

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
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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.”

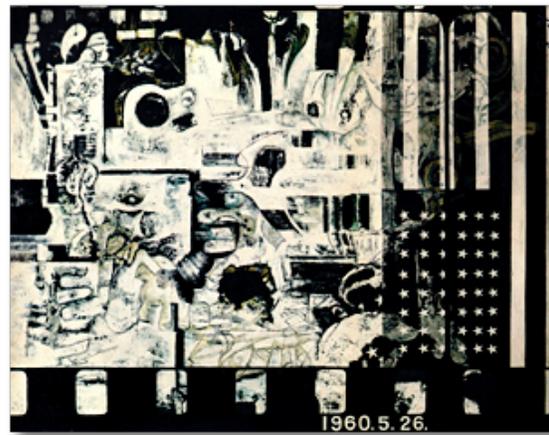
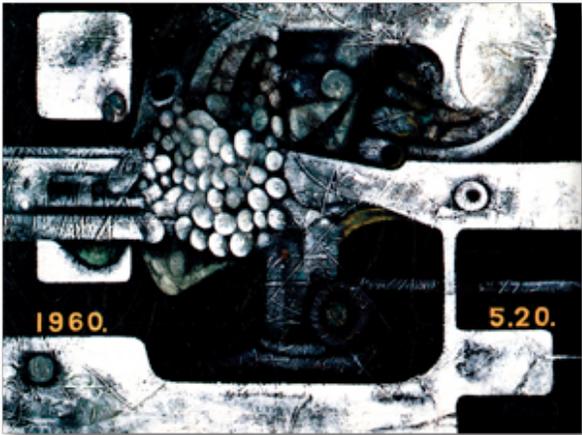


Preliminary sketch for "The Tale of New Japan," 1954

[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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