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The Absurdity of Atrocity

Takeda Hideo

as Erotic Grotesque

Kit Brooks

Takeda Hideo (b. 1948) has earned a reputation as an artist of acerbic, satirical humor and distorted, erotic aesthetics. His work is wide-ranging, from sculpture and photography to paintings and prints, though he is best known for his most prolific sphere of activity: sharp caricatures that ridicule anything and everything from current events and national stereotypes to figures from global history and mythology. Takeda's visual style and sense of humor is typified by his debut print portfolio, *Mon Mon* (1976) (fig. 1). Published just three years after his graduation from Tama Art University in Tokyo, *Mon Mon* achieved critical acclaim and received that year's Bungei Shunjū Manga Award, which is given to artists for outstanding achievements in satirical illustration.¹ The title of the portfolio is a slang term for traditional Japanese full-body tattoos and those who have them; in the modern era, such tattoos have become indelibly associated with members of the Japanese criminal underworld, the yakuza, a subculture that has been both stigmatized and lionized in Japanese society and global media.² The prints in Takeda's *Mon Mon* series show male figures both defined and confined by the marks on their skin—the designs permeating their flesh so deeply that even their “poop” is tattooed. The term *monmon* is also a synonym for “horny,” and some of the portfolio's subjects are engaged in sex acts, with their nudity somehow both covered and emphasized by the tattoos that serve as their primary garments. *Mon Mon*'s absurd

characterizations seem to poke fun at the aura of masculine bravado that surrounds these figures in the popular consciousness. With these associations in mind, the series can be seen as exemplary of Takeda's approach, combining tattoos and sex and permeated throughout by his razor-sharp sense of humor and preference for the ludicrous.

Mon Mon also characterizes the tension in many of Takeda's works—between a timeless humor and a specific cultural framework. His making fun of the tattooed yakuza in *Mon Mon* can be quickly appreciated by anyone familiar with such stereotypes in other cultures and time periods without being limited only to those with detailed knowledge of Japanese social history. Tattoos, nudity, and questions of cultural specificity are all similarly pervasive threads in Takeda's *Genpei*, a series of silkscreen prints that are the subject of this exhibition and publication (fig. 2). The title refers to the Genpei civil war of 1180–85, which saw a struggle for power between two rival families—the Minamoto and the Taira—to place an heir on the imperial throne.³ Ending with the destruction of the Taira, the war led to the establishment of the position of shogun and a system of military rulership that would last for almost seven hundred years. As elucidated by Elizabeth Oyler's essay in this volume, the Genpei War has influenced Japanese literary and performing arts for centuries through its narrativization as the epic *The Tale of the Heike* (hereafter, *Heike*).



FIGURE 1. Takeda Hideo (born 1948, Osaka, Japan), *Poop*, from the series *Mon Mon*, 1976. Screenprint, 60 × 45 cm. Collection of Paize Keulemans

Yet, despite this specific historical referent, the prints in the *Genpei* series have been appreciated internationally by many viewers who have little or no knowledge of Japanese history or culture. Indeed, a lack of familiarity cannot be a barrier, since Takeda himself claims he has never actually read *Heike*, the referents in *Genpei* drawn instead from residual impressions of the story gained by his early exposure to modern *Heike*-related media. Takeda's reinterpretations of the events of the Genpei War therefore do not replicate standard iconographies that have been transmitted over several centuries of Japanese image-making. Audiences seeking a Japanese art-historical referent often compare the aesthetics of *Genpei* to another globally familiar art form, the ukiyo-e woodblock prints popular among urban commoners in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and particularly those prints that similarly feature samurai warriors, graphic violence, and full-body tattoos. However, those factors are very generalized and neither specific to Takeda's treatment of *Heike* episodes nor sufficient for developing a critical understanding of his *Genpei* series within its own art-historical moment. Moreover, unlike many previous interpretations of the tale, which

romanticize the war and its major figures, Takeda pokes holes in such idealized characterizations, pointing out the atrocities committed and rendering them into a series of episodes that may be absurd, perverse, or morally ambivalent but are always visually striking.

Although acknowledging the relevance of more familiar Japanese aesthetics in the easy appreciation of Takeda's work, this volume seeks to situate *Genpei* more firmly within the twentieth century. Excessive attention to the factual details of the war can be distracting, for it encourages comparisons to earlier visualizations of the tale. Such interpretations pull Takeda backward through art history, severing the connections to his own contemporary context as well as his minimalist approach to hyperbolic visual humor. Satirical cartoons often rely on generalized stereotypes in order to be quickly understood without requiring additional explanations that would undercut the alacrity of the joke. And Takeda does consider himself a cartoonist—insisting upon it for the title of his 2002 solo exhibition at the Itami City Museum of Art, *Takeda Hideo's World: I'm a Cartoonist, Not an Artist!*⁴ Rather than relying solely on the specificities of historical and literary episodes or established visual lineages for these subjects, we can consider other twentieth-century Japanese trends, such as the aestheticization of grotesque sexuality known as *ero-guro-nansensu* (erotic grotesque nonsense), the civil disruption between Japanese university students and broader society in the 1960s, and the transformation of historical Japanese cultural motifs in contemporary printmaking. While these broader contexts are not intended to “explain” Takeda's artistry nor apply to him alone, they can provide alternate lenses for analyzing the *Genpei* series than have been relied upon to date. Moreover, such contexts allow for Takeda's output to be positioned among contemporaries like Yokoo Tadanori (b. 1936) or Yayanagi Go (1933–2025), artists who equally remix traditional referents with contemporary impulses, obfuscating the boundary between fine art and graphic design.

SIMPLIFICATION AND EXAGGERATION

Although simplification and exaggeration might seem like oppositional concepts, they converge in Takeda's graphic and narrative approaches. He does not use models when drawing his figures, relying instead on memory and a deeply ingrained understanding of form and kinetic movement. Takeda uses very few lines; he explains his tendency for exaggeration as “going beyond (*ōbā suru*)” the realistic arc of every gesture.⁵ Nevertheless, his figures are convincing, even if they are distorted and hyperbolic. His abilities may have developed during his training as a student at Tama Art University in



FIGURE 2. Takeda Hideo, Portfolio cover for *Genpei* (Kyūryūdō, 1985). Princeton University Art Museum. Museum purchase, Mary Trumbull Adams Art Fund (2026-10.1-.12)

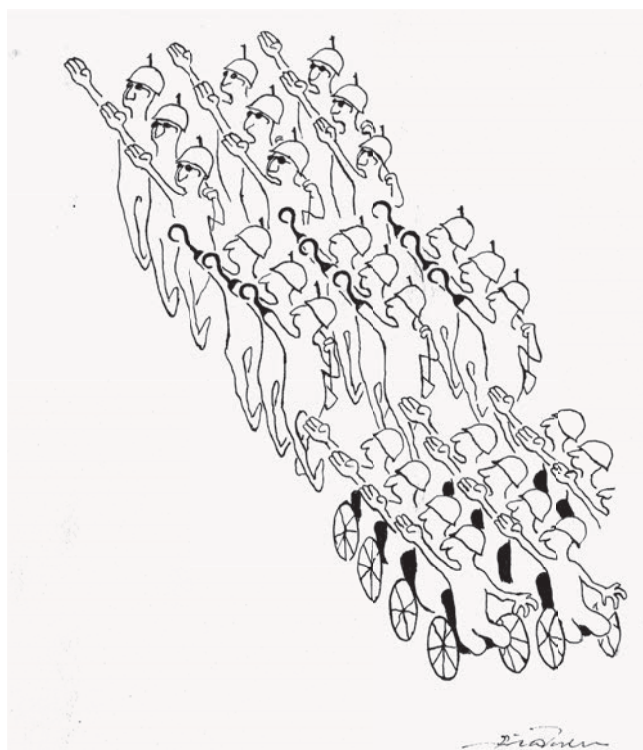


FIGURE 3. Takeda Hideo, Page from *Mme. Chang's Chinese Restaurant* (Tokyo: Nami Shobō, 1976)



FIGURE 4. Takeda Hideo, *Moving Bonsai*, ca. 2020. Ink and color, 43.8 × 35.6 cm. Princeton University Art Museum. Museum purchase, Carl Otto von Kienbusch Jr. Memorial Collection Fund (2025-19)

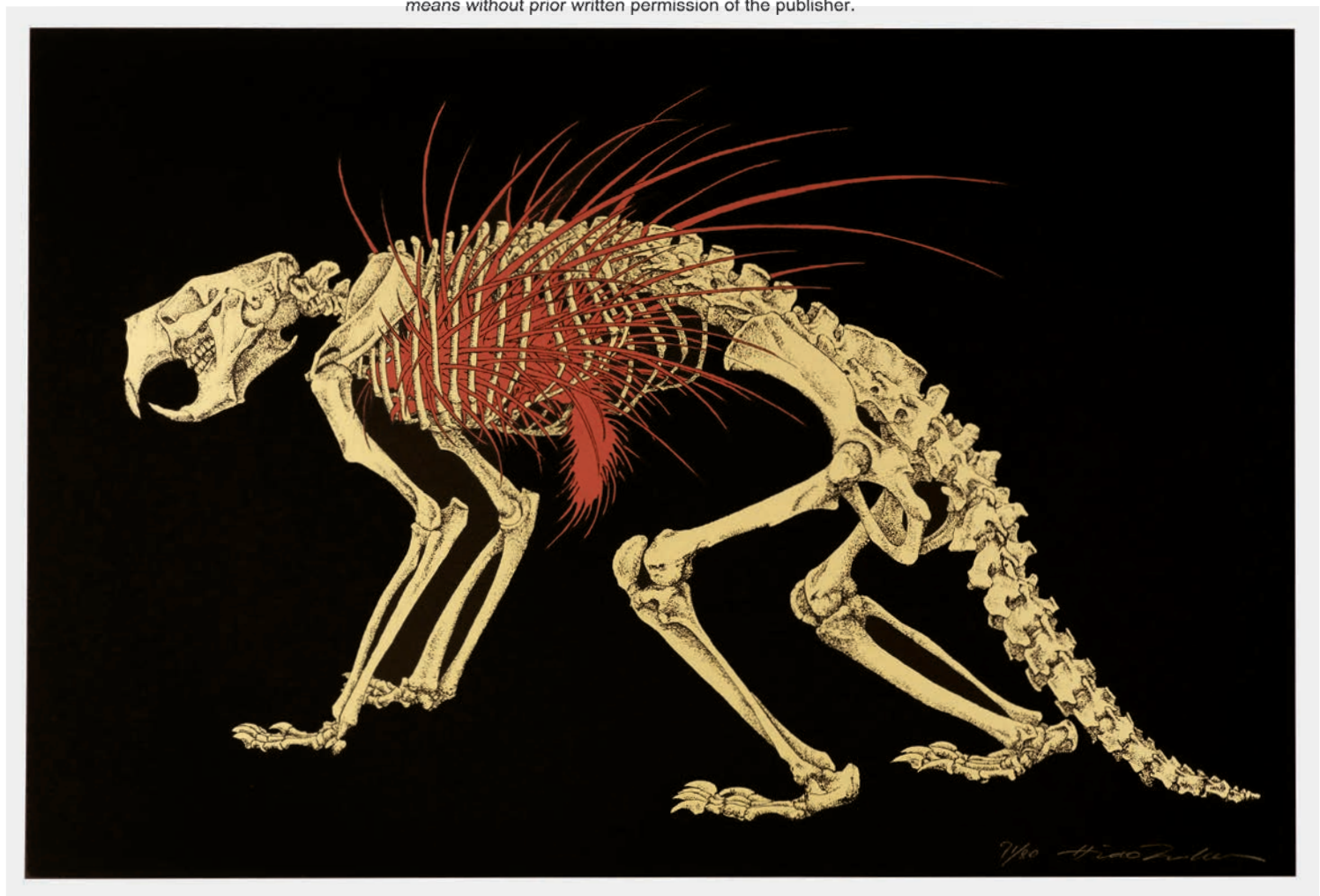


FIGURE 5. Takeda Hideo, *Canadian Porcupine*, from the series *Altamira—Moving Sculptures*, 1994. Screenprint, 52 × 72 cm. Collection of the artist

Tokyo, where he studied sculpture. Although Takeda was already proficient in drawing by the time he enrolled, studying the plastic arts would have provided a complementary training in depicting mass. His understanding of movement has also been acquired in a more direct way, through his experiences as captain of his college boxing team and the many years he spent as a construction worker in his family's roofing business in Osaka.⁶ Takeda explicitly conceives of drawing with a volumetric awareness—as a conversion from a three-dimensional plane (*men*) into a two-dimensional line (*sen*) (interview, p. 114). His figures in the *Genpei* series often have a remarkably plausible sense of fleshy, pillowy volume despite the minimal or sometimes entirely absent shading and foreshortening used to model them—a quality that transcends the aesthetics of a particular cultural moment.

Despite his concentration being in sculpture, it was while a student that Takeda decided to become a cartoonist, attributing this decision to a chance encounter at a Tokyo bookstore with a collected volume of *Playboy* cartoons. Although they express juvenile humor that he undoubtedly appreciated, it was

the ability of these cartoons to efficiently condense their ideas into a single image that most appealed to Takeda. He put together his own book of humorous drawings, *Mme. Chang's Chinese Restaurant*, which he first self-published in 1973 before successfully submitting it as his graduation thesis (fig. 3). Commercially republished in 1976, this volume marks the beginning of Takeda's commitment to encapsulating his message within the stringent confines of a single image.⁷

Playboy may have been the catalyst, but Takeda had already moved beyond its paradigm, as *Playboy* cartoons usually have text—sometimes as speech bubbles but more frequently as a brief sentence along the lower edge that stages the visual joke, and without which the humor of the image would be incomprehensible.⁸ Takeda, however, prefers no text at all in his cartoons, which are referred to as “manga” in Japanese. Although Takeda's darkly humorous, abbreviated works may not resemble the serialized graphic narratives that audiences expect from manga, for the critic and author Fukuda Tsuneari (1912–1994) it is precisely the ability to create images that are complete works in themselves, without text or plot, that makes Takeda



FIGURE 6. Aubrey Beardsley (1872–1898; born Brighton, England; died Menton, France), *The Climax*, from a portfolio of Aubrey Beardsley's drawings illustrating *Salome* by Oscar Wilde, first published 1894, printed 1907. Line block print, 33.8 × 26 cm (sheet). Princeton University Art Museum. Museum Collection (x1939-83 o)

a cartoonist in the truest sense.⁹ He frequently pokes fun at stereotypes about Japan in visual terms alone—for example, in *Moving Bonsai*, a miniaturized tree crawls out of a dull ceramic pot in search of a more ornamented habitation (fig. 4). The abandoned vessel, with its simple shape and muted color, is emblematic of the restrained, uncluttered aesthetic that is commonly associated with Japanese design principles. However, the bonsai is breaking free of these confines, choosing instead to occupy a much flashier, ostentatious ceramic, thereby taunting a national stereotype via a quick joke that relies solely on visual language. Takeda's disdain for text is perhaps taken to an extreme with the *Genpei* series, as Takeda claims he has never read the book that his images are ostensibly based upon.¹⁰

The sophistication of Takeda's ability to strip concepts to their core is clearly demonstrated in *Altamira—Moving Sculptures*, a portfolio of ten silkscreen prints depicting animal skeletons engaged in typical activities for each species: gathering eggs, having their teeth picked clean, or animated from

within by their protective quills (fig. 5). Takeda's images in the series, titled after the cave complex in northern Spain famous for its Paleolithic paintings of animals, are simplifications of a different order. The animals are stripped of all extraneous elements—even their flesh—and we understand their nature from bare bones alone. Takeda had initially attempted to work from illustrations in biological textbooks before petitioning to study directly from specimens housed in a restricted storage facility at the National Museum of Nature and Science in Tokyo (interview, p. 111–13). The insights Takeda gained and rendered in his designs were subsequently recognized by zoological specialists, who acknowledged that his depictions were more accurate than the illustrations in some textbooks.¹¹

Although it is tempting to give priority of reference to the historical artistic traditions of Japan when analyzing contemporary Japanese artists, we might also consider works that have been similarly characterized as both simplified and exaggerated and that seem to straddle the divide of legibility across East Asian and Euro-American audiences. If we consider Takeda's visual style as contrasting areas of relative simplicity with areas of intense pattern, we can see similarities with the works of the British illustrator Aubrey Beardsley (1872–1898), particularly his evocative illustrations for Oscar Wilde's (1854–1900) one-act tragedy, *Salome* (fig. 6). Beardsley's letters profess the inspiration he took from Japanese prints in developing his style; in turn, his designs became known to artists in early twentieth-century Japan through their dissemination in coterie magazines, thus becoming cyclically reintegrated into Japanese aesthetics in subsequent decades.¹² Sympathetic comparisons between Beardsley and Japanese artists have been made by the literary critic Tanemura Suehiro (1933–2004), who highlights similar juxtapositions of dense ornamentation and empty space in the works of Tsukioka Yoshitoshi (1839–1892).¹³ This characterization can be applied equally—if not more so—to Takeda's work, as the fleshy figures in *Genpei*, undifferentiated by shading, are offset by the dense pattern fields of tattoos and the repetitive details of armor and weapons, the “superabundance of ornamentation corresponding contrastively with bold omission.”¹⁴ Takeda's compositions exploit these universally appreciable design principles, which have become part of an international visual language since ukiyo-e was absorbed into European artistic practices in the later nineteenth century. The appeal of his work therefore need not be reduced to its adherence to a strictly Japanese, or East Asian, aesthetic trajectory.¹⁵

Aside from their formal qualities, similarities between Takeda and Beardsley can also be made regarding the extent to which their work “illustrates” a parent text. Like Takeda's visually driven interpretation of *Heike*, Beardsley's *Salome* is not a literal translation of the scenes in Wilde's play but a



FIGURE 7. Jean Cocteau (1889–1963; born Maisons-Laffitte, France; died Milly-la-Forêt, France), *In Church*, from *Le Potomak*, 1913–14. Reproduced in *Gurotesuku* (Grotesque) (November 1928)

complementary interpretation.¹⁶ The hyperbolic gestures and dramatic lines in the *Genpei* series are evocative rather than descriptive, distilling complex matrixes of history and memory into sharp, intense focus.

EROTIC, GROTESQUE, NONSENSE

In Japan, Beardsley's style resonated with prevalent aesthetic tendencies that would coalesce in the early twentieth century into a movement known as *ero-guro-nansensu*, derived from the English words "erotic," "grotesque," and "nonsense" and often shortened to *eroguro*.¹⁷ Each of these terms can be intuitively applied to Takeda's work in different degrees at different times, from the absurd and often horrifying caricatures of *Mme. Chang's Chinese Restaurant* to the distorted bodily proportions and eroticized configurations of the figures in *Genpei*, exemplified by the procession of warriors riding naked women instead of horses in *Surprise Attack at Hiyodorigoe* (cat. 15). Takeda's interpretations are often surprising subversions of the paradigms and characterizations expected from *Heike*, injecting a startling jolt into the appreciation of a narrative with which the viewer may have grown (overly) familiar. Although *eroguro* is most closely associated with cultural developments in 1930s Japan, scholars have identified its periodic resurgence in similar responses to widespread social trauma in both earlier and later eras, thereby connecting Takeda to a recurrent artistic phenomenon.

As a composite term, *eroguro* first appeared in Japanese media in the 1930s to describe a particular type of emerging, rebellious counterculture that manifested in bizarre mystery novels, distorted sexual imagery, and sensationalized real-life

crimes—a type of decadence born of a newly affluent (and newly bored) bourgeoisie class.¹⁸ Scholars debate almost every aspect of the movement, from its emergence, qualifying characteristics, and cohesiveness to when, or if, it ended. The ambiguity of *eroguro* is partially driven by the variety of media forms through which it was expressed, as each had its own defining qualities and trajectories of development. Although it can be difficult to identify concrete points of convergence in such a diffuse countercultural movement, the short-lived journal *Gurotesuku* (Grotesque) (1928–31) offers one example of the types of material being considered under this broad category. *Gurotesuku* included an eclectic array of deviant, pornographic, scatological, and racist articles—ranging from Surrealism and opium use in China to lesbians and striptease—until publication of the magazine was finally halted by government censorship after twenty-one issues.¹⁹ The range of images in *Gurotesuku* was equally broad. The November 1928 issue includes several reproductions from *Le Potomak* (1913–14), an experimental work by the avant-garde French artist Jean Cocteau (1889–1963) that addresses modern anxieties and features cartoonish figures and sparse text with farcical elements (fig. 7). *Gurotesuku* also included reproductions of works by earlier Japanese woodblock print artists, namely Utagawa Kuniyoshi (1798–1861; see fig. 10), Yoshitoshi, and Kawanabe Kyōsai (1831–1889), three artists with a particular reputation for fantastical and bizarre imagery that also extended to their treatment of erotic subjects.

In this same period, imagery of a new type of woman was emerging in fashion magazines, department store displays, cosmetics advertisements, and even government-sponsored painting exhibitions—the *moga*, or "modern girl." Somewhat similar to flappers in the United States, *moga* comprised a new demographic of working-class women consumers with financial independence that exemplified a new social reality of cosmopolitanism, Western sophistication, and athleticism. However, representations of the *moga* were not always positive. In the woodblock print *Tipsy*, a *moga* looks directly at the viewer with bloodshot eyes, holding a lit cigarette with a cocktail before her (fig. 8). While images of beauties, or *bijin-ga*, are almost invariably flattering to their subject, there is an unsettling quality to this portrayal. It reveals the darker side of the new glamour and Western-influenced lifestyles, and yet the print itself is exquisitely executed, with a thin application of glittering mica pigment embellishing the cocktail glass that has precipitated the *moga*'s compromised state.

The critical analysis applied to such works within the broader category of *eroguro* offers an interpretive primer for the depiction of women in *Genpei*, which may be oversimplistically perceived as misogynist and exploitative. *Tipsy* encapsulates the uneasy framing of women within *eroguro*; *moga* were

positioned as both sexually liberated and emblematic of the potential futures newly available to women beyond the conventional roles of wife and mother, but they were also representative of the corruption of traditional values brought on by Western influence.²⁰ *Eroguro* has often been characterized as misogynist, as female bodies endure literal and symbolic violence in their role as scapegoats for widespread social anxieties. Although a full appreciation of the complexities of these issues is beyond the scope of this essay, the difficulty of making binary judgments regarding imagery that appears exploitative of women may also be applied to *Genpei*. In light of Takeda's career-spanning ridicule of societal norms, his images can be read as reflecting the choices of a misogynist society rather than as a valorization of them. The women depicted in *Genpei* are subject to the same violence endured by their historical counterparts, which has often been obscured in versions of the narrative that emphasize heroic and courageous actions at the expense of stark historical realities. In contrast, the episodes of *Heike* that Takeda has selected overwhelmingly highlight acts of cowardice and deceit. In some instances, he has depicted canonically male characters with female bodily characteristics, particularly those meeting death at the hands of their enemy (see cats. 13, 22). It is as if their physical feminization represents their diminished power and a loss of control, as they join other women depicted in the series whose fates are determined only by those around them rather than through their own agency. But this is not to suggest that women in Takeda's *Genpei* are only depicted as weak—the legendary female warrior Tomoe Gozen is shown at the height of her physical domination (cat. 13), and the painful sacrifice of Lady Nii is rendered with a haunting tenderness (cat. 20). Takeda's treatment of Tomoe subsequent to the completion of the *Genpei* series continues to emphasize her martial strength in a male-dominated arena (fig. 9).

Introducing *eroguro* as an interpretive lens for analyzing *Genpei* is not to suggest the series was directly inspired by canonical *eroguro* images or literature, nor that *Genpei* and all *eroguro* have a direct countercultural objective. Nonetheless, various aspects of Takeda's work parallel themes found in *eroguro* across different time periods. *Eroguro* scholar Miriam Silverberg (1951–2008) identifies the defining characteristic of the genre as montage, namely, drawing from different sources to create a somewhat jarring effect that is not blatantly incongruous but rather a synthesized whole of disparate parts.²¹ For example, the bloodshot eyes juxtaposed with a glittering cocktail glass in *Tipsy*, as the *moga*'s gaze holds both a promising future and potential societal ruin. Takeda combines a historical framework with anachronistic tattoos, a slick silk-screen technique, and a universalizing design aesthetic—a fusion of different elements as a coherent montage that might



FIGURE 8. Kobayakawa Kiyoshi (1899–1948; born Hakata, Kyushu, Japan; died Tokyo, Japan), *Tipsy (Horoyoi)*, from the series *Modern Styles of Women (Kindai jisei shō no uchi)*, 1930. Color woodblock print with mica, 52.1 × 30.5 cm (sheet). Saint Louis Art Museum. The Langenberg Endowment Fund (119:2016)

equally fit within a broader characterization of the *eroguro* genre. Although *eroguro* is generally thought to have crystallized in the 1930s, its characteristics have been identified in both earlier and later eras of Japanese art. Suzuki Sadami locates its origins in the romantic spirit of the late Meiji era (1868–1912) and its “high collar” (*haikara*) culture of fashionable Western influence.²² For others, this timeline can be moved back even further, with the explicit sexual violence depicted in later Edo-period (1603–1868) pornographic images.²³ And whereas some see the conservative nationalism of World War II as bringing the decadence of *eroguro* to an end, others see its

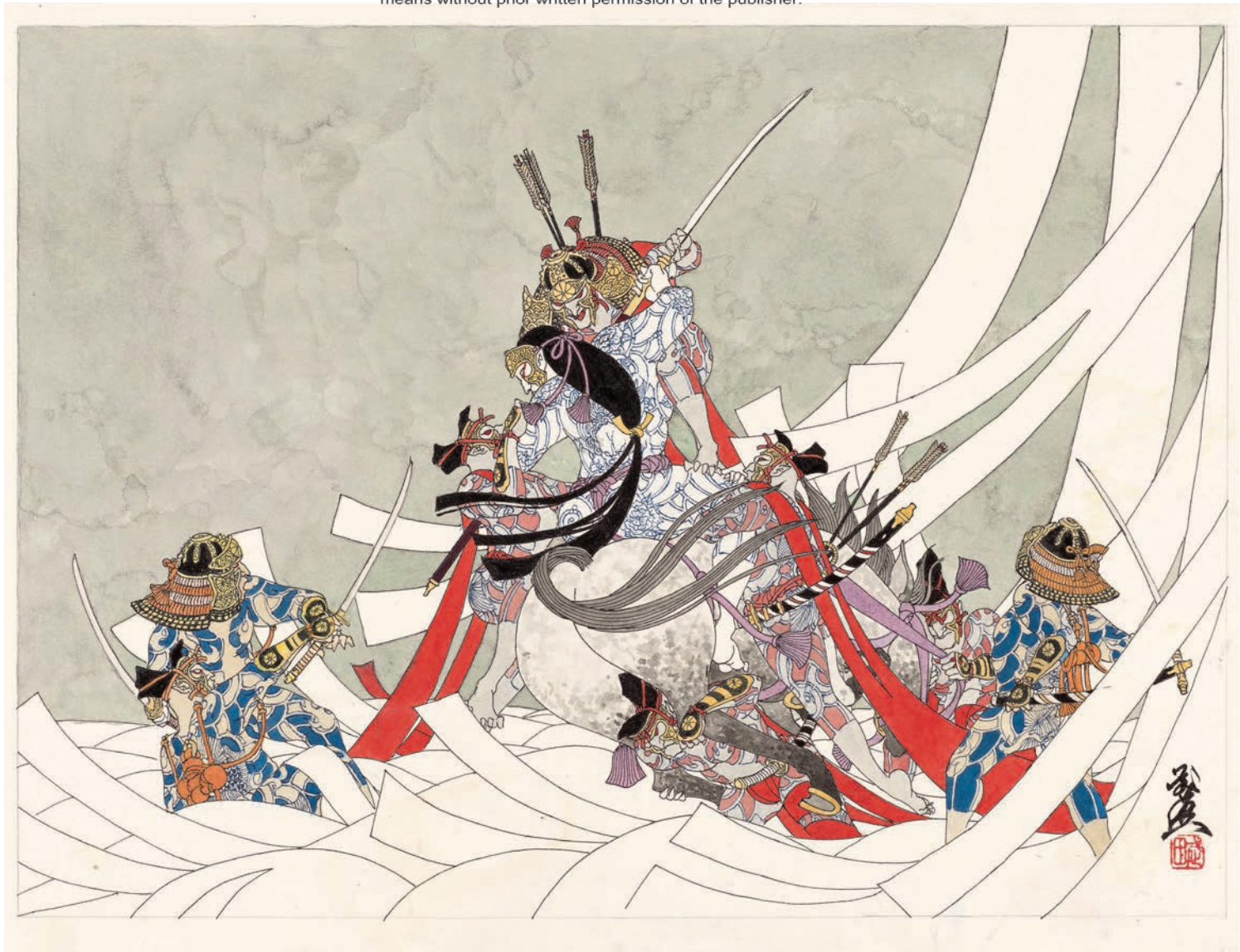


FIGURE 9. Takeda Hideo, *Tomoe Gozen*, 2014. Ink and color, 41.3 × 55.2 cm. Princeton University Art Museum. Museum purchase, Carl Otto von Kienbusch Jr. Memorial Collection Fund (2025-17)

periodic resurgence into the present in the works of modern and contemporary artists such as Saeki Toshio (b. 1945) and Matsui Fuyuko (b. 1974).²⁴ Many of these works contain a nostalgic component, either as a regression to childlike activities or through references to classic narratives that, like *Heike*, were well known through adaptation and reference. For example, in the early nineteenth century, this included a production of the popular story of warrior loyalty, the *Chūshingura*, in which the samurai were incongruously dressed in modern clothing, and other instances where classic lovers from Japanese literature, such as the poet Ariwara no Narihira (825–880) or the fictional Prince Genji, were portrayed dancing to jazz music.²⁵

Staging an earlier narrative or concept amid the trappings of contemporary fashion was not new for this era, as this device, variously characterized as *mitate* or *yatsushi*, was a staple of

much Edo-period art and a means of demonstrating the artist's (and audience's) literary knowledge and cultural erudition. However, whereas this strategy was rarely overtly political in commercial works during the Edo period, for some counterculture advocates, reviving classic stories with new interpretations has also offered a means to veil direct criticism of government policies in authoritarian eras. Triggers for the successive waves of *eroguro* have been attributed to the traumas caused by the opening up of Japan to Western powers in the late nineteenth century, the devastation caused by the 1923 Great Kantō Earthquake and the massacre that followed in its wake, Japan's imperialist expansion and defeat in World War II, and the subsequent US occupation. For artists of Takeda's generation, a similar catalyst may have been the chaotic aftermath of the student protest movement in the late 1960s, discussed below.

COMPARISONS TO EARLIER JAPANESE ART FORMS

Introductions to Takeda's work, particularly for the *Genpei* series, usually compare it to the earlier Japanese art form of ukiyo-e. Most often portraying actors from the kabuki theater or celebrity sex workers from licensed prostitution districts, the genre also includes images of historical narratives, literary works, famous tourist landmarks, and martial battles. Comparisons to Takeda's work point to the shared subjects of warrior imagery and full-body tattoos arranged in dynamic compositions, aspects of mid-nineteenth-century ukiyo-e prints that coalesce most forcefully in the works of Utagawa Kuniyoshi (fig. 10). In formal terms, resemblances may also be drawn with the strength of graphic line, flat color fields, and the use of *bokashi*, or graduated shading, to provide visual complexity without implying volumetric modeling.²⁶ The characterization of Takeda's work as influenced by ukiyo-e is emphasized in the commentary of Lawrence Smith, who describes the *Genpei* series as "almost the ultimate in neo-ukiyo-e."²⁷ However, Sasaki Seiichi, a professor at Tama Art University during Takeda's years as a student there, references only non-Japanese artists in his discussion of Takeda's work: the satirical cartoonists Tomi Ungerer (1931–2019) and Ronald Searle (1920–2011).²⁸ Takeda himself denies that he is influenced by ukiyo-e and, more broadly, sees an abrupt caesura with traditional forms of Japanese printing, identifying the critic-collector-patron Kubo Sadajirō (1909–1996) with initiating contemporary printmaking practices (see interview, pp. 109–11). Even if we do not take artists' statements about their own work at face value, these competing perceptions should at least prompt us to examine comparisons with ukiyo-e more rigorously.

Though the resemblances with ukiyo-e are usually stated in very general terms, it is possible to make more specific comparisons. For example, in Katsushika Hokusai's (1760–1849) well-known and much reproduced *Under the Wave Off Kanagawa*, a viewer might see the sharp contrasts of blue and white, and the stylized foam that almost looks like curling fingers (fig. 11a,b), and read these same traits into the repeating curves of Takeda's waves in *The Mark of the Fan* (cat. 16).²⁹ But beyond ukiyo-e, other features of the *Genpei* series can be compared to different categories of Japanese artistic practice. For example, in *Daibutsuden Destroyed by Fire* (cat. 6), the models for traditional aesthetics are present in the background of textured gold squares, which explicitly recall the gridded gold leaf applied to Japanese folding screens to enhance their decorative appeal and light-reflecting qualities.³⁰ The background to *The Final Illness of Taira Kiyomori* also incorporates familiar elements from other Japanese art forms (cat. 7). The



FIGURE 10. Utagawa Kuniyoshi (1798–1861; born and died Edo [Tokyo], Japan), *Mu Chun and Xue Yong (Shōsaran Boku Shun, Byōtaichū Setsu Ei)*, from the series *One Hundred and Eight Heroes of the Popular Water Margin (Tsūzoku Suikoden gōketsu hyakuhachinin no hitori)*. Woodblock print, 37.8 × 25.6 cm. National Museum of Asian Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC. The Pearl and Seymour Moskowitz Collection (S2021.5.587)

silkscreen print uses a bright-orange pigment interspersed with grays to create the effect of flames and smoke. This combination simulates the *tan*, or red-lead pigment, used in traditional Japanese woodblock printing that oxidizes gray, creating a powdery effect that artists could exploit to mimic the appearance of choking smoke or other decorative effects. Moreover, the background is reminiscent of the style of some medieval Japanese handscrolls in terms of line drawings of courtly women, easily identifiable by their long, dark hair (fig. 12).

Tattoos are one of the most recognizable elements of Takeda's work. In Japan, tattoos have long been associated with illegality, as prior to the nineteenth century, tattooing had been practiced as a form of punishment. Criminals were tattooed



FIGURE 11 A,B. Katsushika Hokusai (1760-1849; born and died Edo [Tokyo], Japan), *Under the Wave off Kanagawa* (*Kanagawa oki nami ura*), also known as *The Great Wave*, from the series *Thirty-Six Views of Mount Fuji* (*Fugaku sanjūrokkei*) (overall view and detail), 1825–38. Woodblock print, 25.4 × 37.6 cm. Art Institute of Chicago. Clarence Buckingham Collection (1925.3245)



FIGURE 12. Artist unidentified, Japanese, Muromachi period (1333–1573), *Tale of Genji* (*Hakubyō Genji Monogatari emaki*) (detail). Handscroll: ink and red color. Princeton University Art Museum. Museum purchase, Fowler McCormick, Class of 1921, Fund (2011-160)

with simple armbands whose patterns corresponded to the crime committed.³¹ Over time, tattooing became a means for personal self-expression among the lower classes, and full-body tattoos became increasingly popular among the members of

certain professions who wore little clothing, such as firefighters and construction workers; their muscled physiques were made even more impressive with inked decoration that also attested to their ability to endure pain.³² These tattoos were also associated with the gambling industry, and in the twentieth century, they became so identifiable with members of the yakuza that most public bathing facilities and gyms in Japan still have rules prohibiting entry for people with tattoos of any kind. Figures in *Genpei* may be scantily clad in the conventional sense, but the warriors wear full “bodysuits” of tattoos that evoke the yakuza. These tattoos, now emblematic of Japanese tattoo culture, were first developed in the nineteenth century and were represented in ukiyo-e prints of the same era, strengthening the nominal association between ukiyo-e and Takeda’s compositions. However, while ukiyo-e celebrated a contemporary practice, Takeda’s application of tattoos to the bodies of twelfth-century warriors is totally anachronistic.

Rather than premodern depictions of actual tattoos of the nineteenth century or their representation in ukiyo-e, it is the twentieth-century reference to the yakuza that seems more relevant to Takeda’s commentary. His explicit identification of tattoos with the yakuza is clear from a page in *The Sketch Book of 100 Kinds of Professions* that shows a tattooed skeleton, an image that strips away the constructed behaviors of machismo literally to the bone (fig. 13).³³ By tattooing the warriors of the Minamoto and Taira clans in the *Genpei* series, Takeda seems to be effectively reducing them to warring gangs and interpreting this romanticized, valorized clash of the ages as nothing more spiritually significant than a gangster turf war.³⁴ Outside of an identification with the yakuza, Takeda’s use of tattoo motifs is discussed in an essay by Matsuda Osamu in the 1985 *Genpei* volume that accompanied the release of the prints; Matsuda cites the anthropologist Yamaguchi Masao (1931–2013), who was familiar with Takeda’s work and who commented that Japanese people are better able to accept the tattoos in *Genpei* as pattern fields than as merely literal representations of actual tattoos.³⁵ This outlook appears to align with Takeda’s own—after all, his debut portfolio is titled *Mon Mon* (see fig. 1), which has the literal meaning of “pattern, pattern,” avoiding any of the conventional terms used in modern Japanese to refer to tattoos (*irezumi* or *tatū*).³⁶ Prioritizing their visual effect, Takeda himself does not regard the tattoos in *Genpei* as a literal representation of pigmented skin but rather as a physical manifestation of the curses (*noroi*) afflicting the warriors in that conflict.³⁷ And while Takeda may exploit the graphic potential of tattoos and the symbolic resonances with underworld culture in Japan, this should not be simplistically interpreted as valorization or admiration—Takeda himself is not tattooed and expresses no interest in them personally.³⁸



FIGURE 13. Takeda Hideo, *Yakuza*, from *The Sketch Book of 100 Kinds of Professions* (Banseisha, 1986). Private collection



FIGURE 14. Takeda Hideo, "AIDS Makes Landfall in Japan," *Asahi Journal*, April 5, 1985 (April 5, 1985), p. 108

Despite the similarities with ukiyo-e discussed above, the satirical element of Takeda's work is incompatible with the social conditions under which ukiyo-e was produced, which heavily conditioned its content. The ukiyo-e print industry was fast, and fashion-paced, with publishers commissioning artists to create designs that would respond to the latest trends and capitalize on the popularity of current celebrity actors or best-selling illustrated novels. And although Takeda claims he drew his knowledge of the *Heike* story from twentieth-century media, the images in *Genpei* do not represent scenes from those productions, or actors starring in them. Political or satirical content is relatively rare in ukiyo-e, as all print designs were subject to inspection and approval by censors, and several high-profile publishers, artists, and authors were punished for their infractions.³⁹ However, social critique is an essential aspect of Takeda's work. In the 1980s, he spent approximately four years working for the *Asahi Journal*, a current-affairs publication under the umbrella of the *Asahi Newspaper*, contributing satirical drawings for social and political world events (fig. 14).

Like his other humorous drawings, these political cartoons rely on an economy of line and simplicity of design in order to make the joke as succinctly and powerfully as possible.

Certainly, a tendency toward simplification and flattening of the pictorial field is common to both ukiyo-e and Takeda's style. However, ukiyo-e is not the only visual tradition to engage in these modes. The familiar pictorial language of Japanese artistic conventions that Takeda occasionally deploys—more frequently in the historically allusive *Genpei* than in much of his other work—can be seen as a visual shorthand that conjures the aura of a Japanese narrative setting. At the same time, the anachronistic twentieth-century elements, such as the tattoos and unfavorable depiction of warrior conduct, hint that something is awry. In different eras, darker reinterpretations of classic narratives have been triggered by significant social disruption. The radical visual reinterpretation of Takeda's *Genpei* might also be conceived within the parameters of his artistic education at the time of Japan's student protest movement.

STUDENT PROTEST

When Takeda matriculated into Tama Art University, many Japanese universities were still embroiled in the violent political-protest movements carried out by students in the late 1960s. Tama Art University itself was a locus of such activity, and while Takeda himself did not participate in direct political action, the language of protest can take many forms. The distrust of institutions and disillusionment with prevalent societal norms more broadly that was experienced by the youth of Takeda's generation prompted satirical and subversive artistic responses that challenged old narratives and paradigms. In discussing *eroguro*, Miriam Silverberg has articulated that parody can be understood as a form of protest.⁴⁰ We might then see Takeda's approach in *Genpei* as being partially shaped by his experiences as a student in this turbulent era, though he does not consider himself aligned with the movement.

Student unrest began in 1960, with protests against the signing of the US-Japan Security Treaty, which ratified the continued presence of US military bases on Japanese soil and was widely perceived to unduly favor the US in this and other ways.⁴¹ A major precipitating event occurred on October 8, 1967, when students participating in an anti-Vietnam War demonstration clashed with the police at the site of Narita Airport, resulting in the death of a student. In 1968, student revolutionary groups at particular universities, which had previously been directed toward local campus reform, began to join together under the umbrella of All-Campus Joint Struggle Councils (Zengaku kyōtō kaigi, abbreviated to Zenkyōtō) to



FIGURE 15. Tōmatsu Shōmei (1930–2012; born Nagoya, Japan; died Naha, Okinawa, Japan), *Protest, Shinjuku, Tokyo, 1969*, printed ca. 2000. Gelatin silver print, 29.2 × 40 cm. Princeton University Art Museum. Museum purchase, gift of Duane Wilder, Class of 1951 (2000-302)

address wider social concerns. The general public was initially unsympathetic toward the movement, as images circulating in the media showed students wearing hard hats and wielding makeshift weapons against police. However, this attitude shifted when police were seen to respond with indiscriminate violence to both conscious political activists and unaffiliated citizens who were caught up in the events.⁴²

The turbulence of the period is crystallized in the grainy, high-contrast photos of Tōmatsu Shōmei (1930–2012; fig. 15). The so-called Shinjuku Riot on October 21, 1968, involved tens of thousands of participants, including working-class and white-collar workers who spontaneously joined the protesting students in response to state violence. Tōmatsu's style matched his political expression, as the blurred and shaky images were in opposition to the slick, commercial appeal achieved by mainstream photography. Like Takeda, Tōmatsu was a student at Tama Art University during this difficult time, and his work has occasionally been described in similar terms. For example, the art historian Yasufumi Nakamori analyzes the montages in Tōmatsu's photo essay "That Bastard of an Expo" as "satirical, subversive, and sometimes caricature-like."⁴³ The photo-essay was a critique of the Japan World Exposition in Osaka in 1970, commonly known as Expo '70. Ostensibly an occasion to showcase Japan's industrial and artistic achievements, Expo '70 attracted considerable domestic criticism from activists,

not least because it coincided with the 1970 renewal of the US-Japan Security Treaty. The disconnect between the image of itself that Japan presented to the world through Expo '70 and the lived reality of its citizens prompted some artists to adopt an absurdist, disjunctive visual language in their critiques. Nakamori further remarks of Tōmatsu's photomontages that absurdity was required to express the distance between two worlds—"the troubled reality of the present day and the baseless utopian future that Expo '70 projected."⁴⁴

Disillusionment was not limited to the vision presented by Expo '70. In addition to protesting Japan's benefiting from the Vietnam War, significant on-campus political activity was fomented by the betrayal felt by a new generation of students for whom the reality of their university experience was in bleak contrast to the romantic image that previous generations had raised them to expect.⁴⁵ A population boom after World War II had created a surge in student numbers at this time, and increased urbanization brought a flood of young people—many from rural backgrounds—to the cities, where they were forced into huge, cramped, concrete dormitories. In order to accommodate the overwhelming number of students in each class, professors gave their lectures using megaphones. Students exercised their frustration at various levels, as Takeda's professor Sasaki Seiichi recalls of the student action at Tama Art University:



FIGURE 16. Hamaguchi Takashi (1931–2018; born Shizuoka Prefecture, Japan; died Yokohama City, Japan), *Untitled*, from *The Shudders of Narita Airport*, May 8, 1977, printed 2015. Cibachrome print, 16.3 × 24.3 cm. Princeton University Art Museum (2026-182.17)



FIGURE 17. Takeda Hideo, *Invasion of the Southern Capital*, from the *Genpei* series (cat. 5)

Students in the late 1960s . . . broke down school walls and came and went through the holes [they] created. They tore down the steel staircases leading to the second floor of their dormitories and came from and went back to their rooms via the branches of a large ginkgo tree just next to the building. . . . Takeda was caught up within this movement, and through the student revolution, he began to strip away the outer layer of things, firmly convinced that he could thus arrive at a fresh, new point of view.⁴⁶

Although the student movement ultimately failed to bring about any significant changes to the assembly-line approach to education in Japan, the experience undoubtedly shaped some young artists of the era at an individual level. In Takeda's case, it is possible that the militant formations of some student activists and their notional association with the yakuza would unconsciously play a role in his visualizations of the feuding armies in *Genpei*, as demonstrated in certain visual parallels (figs. 16–17). On a superficial level, some contemporary newspaper headlines had compared the student groups to “mere yakuza” due to their militarism and use of violence.⁴⁷ Furthermore, some student groups self-identified with a romanticized image of the yakuza due to growing tendencies among some factions toward conservatism, misogyny, and right-wing nationalism as the movement progressed and what was initially revolutionary thinking gave way to a desire to return to a previous, idealized status quo. Identifications between student groups and the yakuza in the *Genpei* series may be latent rather than explicit, however, as Takeda himself is dismissive of the student movement for having never achieved their aims.⁴⁸

Ultimately, Takeda is not making direct political statements through his images. Instead, we might position Takeda in a fashion similar to art historian Alexandra Munroe's analysis of Masami Teraoka (b. 1936), a Japanese artist active in the US who is best known for his ukiyo-e-esque critiques of sexual politics—his “perspective is more satirist than activist.”⁴⁹ However, Takeda was born during the US occupation, when certain media forms that valorized failed heroes, including retellings of *Heike* on-screen and in print, were censored by the US occupying forces (see Oyler, p. 46). Takeda thus grew up at a time when *Heike* and its characters were very explicitly positioned as a vehicle for critical social commentary. He is thus one of a number of contemporary Japanese print designers who periodically and selectively deploy the familiar visual languages of older Japanese artistic styles for their own individual purposes.

GRAPHIC PASTICHE, MONTAGE AND CRITIQUE

Japanese print designers in the later twentieth century and into the twenty-first have made explicit references to ukiyo-e motifs for a variety of reasons. Those choices might initially be dismissed as driven by commercial incentives, as within the global marketplace of contemporary art, which privileges abstraction and anti-aesthetic visuals, many collectors favor artworks that can be easily identified as quintessentially “Japanese.” On the other hand, critics may also overessentialize these references, characterizing the artists as moving between simple binaries of tradition and innovation.⁵⁰ Further, the dismissal of contemporary artists' inclusion of ukiyo-e references in commercial terms is ironic, given that ukiyo-e itself was driven entirely by commercial prerogatives when it was produced. However, since the late nineteenth century, the status of ukiyo-e has been elevated as one of the recognized categories of fine art, and its valence has shifted from popular ephemera to historical. For the artists themselves, repackaging older narratives can function as a means of criticizing an idealized past, using its own pictorial language to do so.

A characteristic example of the combination of commercialism and earlier Japanese aesthetics is the riotous, saturated work of Yokoo Tadanori, who is mostly known for his poster designs. With a very recognizable pictorial style, Yokoo uses flat color fields of bright, almost acidic colors in dynamic compositions, using the technique of photomontage to combine and pastiche existing imagery from a diverse array of sources. Although his designs draw heavily from postwar American iconography and Asian religious imagery, much of his work cites traditional Japanese motifs—particularly in his posters for theatrical performances derived from historical narratives. One example is Yokoo's poster advertising a 1969 kabuki production by the controversial author Mishima Yukio (1925–1970) at the National Theatre, itself based on the best-selling novel *Strange Tales of the Crescent Moon* (serialized 1807–11), authored by Kyokutei Bakin (1767–1848) and illustrated by Hokusai (fig. 18).⁵¹ The story is a redemptive account of Minamoto Tametomo (1139–1170), a warrior of the Minamoto lineage who is also depicted in Takeda's series (cat. 1). Yokoo has excised specific figures from the original illustrations, combining them with the wave designs for which Hokusai is best known, and rendered it in his own characteristic, acid-trip palette. For Yokoo, his kaleidoscopic designs approximate the dizzying array of images that we are confronted with when moving about the world; we can compare the sensation of viewing them to the disorienting effect of walking through the streets of Tokyo and being inundated with different advertisements, signboards, and slogans.⁵²

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