon in 1949, the same year that the People's Republic of China was established. The Korean War had erupted in June 1950—drawing in both the U.S. and subsequently China, and dragging on into 1953. A mere five years after Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the end of World War II in Asia, American strategic planners had come to regard Japan not merely as an indispensable military base, but also as the projected "workshop" of the non-Communist Asian world.

Even the staunch anti-Communist and pro-American political leader Yoshida Shigeru, who served uninterruptedly as prime minister from late 1948 to the end of 1954, regarded Washington's cold-war demands as excessive. He was willing to trade Okinawa for American guarantees of protection, but did not welcome extensive U.S. bases in the main islands of Japan, did not support the isolation of China, and regarded Washington's demands for rapid rearmament as particularly foolhardy while harsh memories of Japan's recent militarism were still vivid, domestically and among the nation's neighbors. In a reflection on the state of the country written shortly after he left the premiership, Yoshida employed language analogous to Nakamura's evocation of "civil war." An ideological "38th parallel" had split Japanese society in two, he observed, taking his bleak metaphor from the post-World War II division of Korea.

It was the hope and expectation of Yoshida and his fellow conservatives that the most grating and blatantly inequitable aspects of the U.S.-Japan security relationship would be corrected within a short time. The target date was 1960, when the bilateral treaty would come up for revision—and the path to that date turned out to be more tortuous and contentious than anyone anticipated, as a succession of particularly provocative military-related incidents inflamed domestic hostility to the militarized U.S.-Japan relationship. This is the milieu in which the artists introduced here produced their protest paintings.

The genesis of the so-called peace movement in postwar Japan actually dates to late 1949, when U.S. plans to turn Japan into a bulwark against Communism first became clear. Protest intensified when the terms of the secretly-negotiated security treaty were disclosed in 1951 and 1952, and grew even more intense in the several years that followed, as the concrete presence of an unexpectedly extensive web of post-occupation U.S. bases and facilities materialized.

Ikeda Tatsuo

“American Soldier, Child, Barracks,” 1953 (detail)

The presence of numerous U.S. military bases in post-Occupation Japan, coupled with fraternization of the foreign troops with Japanese women, drew critical scrutiny from many photographers, artists, and journalists in the 1950s.

[anp1002] detail



When the Americans finally relinquished direct control of Japan in the final days of April 1952, they left a mixed legacy of genuine friendship and goodwill on the one hand, and disillusion and hostility on the other. The latter erupted openly within days—on May 1, known ever since as “Bloody May Day”—when union-led demonstrators clashed with police in Tokyo in a day-long confrontation that left several protestors dead. One of the major issues that fired up the protestors was the militarized nature of the peace settlement.

“Bloody May Day” marked the beginning of a near-decade of continuous, volatile anti-base and anti-remilitarization protests that culminated in massive demonstrations that convulsed Tokyo in May and June 1960, when the security treaty came up for renewal. Communists and non-communist leftists played major roles in many of these protests. What truly alarmed the Japanese government and its handlers in Washington, however, was the extent to which this movement fed on grassroots support—often stimulated by sensational events.

One of the most galvanizing of these events occurred in March 1954, when a Japanese tuna-fishing boat named Lucky Dragon #5 was irradiated by fallout from an American thermonuclear (hydrogen-bomb) test at Bikini Atoll, located between Hawaii and Japan. The ship’s catch was contaminated, and it was widely feared that such contamination extended to other catches in the vast ocean area where U.S. nuclear testing took place. More shocking, all 23 of the Lucky Dragon’s crewmen developed symptoms of radiation poisoning, and the ship’s radio operator died of acute radiation sickness six months later. (“I pray,” he said famously near the end, “that I am the last victim of an atomic or hydrogen bomb.”) While the U.S. government tried mightily to cover-up the enormity of this tragedy, the response in Japan was a groundswell of anti-nuclear activism that included a petition calling for abolition of nuclear weapons that was reported to have been signed by an astonishing 30-million individuals, amounting to over half of Japan’s adult population.

Ikeda Tatsuo
“10,000 Count,” 1954
(detail)

The Lucky Dragon #5, a Japanese fishing boat, was irradiated by fallout from an American thermonuclear bomb test at Bikini Atoll in 1954. Both the crew and catch were contaminated.

[anp1009] detail



The mid 1950s saw a nationwide surge in anti-base activity. One of the most dramatic and highly publicized of these protests, known as the Sunagawa struggle, arose in opposition to government plans to confiscate privately owned farmland in order to expand the runways at the already huge Tachikawa air field, on the outskirts of Tokyo. Beginning in 1955, student and labor-union activists joined local residents at Sunagawa, a town on the edge of the base, in a series of confrontations with police who had been dispatched to protect the government’s land surveyors. In 1955 and 1956, the well-known leftist film maker Kamei Fumio produced three documentary treatments of the Sunagawa struggle; and on July 8, 1957, this confrontation culminated in a riot that led to seven individuals being arrested and accused of trespassing on the U.S. base, which was a felony under the terms of the bilateral security arrangements.

Nakamura Hiroshi
“Sunagawa #5,” 1955
(detail)
Between 1955 and 1957, the “Sunagawa struggle” pitted the police against local farmers protesting confiscation of their land to expand the runways at a U.S. base on the outskirts of Tokyo. Nakamura’s reportage painting depicts an intense confrontation in late 1955.

[anp5013] detail



In a sensational decision on the “Sunagawa case” (this is sometimes romanized as “Sunakawa”) delivered on March 30, 1959, the Tokyo District Court found the trespassers not guilty on grounds that maintaining “war potential” on Japanese soil was prohibited by article nine of the nation’s postwar constitution—which meant that the maintenance of U.S. bases under the bilateral security treaty was itself unconstitutional. Prodded by a frantic Washington, the Japanese government intervened to rush the case directly to the supreme court, which overturned the district-court decision with unprecedented speed and—in a decision of great consequence delivered in December 1959, on the very eve of the government’s 1960 timetable for renewing the security treaty—declared that article nine did not prohibit Japan from engaging in self-defense, including security agreements with other countries. (Years later it was learned that the U.S. ambassador to Tokyo had met directly with the chief justice of Japan’s supreme court before the lower-court decision was overturned.)

Six months before the Sunagawa confrontation peaked in the arrests of July 1957 and ensuing court case, a shocking base-related incident of a different sort galvanized anti-base sentiment nationwide. On January 30, an American soldier guarding a U.S. Army shooting range in Gunma prefecture shot and killed a 46-year-old mother of six who had trespassed on the firing range to collect spent shell casings, which she sold as scrap metal. This wanton act became known as the “Girard incident,” after the name of the shooter, and led to controversial legal proceedings as well as acute and often acrimonious tensions with the U.S., where public opinion was mobilized against the Japanese having any legal role in the disposition of the case.

Nakamura Hiroshi

*“Gunned Down,” 1957
(detail)*

In the notorious “Girard incident,” a middle-age mother collecting brass shell casings at a firing range was deliberately shot by a U.S. guard.

[anp5004] detail



When Nakamura Hiroshi described the 1950s as a “civil-war era,” he obviously had these confrontations over the militarization of Japan in mind. He himself took both the Girard and Sunagawa incidents as subjects of his artwork, in two equally powerful but stylistically very different protest paintings. Militarization, however, was only one aspect of what Nakamura and his like-minded compatriots found disturbing and grotesque in post-occupation Japan.

Commonly known as the “reportage painters” for their distinctive left-wing combination of realism and surrealism, these artists also called attention to social oppression and grievous poverty; to corruption, and the return of former militarists to high political positions; and to the “inhumane mechanism” of postwar society in general.

Yamashita Kikuji

“The Tale of Akebono Village,” 1953 (detail)
Sometimes called the masterpiece of reportage painting, this large oil addresses murder and suicide in an impoverished village.

[anp6006] detail



Ishii Shigeo

“Decoy,” 1961 (detail)

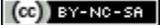
The unattractive head that dominates this work clearly depicts Kishi Nobusuke, who became prime minister in 1957 and negotiated the renewal of the security treaty in 1960. Kishi was imprisoned as an accused war criminal between 1945 and 1948, but never brought to trial.

[anp3018] detail



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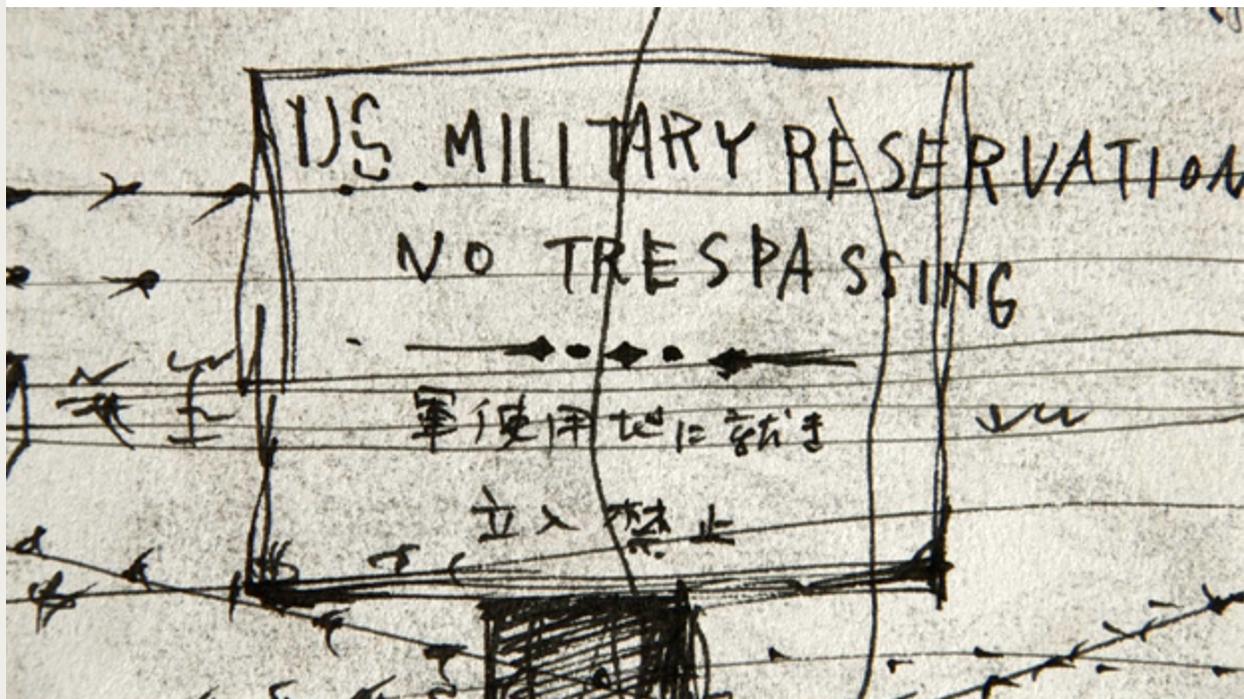
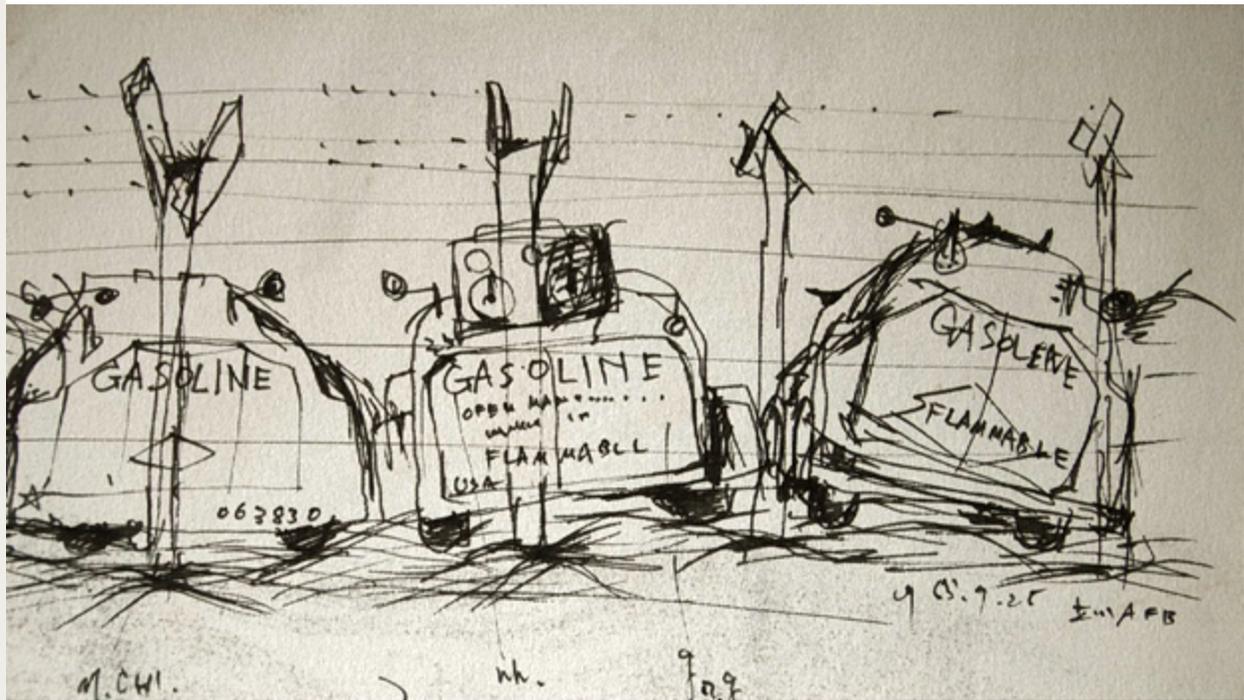
NAKAMURA HIROSHI

Nakamura Hiroshi (1932–) was trained as a reportage painter by the Japan Art Alliance, a postwar art group that advocated politically-themed realist painting. As he recalled:

In the early 1950s, socialist realism was spreading throughout the world as an art movement and many art students were influenced by it. The Alliance's basic premise was that our paintings had to be readily understood by anyone who saw them. We were encouraged to persuade the viewer.

In the mid 1950s, Nakamura became deeply involved in depicting the protests against U.S. military bases that were beginning to rise to a crescendo. One such locale was Sunagawa, where farmers were protesting plans to confiscate their land to extend the runways at Tachikawa Air Force Base. The farmers, whose ancestors had cultivated their land for centuries, were vociferously opposed, and their demonstrations became a magnet for members of student groups and labor unions from nearby Tokyo. In his own mind, Nakamura was a "reporter at the frontlines" of these confrontations, brandishing not a camera but a sketchbook and pencil. Several of these sketches now belong to the Museum of Contemporary Art Tokyo.





Nakamura Hiroshi's 1955 sketches of the U.S. military base at Tachikawa, near Tokyo (details)

[anp5073] full sketch
 [anp5079] [anp5078] details

These sketches became the basis of a large-scale oil painting titled "Sunagawa #5," depicting a confrontation in November 1955 that pitted the police against several thousand protestors who were attempting to thwart the surveyors mapping the land that the government intended to confiscate. In this graphic rendering, Nakamura's sense of social "realism" was stark and direct.

Nakamura Hiroshi's "Sunagawa #5"

Nakamura depicted a 1955 confrontation in the protracted military-base protests at Sunagawa in a graphic, realistic manner that he did not always adhere to in his later political paintings. Even here, however, he introduces imaginative detail like the tiny figure of a priest standing in solidarity with local residents who were protesting the confiscation of their land to enlarge the runways at a major U.S. airfield.



[anp5013] full painting

Details (clockwise starting upper left):









Even as he was presenting such straightforward “reportorial” artwork, Nakamura was also developing an innovative pictorial strategy that, as he explained it, employed four receding points of perspective instead of the conventional single point—all aimed at composing a “close-up” at the center. He was determined to go beyond the raw visual film footage that left-wing colleagues such as the filmmaker Kamei Fumio were producing in their own critical documentation of the protests.

This more abstract and innovative approach to reportage painting found powerful expression in other strong renderings of the anti-base protests that Nakamura produced. Although he naturally did not witness the January 1957 Girard incident, in which an American soldier fatally shot a local woman scavenging spent bullet casings at a U.S. Army firing range, the media frenzy over Girard’s trial in Japan (he eventually received a suspended sentence) ignited the artist’s imagination:

I couldn’t deliver the message and impact I wanted through conventional composition, so I applied the ‘camera eye,’ from both still photographs and movies, to express my outrage.

One product of this outrage was “Gunned Down,” in which the woman’s crumpled body dominates the canvas, while her out-sized hands claw at bare earth and rifle barrels point in her direction.



"Gunned Down," 1957

[anp5004]

Another almost surrealist painterly response was "The Base," which Nakamura painted on a large sheet of plywood. "The Base" now belongs to The National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo and is cracked with age. In looking back on it decades later, Nakamura reflected on the extreme poverty of those years, when a mother of six was forced to collect scrap metal to survive and he himself, with no market for his paintings, resorted to painting on cheap wood:

12 years after the war, we were just starting to recover. There were still shortages of food to eat every day. Otherwise, this kind of incident [meaning the Girard incident] would never have happened.



"The Base," 1957

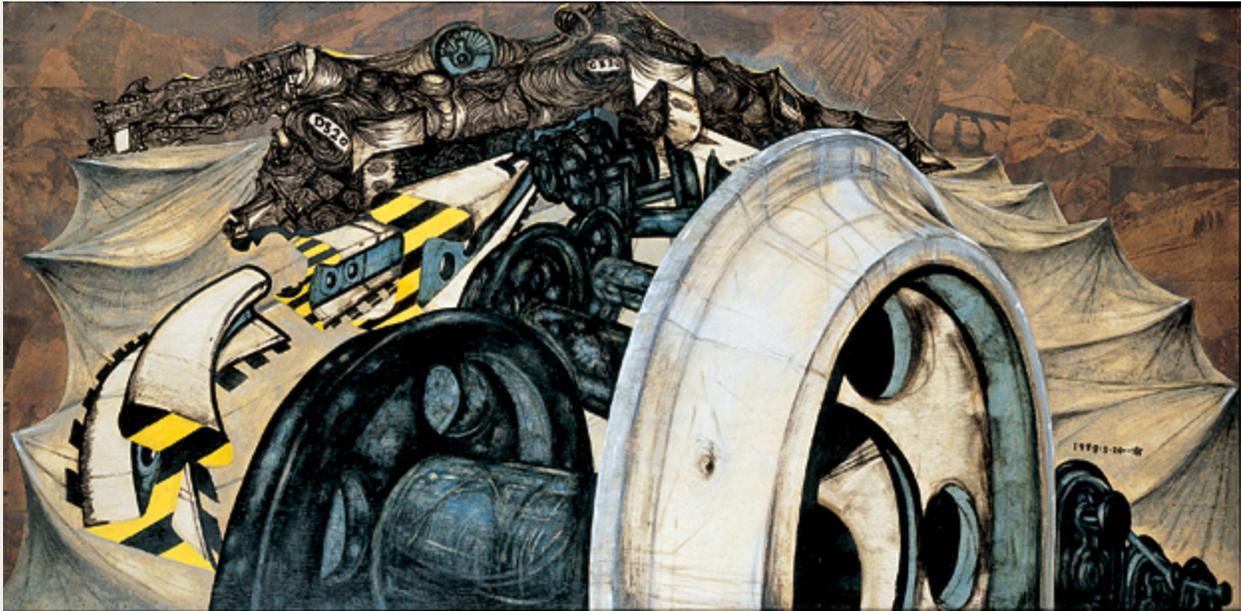
*Full painting (above)
and detail showing the woman who was killed (highlighted in red, below)*

[anp5020]



The continuing heavy presence of scores of U.S. military bases in Japan even after the Korean War ended cast a dark shadow on Japan's recovery as a sovereign and ostensibly independent nation. To critics on the left like Nakamura, the domestic conflict this provoked in the years leading up to the massive 1960 protests could hardly be exaggerated. He observed many years later:

They say after war you have postwar peace, but it's not just war and peace, like in Tolstoy. You have to add a civil war era in between. So the ANPO protests were a kind of civil war. ["ANPO" is an acronym derived from the Japanese name of the U.S.-Japan mutual treaty.] They used to call these protests a revolution, like the French or Russian revolutions. But in Japan the people never rose up that spectacularly. So you can't really call it a revolution, but it was certainly a civil war. And you could say that the ANPO struggle was the zenith of that. I painted that as a theme, and titled it "Civil War Era."



"Civil War Era," 1958

[anp5035]

The painting Nakamura was referring to, also executed on plywood in 1958, was an ominous rendering of complex machinery that seemed about to roll right over the viewer. Nakamura's original title was "Postwar Revolution," but he decided that sounded too "overtly political, so I made it a little more literary and called it 'Civil War Era.'" By the time of the 1960 ANPO protests, Nakamura's reportage paintings had evolved, in his words, into a "montage" technique. He frequently joined the massive protests that rocked Tokyo, but by then, having witnessed so many other protests, he was pessimistic about the prospects of their success.

Nakamura Hiroshi (center) is photographed at one of the 1960 demonstrations against renewal of the security treaty. He is standing next to Yoshimoto Ryūmei, a philosopher whose writings and speeches encouraged many artists and intellectuals to join the protests.

[anp5032] detail



Still, Nakamura produced two striking, unsettling paintings that year. “On the Steps” featured outsized, alarmed eyes—perhaps his own—agape at confronting a foul world. “Samurai in Flight” depicted an unhorsed medieval warrior plunging behind his mount, also topsy-turvy, while a marbled labyrinth looms unscathed alongside the doomed pair—suggesting, it would seem, that even while reactionary leaders may be eliminated, the bastions of power remain unchanged.



“On the Steps,” 1960

Full painting (above)

and detail that shows the steps and urinals (highlighted in red, below)

[anp5046]



"Samurai in Flight," 1960
Full painting (below)
and detail that shows the
unhorsed warrior. (highlighted in
red, left)

[anp5048]



On June 19, the conservative government headed by Prime Minister Kishi Nobusuke, a former accused (but never indicted) war criminal, rammed renewal of a revised version of the U.S.-Japan security treaty through the Diet, Japan's parliament—and, confronted with this fait accompli, the protests quickly sputtered to a stop. Nakamura was disgusted by this spectacle of millions of his fellow protestors abandoning their resistance. For the next several years, all of his increasingly fantastical output featured ominous crimson clouds and landscapes.

Nakamura Hiroshi's Post-1960 Crimson Clouds

After the failure of the anti-security-treaty protests in 1960, Nakamura produced a series of surreal paintings suffused with the color red. Asked to explain this, he replied:

I doubt I would have made paintings with bright red clouds if I hadn't lived through the firebombing. I remember the firebombing extremely well.

He was twelve years old in 1945, when American B-29s incinerated his native Hamamatsu in a nighttime raid,

leaving the whole city burned to the ground. There was nothing left. You know those photographs of the ruins of Hiroshima? It actually looked a lot like that. I really can't believe I'm still alive today.

Past, present, and future thus fused in the red paintings: the personal trauma of the World War II air raids, visions of Hiroshima, the ongoing nuclear arms race, and the spectacle of a future Japan inextricably committed to becoming a remilitarized collaborator in America's cold-war policy.



"Omens of a Place," 1961

[anp5005]



"Red Landscape," 1961

[anp5052]



"Crashlanding," 1963

[anp5028]



“Sightseeing Empire,” 1963

[anp5053]

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IKEDA TATSUO

Ikeda Tatsuo (1928-) became an artist to free himself from all authority. When he was just 15, the Japanese Navy ordered him to become a kamikaze pilot. Japan's defeat spared him from a suicidal mission, but U.S. occupation policy forced him to resign from a school for training teachers because he was an ex-kamikaze. He resolved to study art and joined an avant-garde group that persuaded him that "art and politics and social issues are all related."

In the summer of 1952, Ikeda spent one week in Uchinada, a fishing village on the Japan Sea, joining sit-ins of protesting fishermen and interviewing them about their cause. The U.S. military had seized their beaches, converting them into a firing range to test made-in-Japan artillery shells for the Korean War. The local fishermen promptly lost their livelihoods, but the men who owned and leased their fishing boats collaborated with the government for compensation. Ikeda rendered these conflicting circumstances in ink drawings titled "Fishermen's Boss—Uchinada and The Haul—Uchinada." To Ikeda, newly awakened to Marxist ideas, these contrasting positions corresponded to the smug capitalist, throttling himself with his own greed, and the downtrodden worker, cross-eyed from fruitless labor.



"Fishermen's Boss"—Uchinada series, 1953

[anp1004]



"The Haul"—Uchinada series, 1953

[anp1010]

Choosing an artist's life, unfettered by superiors, Ikeda also doomed himself to poverty; to the art market, his reportage ink drawings were as negligible as Nakamura's oil paintings. To survive, Ikeda joined the ranks of artists paid by U.S. soldiers during the Korean War to paint portraits of themselves, their wives, girlfriends, or children before heading off to a bloody war they knew they might not survive.

Portrait-Painting for the Americans

During the Korean War (1950 to 1953), Ikeda and other impoverished artists supported themselves by painting “silk-scroll” portraits for American servicemen stationed in Japan—usually based on snapshots of wives, children, and girlfriends. Ikeda recalled:

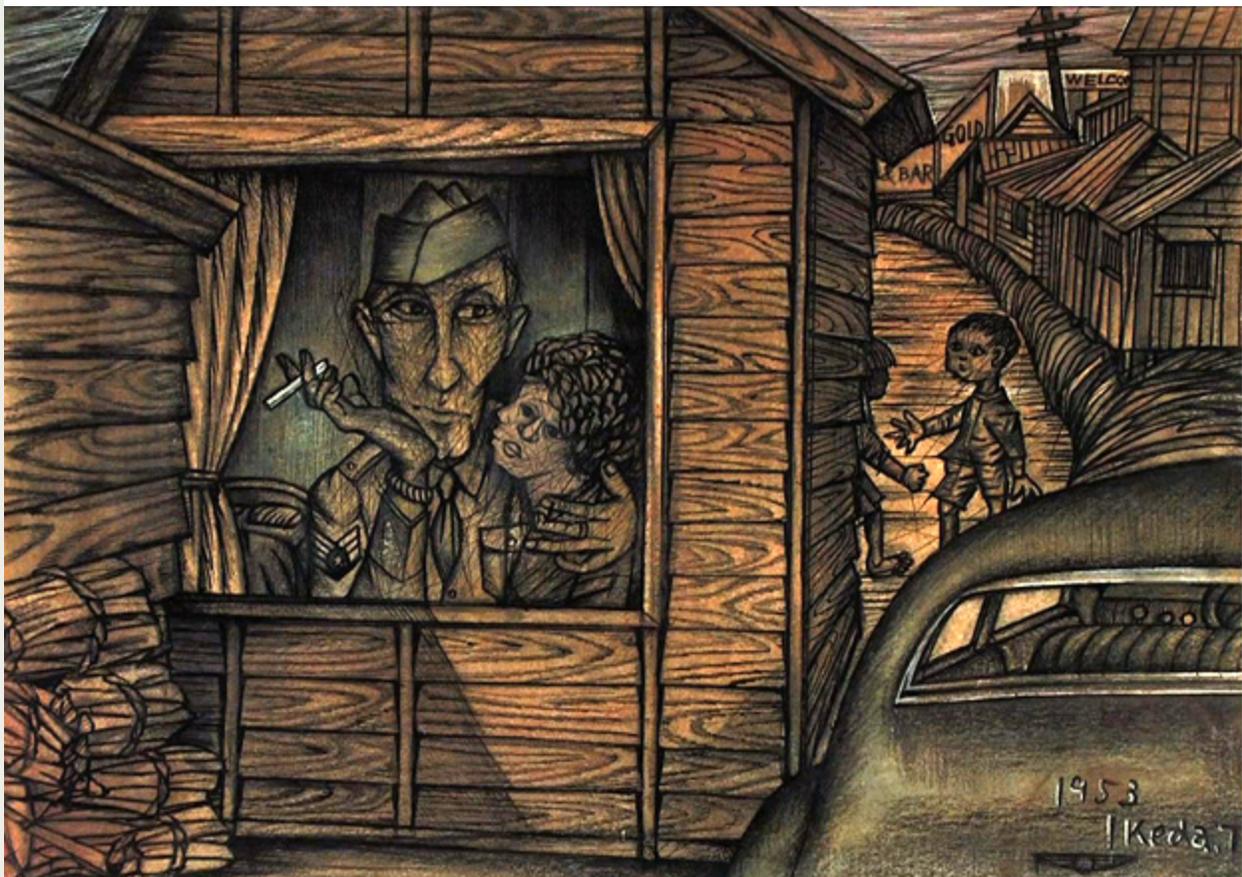
We could transform a black-and-white photo into a color painting. They could display it on the wall. It was very Japanese and must have been exotic.

Ikeda's uncanny rendering of this green-eyed blonde remained in his possession when the soldier who commissioned it was sent to the war front and never returned to claim it.



The Portrait, 1951

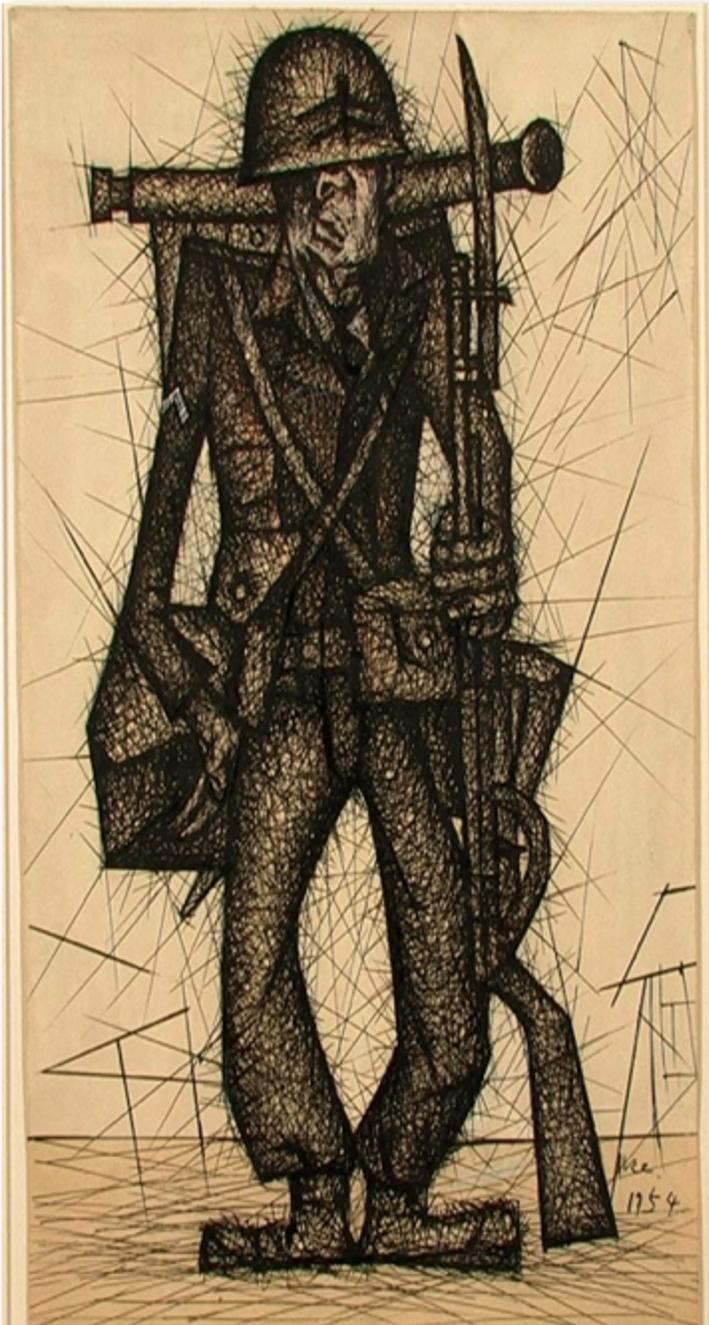
Like so many of his compatriots, Ikeda was acutely sensitive not merely to the oppressive physical presence of U.S. bases in his country, revved up for war in Korea or anywhere else in Asia, but also to the military-base milieu in which American soldiers lived, and their conspicuous fraternization with Japanese women. In a 1953 painting titled "American Soldier, Child, Barracks," he allegorized the predicament many young Japanese women faced after the war and into the post-occupation period. Often bereft of fathers or older brothers to provide for them, some looked to the foreigners for financial support for themselves and their dependents. Ikeda's depiction of the young woman in the GI's casual embrace captures her ambivalence, torn between abject gratitude and debilitating humiliation. The American automobile suggests affluence, while the barracks seem shabby. The identity of the child in the street, and whether he might be of mixed blood, is unclear.



"American Soldier, Child, Barracks," 1953

[anp1002]

A similar complexity pervades an almost cartoonish 1954 ink drawing by Ikeda titled "Resurrected Soldier," in which a veteran brandishes a rifle nearly his own height, his vision obstructed by an overly-large helmet. Despite his obscured identity, the soldier is obviously Japanese—his resurrection and deployment being what the U.S. government had adamantly urged their Japanese partners in Tokyo to undertake since the outbreak of the Korean War in 1950.

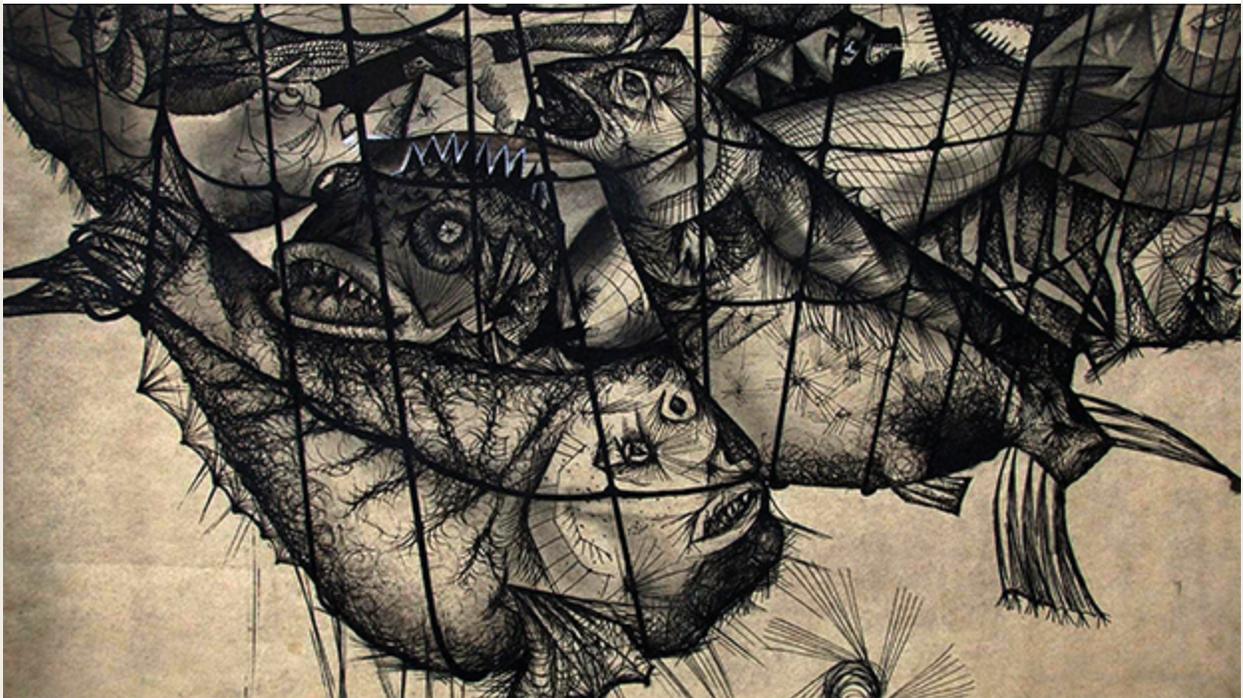


"More than anything, I am anti-war," Ikeda later commented. "The Korean War was a foreign war but I felt it was inevitable that Japan would get dragged into it, and that is what terrified me." His fear was not unfounded, for we now know that the United States was exerting great pressure on the Japanese government to rebuild ground forces quickly enough so that they could be deployed in Korea. In resisting this pressure, Prime Minister Yoshida Shigeru used the popular protests in Japan to explain why this was politically impossible so soon after the war.

"Resurrected Soldier," 1953

[anp1018]

The July 1953 armistice in the Korean War did not dispel the abiding fear that Japan was being dragged into a perilous remilitarized world. On the contrary, before a full year had passed the country was rocked by the Lucky Dragon incident, involving a Japanese fishing boat irradiated by fallout from U.S. thermonuclear-bomb testing in the Pacific. Rather than join the nationwide demonstrations calling for abolition of all nuclear weapons, Ikeda, as he explained it, "wanted to express myself as a painter, to express my protest that way." With great originality, he turned his eye and brush to the toxic, grotesque, almost anthropomorphic catch of the doomed fishing vessel in two paintings titled "10,000 Count" and "Buried Fish."



"10,000 Count," 1954

[anp1009]



"Buried Fish," 1954

[anp1014]

Ikeda's grim renderings of dead fish were inspired by the contamination of a Japanese tuna-fishing boat by fallout from a U.S. thermonuclear test in March 1954. One crewman died of radiation sickness. This shocking incident ignited a nationwide protest against nuclear testing that is commonly regarded as the beginning of an organized anti-nuclear movement in Japan.

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YAMASHITA KIKUJI

Yamashita Kikuji (1890–1973) was already studying art with Fukuzawa Ichiro—who introduced him to the work of Max Ernst, Salvador Dali, and Hieronymus Bosch—when he was drafted into the Japanese Imperial military in 1939 to fight in China. Memories of what he saw and did as a soldier there, including killing a Chinese prisoner, pervaded his ferocious postwar artistic vision and output.

Yamashita painted his most iconic work, “The Tale of Akebono Village”—arguably Japan’s most famous reportage painting—after traveling to the remote village in Yamanashi prefecture at the behest of the Cultural Brigade of the Japanese Communist Party (JCP) in 1952. An activist (shown lying in the bloody pond with the fish) had been murdered in an ongoing struggle between the villagers and their ruthless landlord, and a grandmother had hanged herself after being tricked into bankruptcy (the dog with the yellow ribbon is a surreal rendering of her orphaned granddaughter).

The JCP had instructed Yamashita to make a *kamishibai* (a story related in a dozen or so storyboards and recited narration) plainly depicting the besieged villagers’ plight but, ignoring their direction, he deferred to his own hallucinatory vision, conjuring the large oil painting instead. Needless to say, his association with the JCP, with its rigid prescriptions of politically correct art, did not last long.



"The Tale of Akebono Village," 1953, full painting (above) and detail (left)

[anp6006]

In 1954, the year after he completed "Akebono Village," Yamashita painted "The Tale of New Japan," a direct critique of both the continued U.S. military presence and the Japanese who profited from collaborating. The sketch Yamashita drew to prepare the painting lays bare the underlying metaphor of an American soldier, too tall to fit the frame, leading his much weaker partner in a dance. Only someone like Yamashita —intimately familiar with the potential for exploitative behavior inherent in an occupying army—could have concocted this apparition.



*“The Tale of New Japan,” 1954, full painting (above)
and detail (below)*

[anp6001]

Yamashita’s preliminary sketch for “The Tale of New Japan” (below) was even more salacious than the final painting in its savage indictment of Japan’s obsequious behavior vis-à-vis the Americans. Inclusion of English signs and phrases in the finished work taps into the decadent atmosphere of communities that serviced the U.S. military bases, highlighting the overall corruption of “new Japan.”

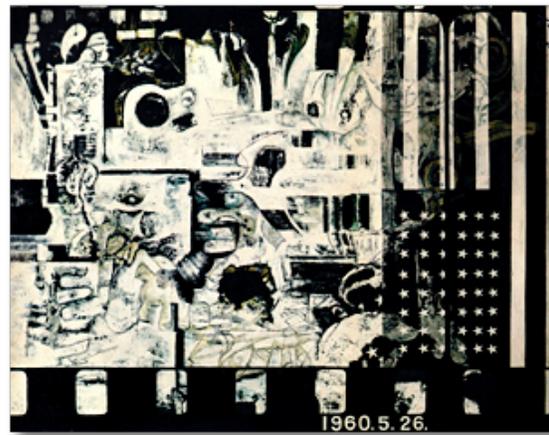
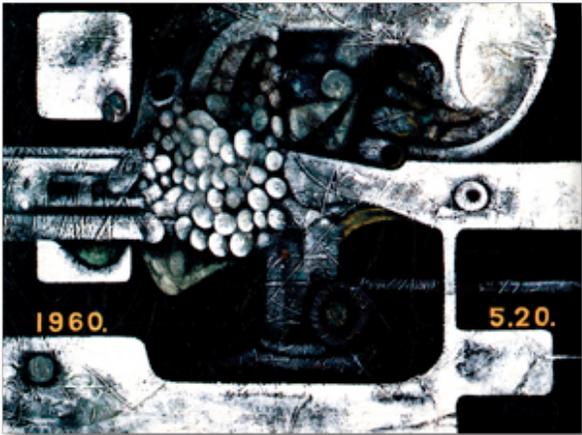


Preliminary sketch for "The Tale of New Japan," 1954

[anp6001a]

When the post-occupation tensions smoldering throughout Japan erupted in 1960, Yamashita, along with the philosopher Yoshimoto Ryūmei, formed the June Action Committee to rally demonstrators. A tall, charismatic figure dressed in a flowing black

cape, Yamashita became famous for extorting students and fellow artists to protest. He also registered his passionate outrage in a series of "film strip" paintings, two of which survive as "Firing Angle Campaign May 20 1960" and "Firing Angle Campaign May 26 1960." Like his friend Nakamura Hiroshi, Yamashita was distraught when the protests collapsed, painting "Descent into Darkness" in 1962.



clockwise from above left:

*"Firing Angle Campaign
May 20 1960," 1960*

[anp6012]

*"Firing Angle Campaign
May 26 1960," 1960*

[anp6011]

"Descent into Darkness," 1960

[anp6014]



Surveying Yamashita's daunting work, it almost seems he deliberately rejected any chance for commercial success. He was only able to thrive as an artist, painting hundreds of large canvasses, because his devoted wife worked as a beautician to support him. When asked about his wartime experiences after his death, she recalled,

He didn't talk about it much, but he would cry out from his nightmares at night. He sounded like he was in such pain that I used to wake him. He didn't tell me directly, but in 1970 he published an article, "A Peephole onto Discrimination." In it, he wrote about how he had executed a prisoner of war in a very brutal fashion.

Here is an excerpt:

I can never forget the day that we buried alive and tortured to death a Chinese prisoner. I had become an animal masquerading as a human being, capable of committing savage acts, but unable to see my own savagery.

Yamashita's wife saw this as the decisive event in her husband's life and postwar creative work:

He deeply regretted the fact that he couldn't give his own life by refusing that order. He wanted to take responsibility for what he had done. That became the driving force behind his paintings.

"Deification of a Soldier," painted by Yamashita in 1967, seems to presage his public confession; the eye sockets of a skull perched over a two-headed horse peer up at its helmet, but they cannot look out, only inward, imprisoned by cursed memories.

*"Deification of a Soldier,"
1967, full painting (below)
and detail (right)*

[anp6007]

*To the end of his life,
Yamashita was haunted by
atrocities he had participated
in as a soldier in the war
against China—torment that
emerges strongly in
"Deification of a Soldier,"
painted in 1967 when he was
in his late 40s.*



Long after the anti-base movement was deflated by its failure to prevent renewal of the treaty in 1960, Yamashita continued to skewer Japan's lopsided relationship with the United States. This was the subject of "Changing Seasons," for example, a surreal yet piercing painting he produced in 1968, one year after "Deification of a Soldier," at the age of 48.



*“Changing Seasons,” 1968,
full painting (above)
and detail (right)*

[anp6002]

*Yamashita’s 1968 painting
“Changing Seasons” offered
a surreal and at the same
time almost obscenely
explicit commentary on
Japan’s supine relationship
with the United States even
after the security treaty had
been revised.*



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The Forgotten Reportage Painters

by Linda Hoaglund

Japan in
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Nakamura
Hiroshi

Ikeda
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Yamashita
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Ishii
Shigeo

Sources
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ISHII SHIGEO

Ishii Shigeo (1933–1962) became a reportage painter not by visiting remote villages or participating in demonstrations, but by exploring his country's uneasy subconscious. Hobbled by debilitating asthma after a nearly fatal childhood attack, Ishii studied classical painting as a teenager but developed a distinct style of social critique in his oil paintings and etchings through his association with Ikeda Tatsuo, Nakamura Hiroshi, and other reportage and avant-garde painters. Conflating his own excruciating affliction with his country's postwar predicament, Ishii, who died at 28 in 1962, left a large body of work still mostly neglected.

Because Ishii's father was a bureaucrat in the Ministry of Finance with a secure salary, his mother was able to nurse her frail son, providing him with art lessons to compensate for the formal education his illness frequently absented him from, and paying for art supplies as his talent and passion for his increasingly morose vision became apparent. His younger sister remembered Ishii reading the entire newspaper every day in grade school. "He was the first to go and get the newspaper. I think he had his antennae out, waiting for information." His friend Ikeda Tatsuo recalled,

When I got to know him, he had a nihilistic way of talking and an ironic smile. But he was always making remarks that were right on target. He was only 20 years old, but he'd already read Jean Genet and used to quote him.

His older brother remembered Ishii's bookshelf "lined with Japanese translations of Sartre and Camus."

Ishii's dominant works belong to a series of over 15 paintings he produced between 1955 and 1957, which he collectively titled "Violence." The series includes "Judgment," "The Room," "Floating Skulls," "Under Martial Law III," "Under Martial Law IV," "Acrobatics," "The Trap," "The Wall," "Fissure," and "Pleasure." Some of the works are highly allegorical, but his intention was to map the basic contradictions of postwar Japan—the humiliation of occupation, collusion in a neighboring war, political entrapment, and social inequality. Ishii delineated his unambiguous artistic mission in a brief essay he wrote in 1957:

The force driving any individual attempting to create a work of art in our modern world must be his desire to revolt against the inhumane mechanism of his society in order to transform it. Without that craving it is impossible to create art.

Ishii Shigeo's 1955-1957 Series "Violence"



"Judgment"

[anp3029]



"The Room"

[anp3015]



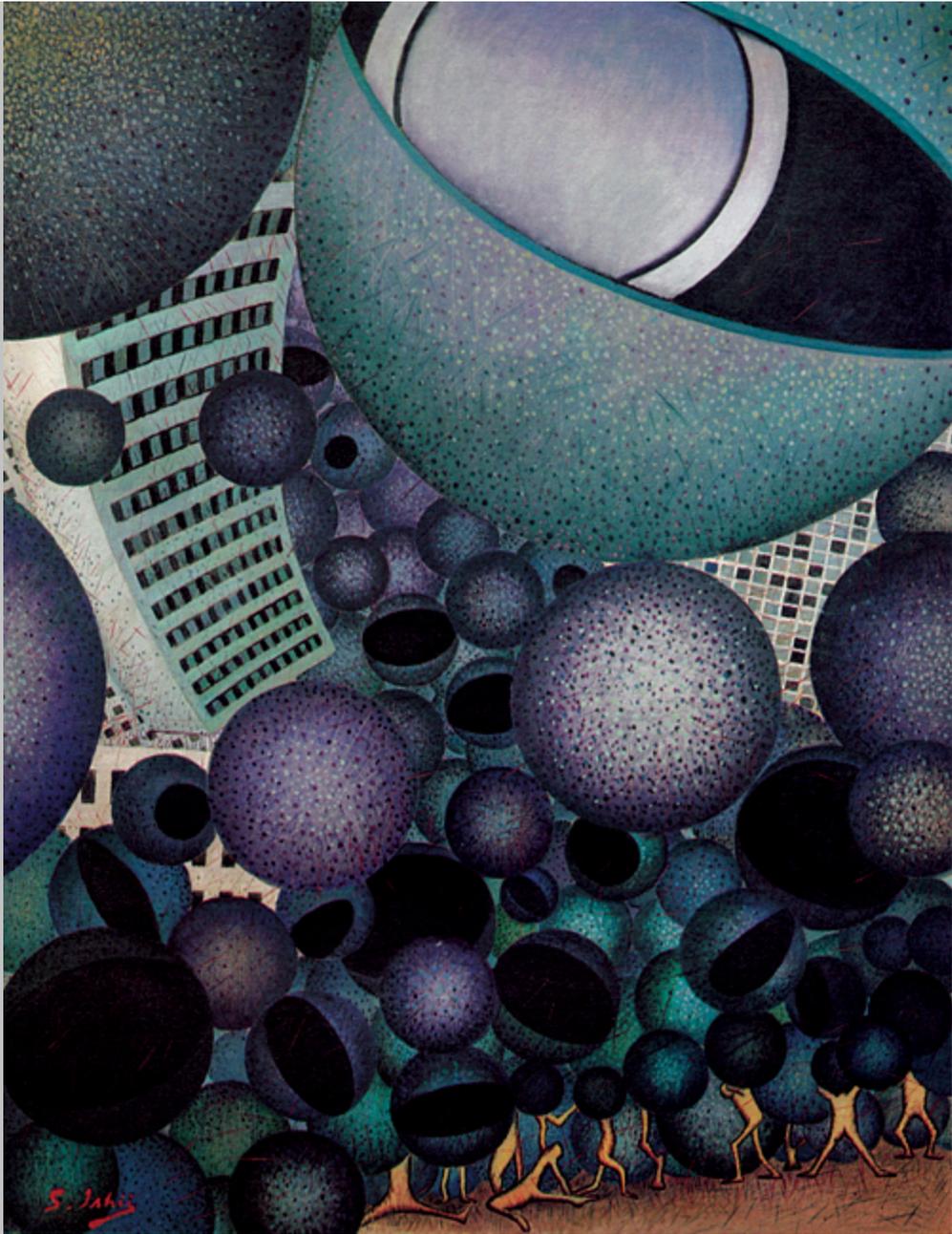
"Floating Skulls"

[anp3027]



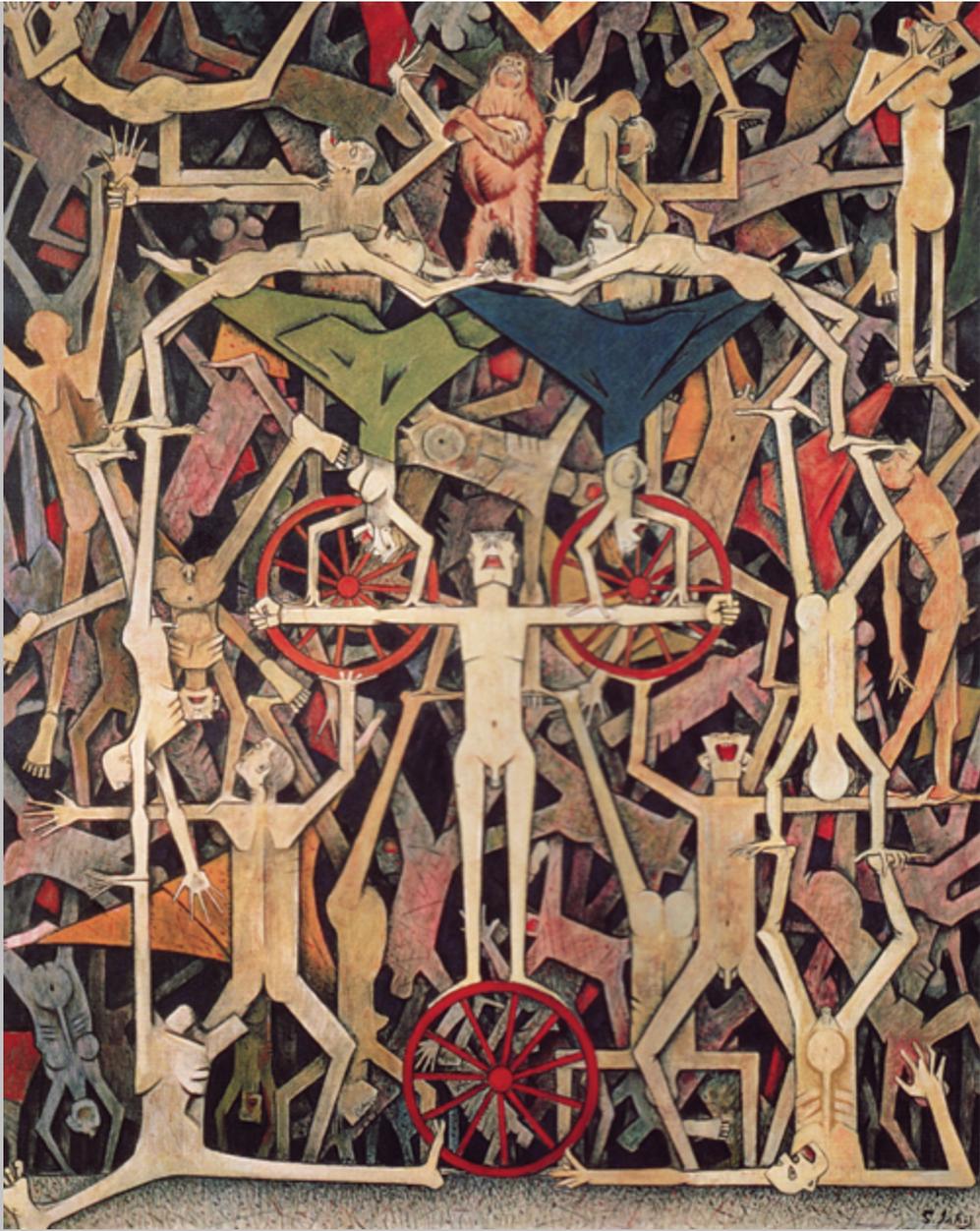
“Under Martial Law III”

[anp3001]



“Under Martial Law IV”

[anp3002]



“Acrobatics”

[anp3024]



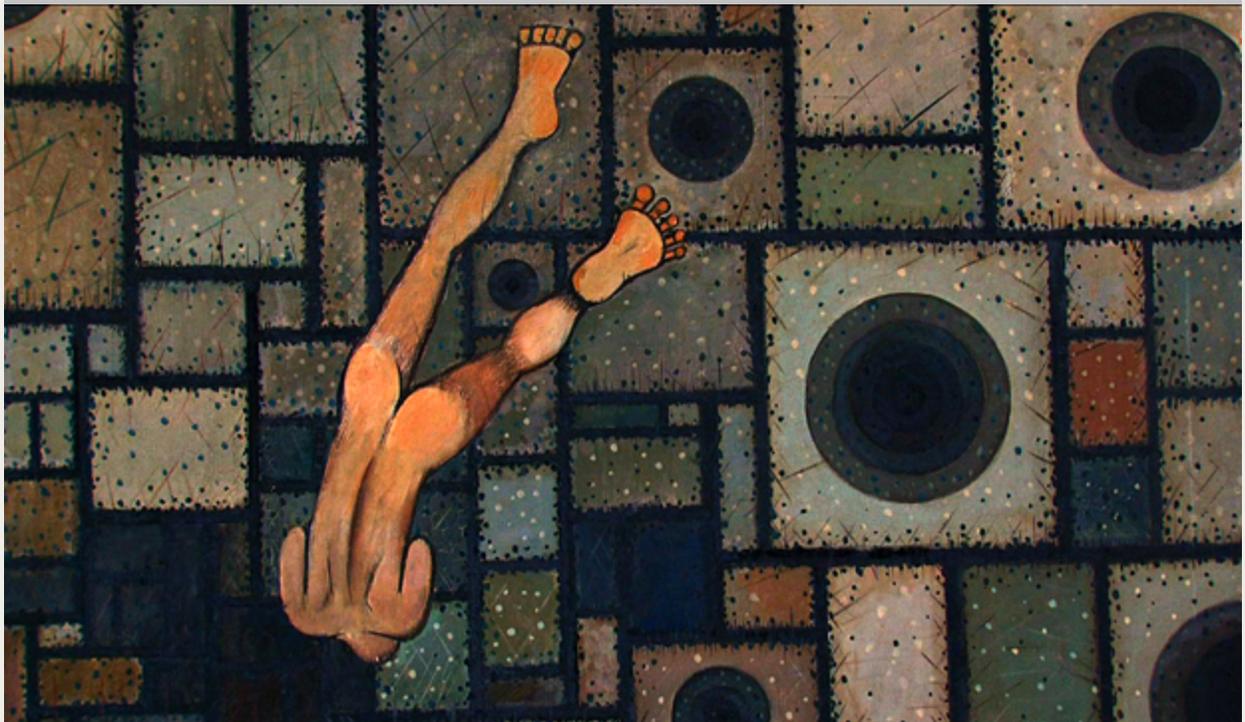
"The Trap"

[anp3008]



"The Wall"

[anp3016]



"Fissure (detail) "

[anp3014]



"Pleasure"

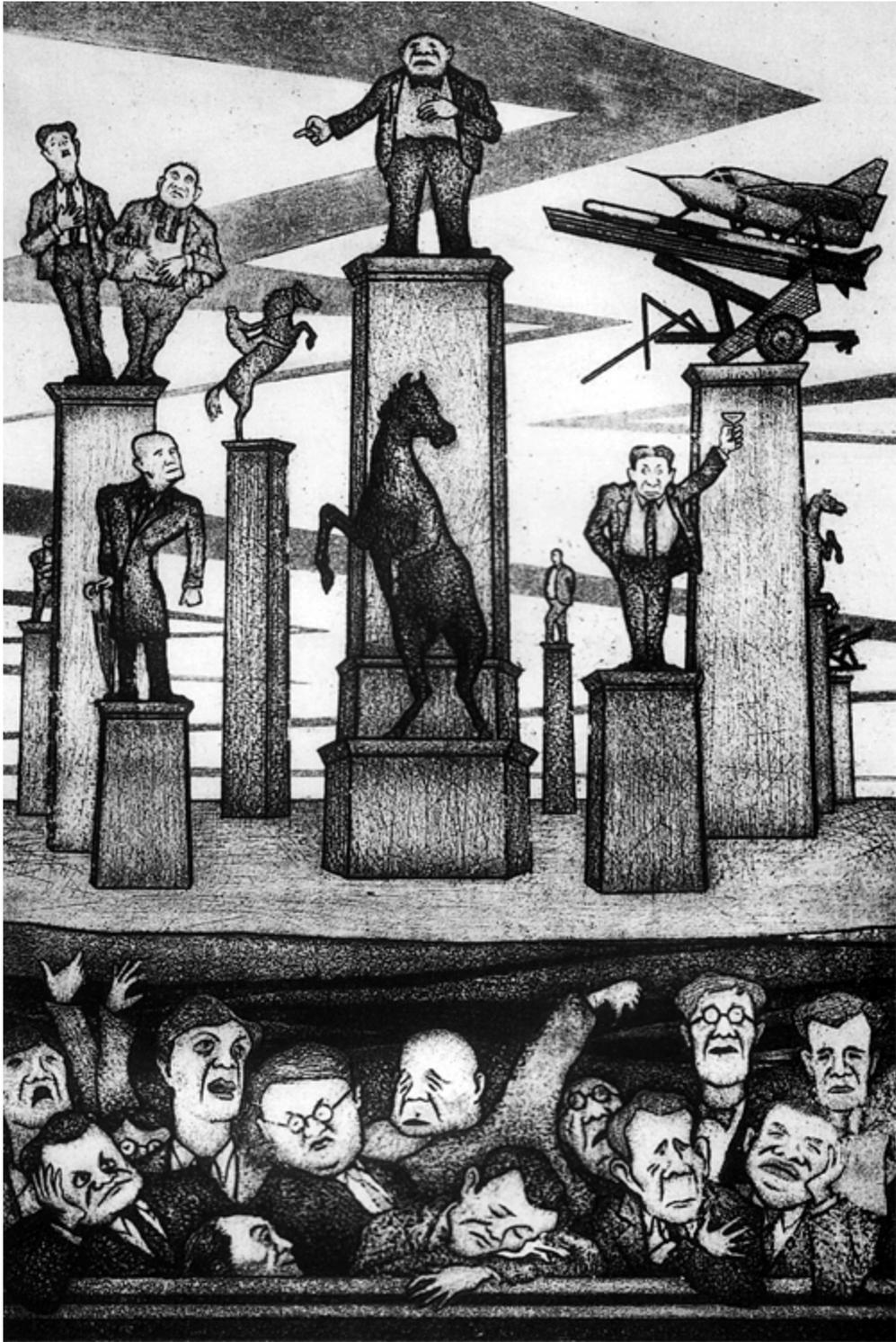
[anp3032]

In several works, Ishii set his sights on specific targets, such as war profiteers in "Untitled (Bound Men)" and warmongers in "Untitled (Monuments to Heroes)," two etchings produced in 1958. Though Ishii never named the fat-lipped, large-eared man who looms over "Decoy," a striking painting done in 1961, the year before his untimely death, it is likely he wanted viewers to imagine it was Kishi Nobusuke, the prime minister who had presided over the extension of the U.S.-Japan security treaty in 1960. In an essay published in the Association of Avant-garde Art journal in 1961, shortly before his death, Ishii referred to Kishi's forced ratification of the ANPO treaty as "a perfect crime."



“Untitled (Bound Men),” 1958

[anp3026]



"Untitled (Monuments to Heroes)," 1958

[anp3028]

Ishii's 1958 etchings target war profiteers and warmongers. The fat-lipped figure looming over rows of petrified faces in the painting "Decoy" (below) is almost certainly Prime Minister Kishi, who rammed renewal of the bilateral security treaty through the Diet in 1960. In the top row—a spectator's gallery?—a helmeted head joins others that are upsidedown.



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Links

[“ANPO: Art X War” official website](#)

[“ANPO: Art X War” in Wikipedia](#)

[“Japan Focus” website: Linda Hoaglund, “ANPO: Art X War—In Havoc’s Wake,” *The Asia-Pacific Journal*, vol. 9, issue 41, no. 5, October 10, 2011](#)

[“Art in America” website: Ryan Holmberg, “Know Your Enemy: Anpo,” January 1, 2011](#)

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