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*Japan and Asia: representations  
of selfness and otherness*

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VOL. 4 – SPRING 2018

JAPAN AND ASIA: REPRESENTATIONS OF SELFNESS AND OTHERNESS

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# ***The disasters of peace: Social discontent in the manga of Tsuge Tadao and Katsumata Susumu – Exhibited at the HONOLULU MUSEUM OF ART***

Hawai'i: Honolulu Museum of Art, 30 November 2017 – 15 April 2018.

Review by Jamie TOKUNO (Independent Researcher, Hawaii, USA)

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Art cannot exist in a vacuum, and certainly cannot be fully appreciated without the proper context; this is especially true of the Honolulu Museum of Art exhibit *The Disasters of Peace: Social Discontent in the Manga of Tsuge Tadao and Katsumata Susumu*, where the sketches of socially-minded manga artists Tsuge Tadao and Katsumata Susumu were on display for the first time in the United States from 30 November 2017 through 15 April 2018. Both artists use manga as a medium to explore the daily struggles faced by marginalised communities in Japan, based on their own personal experiences. Tsuge, born and raised in the slums of postwar Tokyo, offers insight into the plight of veterans and the homeless and draws on his experience working in a blood bank in the decades after the war. Katsumata was an anti-nuclear activist whose work exposed the inhumane conditions of nuclear power plant workers in Japan decades before the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear disaster. Stephen Salel, the museum's Robert F. Lange Curator of Japanese Art, constructed for visitors a number of wonderfully in-depth and interactive supplementary audiovisual aids to facilitate a richer understanding of the sociological underpinnings of the exhibit. According to Salel, the curatorial intent of the exhibit was to allow visitors to relate to the difficulties and realities depicted in the featured work, and to examine how art can speak to past events around the world that might echo what other communities currently face. *The Disasters of Peace* presented the viewing public with an unusual opportunity to learn about the struggles of Japan's postwar society.

Two walls of text were placed at both entrances to the exhibit, to preface the artists and topic to visitors. The first summarised the exhibit itself, which draws parallels with Francisco Goya's 19th-century prints *The Disasters of War*, and also briefly introduced

the manga anthology *Garo*, which was also featured in the exhibit. Interestingly, this first text closed with a remark about how this exhibit might resonate with Americans, in the current volatile social and political climate. This had the effect of constructing a somewhat American-centric lens that was slightly jarring, as it seemed to circumscribe the scope of the applicability of the exhibit's underlying message. The second blurb spoke more broadly to Japanese art enthusiasts by highlighting the exhibit's placement within the museum's mission to "expand and significantly enhance its renowned collection of Japanese works on paper". *The Disasters of Peace* is the second instalment of an ongoing series that focuses on a different, distinct genre within the manga medium. Its predecessor, the 2016 exhibit *Visions of Gothic Angels: Japanese Manga by Takaya Miou*, featured gothic art, technical skill and the influence of the Renaissance on the artistic style of Takaya Miou. Salel explained that, given the emphasis of the inaugural instalment on form, his intentions for this exhibit was to feature artists who consciously avoid craftsmanship, instead electing to use the approach of *heta-uma* (beautifully interpreted by Salel as "brilliantly clumsy", and which literally translates as "bad-good") to focus on the content of the art over its style.

Echoing this philosophy, the exhibit's only adornment for the framed black-and-white pages was the subtle backdrop of blown-up cutouts from the artists' dystopian urban landscapes, seemingly to draw the viewer's eyes immediately to the featured manga sketches. The scenes depicted in these selected pages were disconcerting and troubling; the *heta-uma* style, so decidedly un-*kawaii*, of the drawings exacerbates this effect. This aesthetic in manga is an intriguing contrast to the *kawaii* (literally "cute") style, which relies heavily on big-eyed, childlike cuteness, that is often found in 'mainstream' manga genres. The *heta-uma* style is especially apparent in Tsuge's work, which was influenced by post-war photographers Domon Ken and Tomatsu Shohei, famous for his black-and-white images of *hibakusha* (atomic bomb survivors). Tsuge and Katsumata use their work as vehicles for social commentary on a number of issues that have long been a source of Japan's post-war malaise. Tsuge's *Kuzu no ichi* ('Trash Market') and *Yoru yo yuruyaka ni* ('Gently Goes the Night'), and Katsumata's *Shinkaigyo* ('Deep Sea Fish') were the featured stories, but the exhibit has also included selections from Tsuge's *Oka no ue de Vincent van Gogh wa* ('Up on a Hilltop, Vincent van Gogh') and *Showa no eika* ('Song of Showa'), and Katsumata's *Hanbei* ('Hanbei') and *Kapparō* ('Mister Kappa').

*Kuzu no ichi*, published in 1972, was based off of Tsuge's experiences growing up in the slums of Katsushika Ward, one of Tokyo's more economically hard-hit wards which took longer to recover than other parts of the country. Blood banks were introduced to Japan by the Americans during the Occupation, but as the concept of a philanthropic, donation-based blood bank was incompatible with Japan's post-war society, these blood banks known as places where the impoverished would exchange 'ooze for booze'. These blood banks attracted the homeless, war veterans and other socially marginalised people who would exchange their blood for cash, which created the stigma of blood banks as a market for "human trash", hence the title of Tsuge's graphic novel. Tsuge's experience working in a blood bank, face-to-face with members of these marginalised populations, drove him to create art that would show the public what socially marginalised people's daily lives were like. Similarly, selected pages from *Yoru yo yuruyaka ni*, published in 1970, emphasise how psychological stress in post-war Japan festered and led to further social problems such as sexual harassment. The selected pages from both *Kuzu no ichi* in the exhibit depict such scenes almost wordlessly, with minimal or no speech bubbles, and the effect is powerful.

Katsumata's *Shinkaigyo* was the most heavily featured display, perhaps due to the particular socio-political relevance of its theme: the dangers of nuclear energy. Katsumata Susumu, who passed away in 2007, was a nuclear physicist who was a political activist who protested the rash development of nuclear energy in the 1970s and 1980s. *Shinkaigyo* was published in 1984, almost three decades before the Fukushima nuclear disaster; but in the aftermath of 3/11, it has gained more attention due the prophetic nature of its content. Though more aesthetically palatable than Tsuge's distinctly *heta-uma* style, the clearly anti-nuclear message of *Shinkaigyo* lends a menacing tone to its material. The sketches selected for the exhibit focus on the lives of employees who work at a Japanese nuclear plant, and what Dr Ryan Holmberg, the first American art history scholar on *Garo* and who was a key consultant during Salel's development of the exhibit, calls the "inhumanity of nuclear power".<sup>1</sup> Katsumata deliberately depicts the violence of this inhumanity at the very mundane level of the daily lives of the workers. One excerpt depicts workers mopping and scrubbing the floor in a section of the reactor, only to realise that they are being blasted with radiation. Another highlights the psychological and physical stress caused by lack of proper ventilation for workers,

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<sup>1</sup> Available from <https://youtu.be/fHkeCHNfCqU> [Accessed 3 April 2018]

as one employee has a panic attack and struggles to remove his gas mask. The abysmal working conditions of nuclear reactor employees and the blatant managerial neglect of proper regulations portrayed by Katsumata in *Shinkaigyo* is deeply concerning, especially in the light of the Fukushima nuclear disaster. According to the World Nuclear Association, there are currently 394,137 operable nuclear reactors globally, not including the over half-a-million that are either planned, proposed, or currently under construction.<sup>2</sup> This of course begs the question of how many of these hundreds of thousands of nuclear reactors subject their workers to similar conditions, and leads the viewer to speculate what the quality of regulations and management must be like in reality. The immediacy and the ubiquity of this concern suggests that Salel's hopes that the exhibit would allow visitors to relate to the difficulties and realities depicted in these manga are well-placed; Katsumata's work in particular illustrate how manga is can be used as an educational tool as well as a medium for social commentary that could help drive policies to prevent future nuclear catastrophes.

In addition to these featured manga, the exhibit also presented visitors with an inside look at the production-end of manga during the late 1960s and early 1970s. The sketches from Katsumata's *Hanbei* (1969), which depict interactions between a family of *kappa* (Japanese mythical water imps) and humans in what can be construed as environmental commentary, which were on display are of particular interest due to the large swathes of blue and green colour pencil that shaded some of the panels in a seemingly haphazard fashion. Salel explained that Katsumata used those shadings to indicate to the publisher which screen tone to use for that particular panel. The sketches from *Hanbei* were placed adjacent to a glass case in the middle of the exhibit floor, which displayed the final product after the screentones have been added, to give the viewer a behind-the-scenes glimpse of the full production cycle. The same case also showcased several other graphic novels by both artists.

Another case displayed issues of *Garo* whose covers were illustrated by Tsuge and Katsumata. This was accompanied by one of four iPads in total that were used in this exhibit. On the device was a stunning grid of *Garo* covers, each of which, when touched, expanded into a larger image of the selected cover along with the issue number, publi-

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<sup>2</sup> Available from <http://www.world-nuclear.org/information-library/facts-and-figures/world-nuclear-power-reactors-and-uranium-requireme.aspx> [Accessed 28 April 2018]

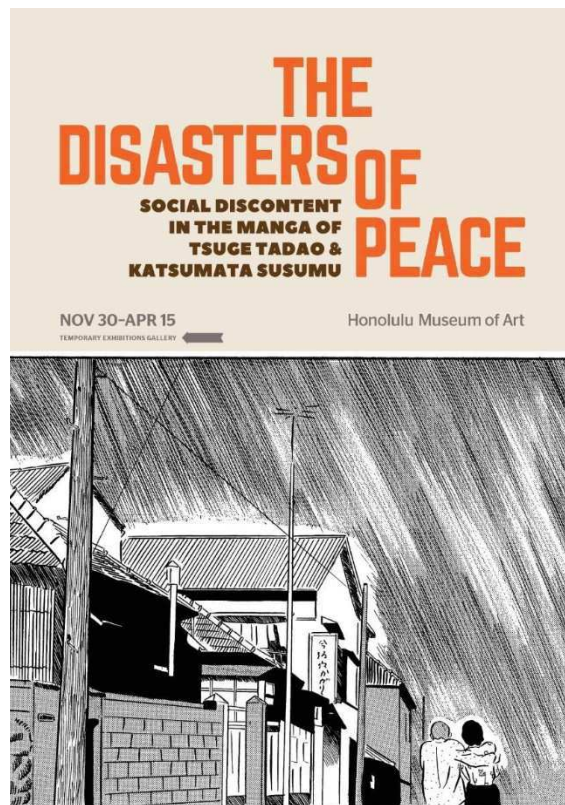


cation month and year, and the name of the artist. The other iPads in the exhibit featured videos offering brief biographies of Tsuge and Katsumata as well as a series of short clips outlining a “History of Nuclear Incidents in Japan”. Part of the exhibit was also partitioned off to allow for a screen projection that displayed English translations of the selected pages featured in the exhibit.

This marvellous array of audiovisual resources provided viewers with supplementary, contextualising information about the wider socio-political, environmental contexts in which these works are situated. Moreover, this exhibit extends beyond the limits of its physicality as a temporary display in Honolulu, Hawai’i. Salel expressed his commitment to harnessing the power of technology to elevate the Honolulu Museum of Art’s exposure on the global stage, as well as to allow visitors to read more about the show than what can be written in the limited physical space of the exhibit. His curatorial philosophy that supplementary text blurbs printed next to each work can only provide so much contextual information to a limited audience has also prompted the museum to keep the exhibit’s supplementary materials available online in digital form. These include two hour-long lectures given by Dr Ryan Holmberg on the history of *Garo* magazine and Katsumata Susumu’s anti-nuclear manga are available on the Salel’s YouTube account. The Honolulu Museum of Art is also developing a manga website, which will serve as a digital platform for the museum’s manga series exhibits.

Given the diverse range of manga subgenres, it may not seem surprising that the medium has also been used historically as a means for social commentary on Japan’s nuclear woes and for raising awareness about the plight of Japan’s socially marginalised communities. But the Honolulu Museum of Art’s exhibit brings to the forefront an awareness that peace is not always what it seems, and forces viewers to bear witness to the violence of daily life, made all the more disconcerting by the use of manga, so closely associated with entertainment and Japan’s signature *kawaii* stylistic approach, for its depiction. The decision to focus on manga artists who have employed their work towards social activism in this instalment has further demonstrated to art audiences the complexity and versatility of manga as a medium.

The next exhibit in the museum’s manga series will be in 2021, and will be featured in the museum’s main exhibit hall. The focus of the upcoming exhibit will be on *shōjo* manga, its historical development, the artwork of women during the early 20th century leading up to the work of a selection of current *shōjo* manga artists.



**Fig. 1.** Flyer from the Exhibit *The Disasters of Peace: Social Discontent in the manga of Tsuge Tadao and Katsumata Susumu* (30 November 2017 – 15 April 2018). © **Courtesy of the Honolulu Museum of Art, Hawai'i (2013)**

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