

Protest Art in 1950s Japan

The Forgotten Reportage Painters

by Linda Hoaglund

Japan in
the 1950s

Nakamura
Hiroshi

Ikeda
Tatsuo

Yamashita
Kikuji

Ishii
Shigeo

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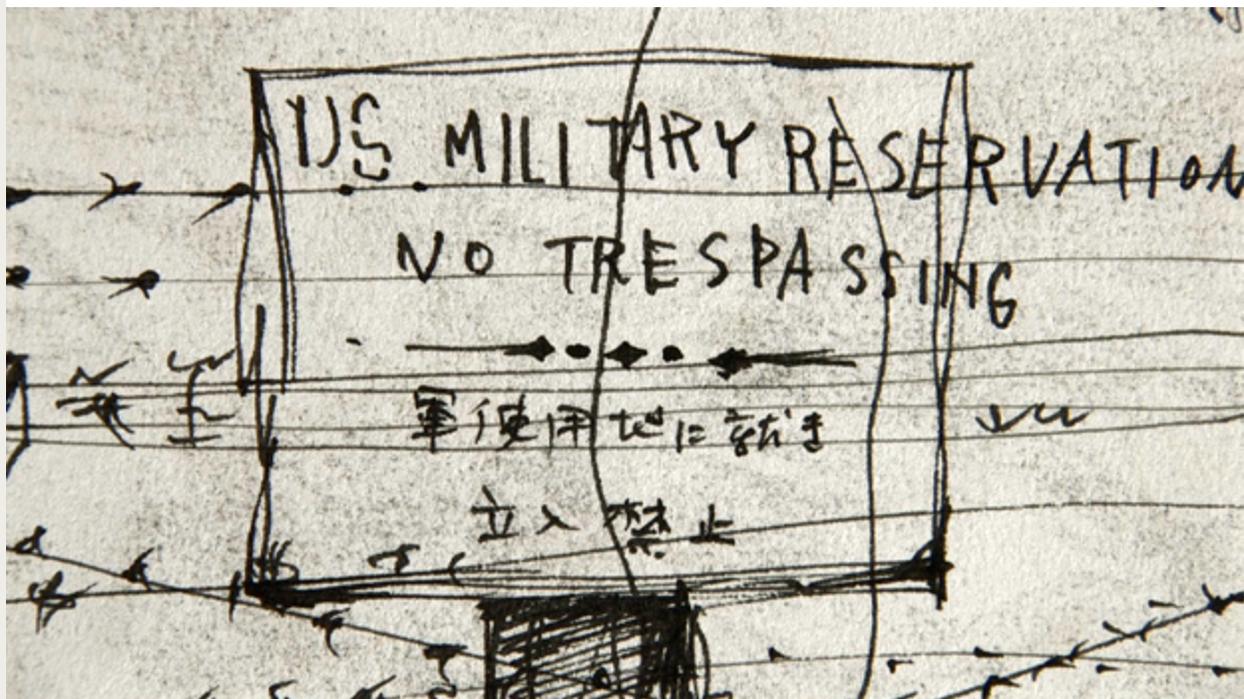
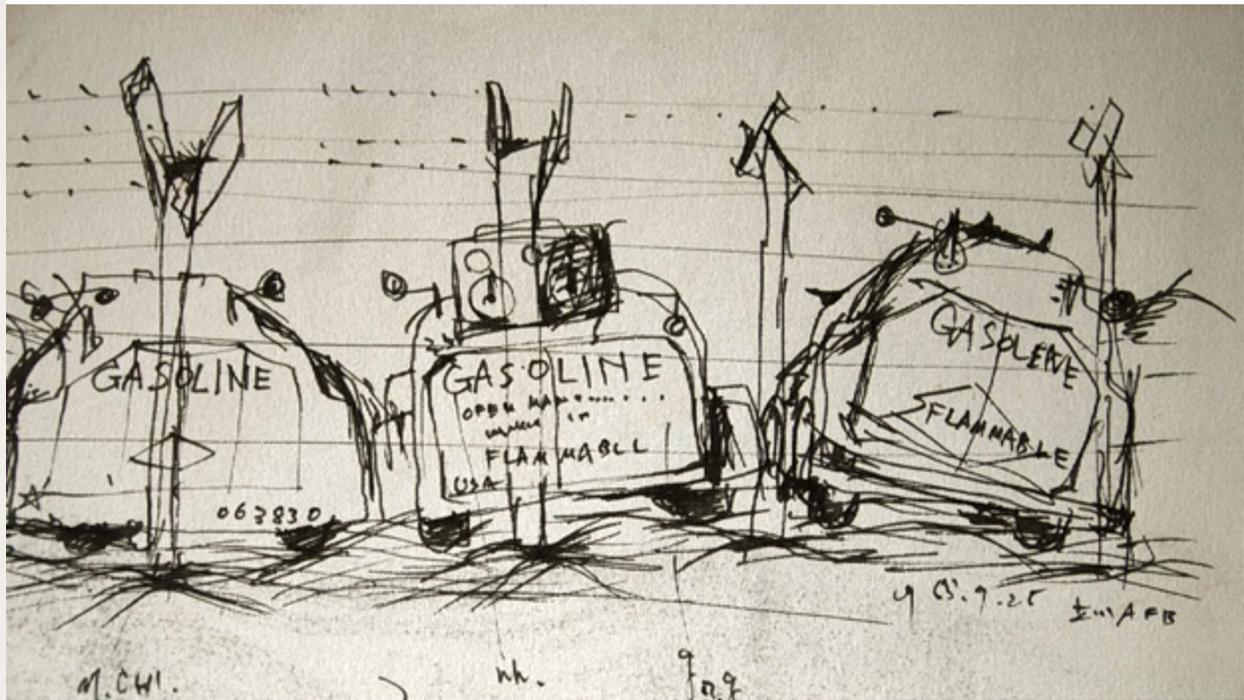
NAKAMURA HIROSHI

Nakamura Hiroshi (1932–) was trained as a reportage painter by the Japan Art Alliance, a postwar art group that advocated politically-themed realist painting. As he recalled:

In the early 1950s, socialist realism was spreading throughout the world as an art movement and many art students were influenced by it. The Alliance's basic premise was that our paintings had to be readily understood by anyone who saw them. We were encouraged to persuade the viewer.

In the mid 1950s, Nakamura became deeply involved in depicting the protests against U.S. military bases that were beginning to rise to a crescendo. One such locale was Sunagawa, where farmers were protesting plans to confiscate their land to extend the runways at Tachikawa Air Force Base. The farmers, whose ancestors had cultivated their land for centuries, were vociferously opposed, and their demonstrations became a magnet for members of student groups and labor unions from nearby Tokyo. In his own mind, Nakamura was a "reporter at the frontlines" of these confrontations, brandishing not a camera but a sketchbook and pencil. Several of these sketches now belong to the Museum of Contemporary Art Tokyo.





Nakamura Hiroshi's 1955 sketches of the U.S. military base at Tachikawa, near Tokyo (details)

[anp5073] full sketch
 [anp5079] [anp5078] details

These sketches became the basis of a large-scale oil painting titled "Sunagawa #5," depicting a confrontation in November 1955 that pitted the police against several thousand protestors who were attempting to thwart the surveyors mapping the land that the government intended to confiscate. In this graphic rendering, Nakamura's sense of social "realism" was stark and direct.

Nakamura Hiroshi's "Sunagawa #5"

Nakamura depicted a 1955 confrontation in the protracted military-base protests at Sunagawa in a graphic, realistic manner that he did not always adhere to in his later political paintings. Even here, however, he introduces imaginative detail like the tiny figure of a priest standing in solidarity with local residents who were protesting the confiscation of their land to enlarge the runways at a major U.S. airfield.



[anp5013] full painting

Details (clockwise starting upper left):









Even as he was presenting such straightforward “reportorial” artwork, Nakamura was also developing an innovative pictorial strategy that, as he explained it, employed four receding points of perspective instead of the conventional single point—all aimed at composing a “close-up” at the center. He was determined to go beyond the raw visual film footage that left-wing colleagues such as the filmmaker Kamei Fumio were producing in their own critical documentation of the protests.

This more abstract and innovative approach to reportage painting found powerful expression in other strong renderings of the anti-base protests that Nakamura produced. Although he naturally did not witness the January 1957 Girard incident, in which an American soldier fatally shot a local woman scavenging spent bullet casings at a U.S. Army firing range, the media frenzy over Girard’s trial in Japan (he eventually received a suspended sentence) ignited the artist’s imagination:

I couldn’t deliver the message and impact I wanted through conventional composition, so I applied the ‘camera eye,’ from both still photographs and movies, to express my outrage.

One product of this outrage was “Gunned Down,” in which the woman’s crumpled body dominates the canvas, while her out-sized hands claw at bare earth and rifle barrels point in her direction.



"Gunned Down," 1957

[anp5004]

Another almost surrealist painterly response was "The Base," which Nakamura painted on a large sheet of plywood. "The Base" now belongs to The National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo and is cracked with age. In looking back on it decades later, Nakamura reflected on the extreme poverty of those years, when a mother of six was forced to collect scrap metal to survive and he himself, with no market for his paintings, resorted to painting on cheap wood:

12 years after the war, we were just starting to recover. There were still shortages of food to eat every day. Otherwise, this kind of incident [meaning the Girard incident] would never have happened.



"The Base," 1957

*Full painting (above)
and detail showing the woman who was killed (highlighted in red, below)*

[anp5020]



The continuing heavy presence of scores of U.S. military bases in Japan even after the Korean War ended cast a dark shadow on Japan's recovery as a sovereign and ostensibly independent nation. To critics on the left like Nakamura, the domestic conflict this provoked in the years leading up to the massive 1960 protests could hardly be exaggerated. He observed many years later:

They say after war you have postwar peace, but it's not just war and peace, like in Tolstoy. You have to add a civil war era in between. So the ANPO protests were a kind of civil war. ["ANPO" is an acronym derived from the Japanese name of the U.S.-Japan mutual treaty.] They used to call these protests a revolution, like the French or Russian revolutions. But in Japan the people never rose up that spectacularly. So you can't really call it a revolution, but it was certainly a civil war. And you could say that the ANPO struggle was the zenith of that. I painted that as a theme, and titled it "Civil War Era."



"Civil War Era," 1958

[anp5035]

The painting Nakamura was referring to, also executed on plywood in 1958, was an ominous rendering of complex machinery that seemed about to roll right over the viewer. Nakamura's original title was "Postwar Revolution," but he decided that sounded too "overtly political, so I made it a little more literary and called it 'Civil War Era.'" By the time of the 1960 ANPO protests, Nakamura's reportage paintings had evolved, in his words, into a "montage" technique. He frequently joined the massive protests that rocked Tokyo, but by then, having witnessed so many other protests, he was pessimistic about the prospects of their success.

Nakamura Hiroshi (center) is photographed at one of the 1960 demonstrations against renewal of the security treaty. He is standing next to Yoshimoto Ryūmei, a philosopher whose writings and speeches encouraged many artists and intellectuals to join the protests.

[anp5032] detail



Still, Nakamura produced two striking, unsettling paintings that year. “On the Steps” featured outsized, alarmed eyes—perhaps his own—agape at confronting a foul world. “Samurai in Flight” depicted an unhorsed medieval warrior plunging behind his mount, also topsy-turvy, while a marbled labyrinth looms unscathed alongside the doomed pair—suggesting, it would seem, that even while reactionary leaders may be eliminated, the bastions of power remain unchanged.



“On the Steps,” 1960

Full painting (above)

and detail that shows the steps and urinals (highlighted in red, below)

[anp5046]



"Samurai in Flight," 1960
Full painting (below)
and detail that shows the
unhorsed warrior. (highlighted in
red, left)

[anp5048]



On June 19, the conservative government headed by Prime Minister Kishi Nobusuke, a former accused (but never indicted) war criminal, rammed renewal of a revised version of the U.S.-Japan security treaty through the Diet, Japan's parliament—and, confronted with this fait accompli, the protests quickly sputtered to a stop. Nakamura was disgusted by this spectacle of millions of his fellow protestors abandoning their resistance. For the next several years, all of his increasingly fantastical output featured ominous crimson clouds and landscapes.

Nakamura Hiroshi's Post-1960 Crimson Clouds

After the failure of the anti-security-treaty protests in 1960, Nakamura produced a series of surreal paintings suffused with the color red. Asked to explain this, he replied:

I doubt I would have made paintings with bright red clouds if I hadn't lived through the firebombing. I remember the firebombing extremely well.

He was twelve years old in 1945, when American B-29s incinerated his native Hamamatsu in a nighttime raid,

leaving the whole city burned to the ground. There was nothing left. You know those photographs of the ruins of Hiroshima? It actually looked a lot like that. I really can't believe I'm still alive today.

Past, present, and future thus fused in the red paintings: the personal trauma of the World War II air raids, visions of Hiroshima, the ongoing nuclear arms race, and the spectacle of a future Japan inextricably committed to becoming a remilitarized collaborator in America's cold-war policy.



"Omens of a Place," 1961

[anp5005]



"Red Landscape," 1961

[anp5052]



"Crashlanding," 1963

[anp5028]



“Sightseeing Empire,” 1963

[anp5053]

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