

Capital of Un-Commerce

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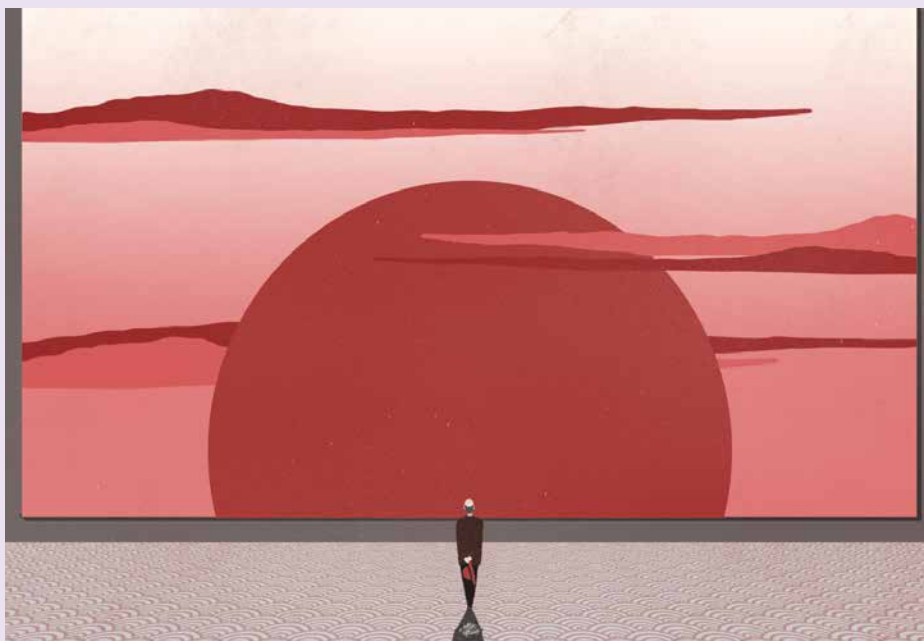
Recognized for its history of pioneering, experimental contemporary art and once an international art-market destination, how did Tokyo lose its centrality in the region?

For decades Japan was the primary source of and destination for innovative contemporary art in East Asia. The period from the mid-1950s to the early 1970s was a relay race of avant-garde movements, from the visceral experimentation of the Gutai Art Association to the absurdist happenings of the Neo-Dada Organizers and Hi-Red Center, followed by the austere, beguiling installations of Mono-ha—each of them drastically redefining contemporary art. These years also saw the establishment of what was then Asia’s largest visual-arts infrastructure, comprising dozens of galleries, auction houses and museums whose influence reached across the region and beyond.

Yet, despite its strong foundations and rich history, since the 1990s Tokyo has been eclipsed by cities such as Beijing, Shanghai and now Hong Kong for renown as Asia’s preeminent destination for contemporary art—both in terms of the market and creative innovation. International hype and Western gallery presence have followed new wealth, as China’s economy and its collector base have grown enormously. By contrast, the Japanese art scene is treated as an afterthought in the region. So, despite all of Japan’s early advances, how did it come to this?

This question has lingered on my mind over the past decade, and now in my role as director of Blum & Poe in Tokyo, it has taken on a new, particular immediacy. In late 2012, the Los Angeles-based gallery announced that it had established an office in Tokyo, followed by opening its gallery space in September 2014. This made Blum & Poe the first major Western contemporary gallery to open in Japan. Since the gallery announced its intentions, I’ve been asked countless times “Why Tokyo and not Hong Kong?”—which has struck me as symptomatic of a sometimes-blind consensus that currently surrounds Hong Kong, and is indicative of how the overall discourse about art so often focuses excessively on commerce at the expense of history and culture. The once-dominant Japanese art scene may have lost its centrality, but its historical and cultural importance is enduring and should not be ignored. Tokyo offers an essential alternative perspective on how commerce and culture can coexist in Asia.

To advocate for Tokyo’s relevance today is not to suggest that it was always,



or is currently, an ideal model. For all the creative experimentation of the postwar period and the country’s rise as a global economic power, the prominence of the Japanese art scene was partly assured by the fact that its neighbors were burdened with less fortuitous social, political and economic conditions, allowing Japan to shine brighter by default. Even within Japan, while the 1960s and 1970s are retrospectively celebrated as an era of avant-garde experimentation, this occurred largely in spite of the gallery system, which consisted predominantly of rental galleries that charged artists substantial fees to exhibit. The contemporary market was always quite limited, as galleries that nurtured their artists’ careers rather than merely providing a venue for display were the exception.

Instead, in postwar Japan the market for modern European works grew rapidly. Japanese collectors and corporations developed a seemingly insatiable hunger for Impressionist and prewar modern art, which prompted Christie’s to hold its first Asian sale in Tokyo in 1969 and open its first Asian branch here in 1972. That same year, Wildenstein & Co. opened a Tokyo showroom, bringing in Monets and Manets from its abundant stock in New York. Other overseas dealers did business here on a constant basis from the 1970s through

to the 1980s. Yet, by the time Sotheby’s had opened its Tokyo outpost in 1989, the economy had overheated. No sooner had Van Gogh’s *Portrait of Dr. Gachet* (1890) sold to a Japanese buyer for a record-breaking USD 82.5 million in May 1990 than the economic bubble burst and Japan slipped into financial decline, its fledgling collector base all but disappearing with it.

Given the Japanese art market’s precipitous collapse, we will never know whether domestic collectors, then so focused on European imports, would or could have been turned on to supporting Japanese contemporary art. Although a dozen internationally minded galleries opened in Tokyo during the 1990s, they faced formidable obstacles in cultivating a domestic contemporary market. There is no tradition of collecting and donating to museums as there is in the West, nor any tax incentives to do so. The crash in value of all assets, art included, made buyers wary. In such a climate, it was difficult for contemporary dealers to build confidence, not least when they themselves existed literally on the margins. Even today, few of even the top-tier galleries can afford rents in the city center. This is not inconsequential: the general absence of street names and numbering makes navigation confusing for all but the most regular visitors.

While Japan's galleries and art fairs have had difficulty asserting a global presence during the past two decades, this has been compensated for to some extent by transpacific institutional ventures. Some of the most influential surveys co-organized by Japanese and US museums include "Against Nature: Japanese Art in the Eighties" (San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 1989); "A Primal Spirit: Ten Contemporary Japanese Sculptors" (Hara Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo, and Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1990); and "Japanese Art After 1945: Scream Against the Sky" (Yokohama Museum of Art and Guggenheim SoHo, New York, 1994). With no outposts of Japanese galleries overseas, and few Western galleries representing contemporary Japanese artists, these exhibitions maintained a prominent Japanese narrative presence abroad, which in turn attracted foreign buyers.

Nevertheless, in the two decades since 1990, times changed in a fundamental way. The globalization of the art world had begun during the very same period in which Japan's financial and cultural policy lost its way and was too slow to catch up. While numerous major museums continued to open across the country, typically after a few years their curatorial ambitions shrank along with their budgets, which favored cheaper, easier options, such as hosting traveling shows of brand-name foreign museums' collections. Japan's main art fair, established in 1992 as Asia's first major event of its kind, the Nippon Contemporary Art Festival, was not able to sustain itself on the contemporary market alone; in 2005 it added antiques, crafts, *nihonga*, early modern and contemporary art under one roof in its reinvention as Art Fair Tokyo. Still only a handful of regional galleries participate, and few international visitors attend. The establishment of the Fukuoka Triennale in 1999 and the Yokohama Triennale in

2001 added two high-profile events to the Japanese calendar, but in a regional context they struggled to stand out among other biennials that had longer histories and bigger budgets, such as Gwangju and the Asia Pacific Triennial in Brisbane. Even private efforts such as the Mori Art Museum, opened in 2003, and the permanent installations of the Benesse Art Site Naoshima, in the Seto Inland Sea, have only had a limited effect in drawing international focus back to Japan.

Tokyo's enduring potential as a hub lies in its cultural capital—from art to architecture, fashion, design, craft, literature, music, dance and cuisine—that is still unrivaled in Asia. Yet, to open a gallery here requires diligent negotiation of one's position in the local context, where cultural sensitivities can run high. In Tokyo, news of Blum & Poe's planned opening mostly triggered reactions of excitement and enthusiasm, but there were also noticeable grumblings of cynicism and suspicion. Wry jokes were made about this being a "black ships" moment—a reference to the episode from 1853 when the United States Navy turned up and threatened to attack if Japan didn't open up to trade. Jokes indeed, yet humor often belies real anxiety. Even some prominent figures in the Tokyo art scene seemed genuinely paranoid that this was the beginning of a hostile, foreign takeover to vacuum up all of Japan's top artists and collectors. People here seem to forget that even Tokyo's homegrown galleries do not by any means limit their clientele to Japan, and that foreign clients visit Japan not just for the art but because the cultural and commercial landscape as a whole is so diverse.

This introverted skepticism is truly symptomatic of a much larger sociocultural issue of deflated confidence in the post-bubble era. Japan has for centuries been highly conflicted about its relationship with the outside world, in turns embracing and rejecting foreign influence and validation. Despite the stereotypes of being a monolithic society, Japan is very much a hybrid culture with its own internal diversity and susceptibility to regional and global trends. Yet the Japanese waver between their willingness to admit this and their preference to search for what they believe is unique about their country. In other words, it is a question of controlling one's national narrative.

In the Japanese art world today, the most prominent source of a cultural and commercial narrative now originates from abroad. A growing number of non-Japanese scholars and curators specializing in contemporary Japanese art, mostly based in North America, have taken the lead. In the past few years this research has borne fruit in the form of several important exhibitions of postwar art at institutions in the US and Europe, most notably the two

shows that took place in New York in 2013: "Tokyo 1955–1970: A New Avant-Garde" at MoMA, and "Gutai: Splendid Playground" at the Guggenheim. The latter exhibition, co-curated by Alexandra Munroe and Ming Tiampo, was explicit in its aim to "decenter" the Western-dominated narrative of Modernism by revealing the links between the Gutai group and their various Western counterparts. Meanwhile, in the past five years the value of postwar Japanese art has surged in the market. Altogether, this overseas boom is undeniably a great gain for Japan, but within the Tokyo art world it has inspired conflicted feelings, with some expressing pride yet also regret that this art-historical recognition and its concomitant commercial success are not being driven more actively from within, and that domestic exhibitions of the same subject matter do not receive even a fraction of the attention.

While the globalization of the art world has reached a point where the Euro-American-centric scene is more willing than ever to engage with the history of art in Asia on a scholarly level, there remains an unfortunate discrepancy between the overseas commercial success of some two-dozen Japanese artists and the still-sleepy domestic market. But there are positive signs of change. The Agency for Cultural Affairs initiated a new grant program to support exhibitions of contemporary Japanese art in overseas fairs and festivals, which has enabled younger galleries with their art-fair participation.

Tokyo will soon see another US gallery open here: Fergus McCaffrey, known for representing the estates of Gutai pioneers. It is unlikely that a flood of Western galleries will open up here anytime soon, as only those that have a long and specific relationship with Japanese art would choose Tokyo as a base of operations, but this trend, however small, represents an important diversification in the art scenes in both Tokyo and Asia as a whole.

It would be absurd to suggest that some government grants and the opening of two Western galleries in Tokyo mark a comeback for Japan. Nor is there any question of Japan regaining "supremacy" among peers in Asia. But with the global art market becoming increasingly synonymous with the luxury lifestyle industry, if Tokyo can do more to harness its international appeal as a high-end destination founded not just on commerce but on culture, then it has the potential to be an enduring alternative model to the boom-and-bust, emerging art markets of the decade—remaining quiet, reserved, in some ways inscrutable, but always worth the effort to explore.

ILLUSTRATIONS BY RICCARDO FANO



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