

File Age 20/9/85

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Japanese sensitivity for natural materials

EIGHT galleries in Melbourne are showing the works of a number of contemporary Japanese artists. Along with a series of lectures and screenings of films and videos, these exhibitions (mostly ending 27 September) reciprocate a similar program of Australian art presented in Tokyo two years ago ('Continuum 83') and collectively make up 'Continuum 85'.

Contemporary Japanese art is rarely seen in Australia. Apart from one or two shows by individual artists, the last substantial survey was mounted in 1975 at the NGV. Only two of the artists in the current program of exhibitions, Korin Moriya at the ACCA (Dallas Brooks Drive, the Domain) and Takuji Azechi at the Gryphon (Melbourne State College) were included in the 1975 show.

Given this unfamiliarity it will take an effort of will on the part of each viewer not to see these works as simple reflections of their makers' sustaining culture. What little one knows of Japan is likely to be reinforced by the works on view.

But one thing becomes obvious from a cursory reading of the catalogue. As a number of commentators inform us, these artists work in a society in which little interest is taken in contemporary forms of art.

A contemporary art subsidised by public funds, as we have here, is bad enough, and so is one with no audience to speak of. Both situations offer artists the last thing they need, and that is a licence to be extravagant in lieu of anything else to do. In attempting to meet the needs of a relatively wide and diverse market, an artist at least avoids the futility and sterility of so much avant-garde art.

As one would expect in a show of Japanese art, a good number of the works indicate a real sensitivity for natural materials. Masafumi Maita's two sculptures at the Gryphon — one a large spiral propped above the floor and the other a beam held out from the wall — include twigs and natural fibres among their diverse materials, which are tightly bound to each other like strands in a rope.

Maita, it appears, was once in-

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fluenced by the work of Joseph Beuys, whose concern for latent and suppressed energies is evident in both of his pieces. I notice that Maita has recently mounted an exhibition in France as a tribute to Gaston Bachelard, the most stimulating of all modern critics.

Supplementing this concern with natural materials is a fascination with one or all of the elements. In their catalogue notes both Maita and Noriko Kurashige, who is showing at Christine Abrahams (27 Gipps Street, Richmond), mention the time they have spent in contemplating the sea. Kurashige's sculptural works are dispersed through the space of the gallery like tide-wrack.

It appears that the enthusiastic embrace of Western modes of art found in Kurashige's work and that of her fellow exhibitors at Abrahams, Naoko Yasuda and Hiroko Yamamoto, is representative of the youngest generation of Japanese artists. Their determinedly scattered works are a rejection of the poise and preciousness of traditional Japanese art.

The same rejection is evident in Ushio Shinohara's sculptures and crowded paintings at the ACCA. Shinohara has lived in New York for 15 years, so the brashness and

vulgarity of his work may say little about modern Japan.

On this point one has fewer doubts about the posters and graphics on display at the George Paton (Union Building, University of Melbourne). This component of 'Continuum' includes a Japanese newspaper stand and was curated by Koichi Tanikawa, whose vaguely absurdist drawings are on show at Pinacotheca (10 Waltham Place, Richmond).

The artists whose works I'd like to see more of are Shigeo Toya and Chieo Senzaki (both at Pinacotheca), Kaoru Hirabayashi (at Gerstman Abdallah), and Toshikatsu Endo, whose baffling and brutally simple 'Canal' runs the whole length of the Gryphon. Toya's 'Wavering Pillar', a tall, wooden column cross-hatched with deep lacerations and daubed with powdery white paint, has a real and quite commanding presence.

A selection of films and videos is showing at RMIT's Glasshouse Theatre (ends 28 Sept.) and the RMIT Gallery is staging a photographic exhibition by the architect, Tadao Ando.

'Continuum 85' strikes me as a worthwhile venture, not least because it is reciprocal exhibition. My only strong objection is that this survey of Japanese art is too obviously one-sided in its emphasis. In 'Continuum 89' I'd like to see some attention given to those artists who work in the traditional modes.