

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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IKEDA TATSUO

Ikeda Tatsuo (1928-) became an artist to free himself from all authority. When he was just 15, the Japanese Navy ordered him to become a kamikaze pilot. Japan's defeat spared him from a suicidal mission, but U.S. occupation policy forced him to resign from a school for training teachers because he was an ex-kamikaze. He resolved to study art and joined an avant-garde group that persuaded him that "art and politics and social issues are all related."

In the summer of 1952, Ikeda spent one week in Uchinada, a fishing village on the Japan Sea, joining sit-ins of protesting fishermen and interviewing them about their cause. The U.S. military had seized their beaches, converting them into a firing range to test made-in-Japan artillery shells for the Korean War. The local fishermen promptly lost their livelihoods, but the men who owned and leased their fishing boats collaborated with the government for compensation. Ikeda rendered these conflicting circumstances in ink drawings titled "Fishermen's Boss—Uchinada and The Haul—Uchinada." To Ikeda, newly awakened to Marxist ideas, these contrasting positions corresponded to the smug capitalist, throttling himself with his own greed, and the downtrodden worker, cross-eyed from fruitless labor.



"Fishermen's Boss"—Uchinada series, 1953

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"The Haul"—Uchinada series, 1953

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Choosing an artist's life, unfettered by superiors, Ikeda also doomed himself to poverty; to the art market, his reportage ink drawings were as negligible as Nakamura's oil paintings. To survive, Ikeda joined the ranks of artists paid by U.S. soldiers during the Korean War to paint portraits of themselves, their wives, girlfriends, or children before heading off to a bloody war they knew they might not survive.

Portrait-Painting for the Americans

During the Korean War (1950 to 1953), Ikeda and other impoverished artists supported themselves by painting “silk-scroll” portraits for American servicemen stationed in Japan—usually based on snapshots of wives, children, and girlfriends. Ikeda recalled:

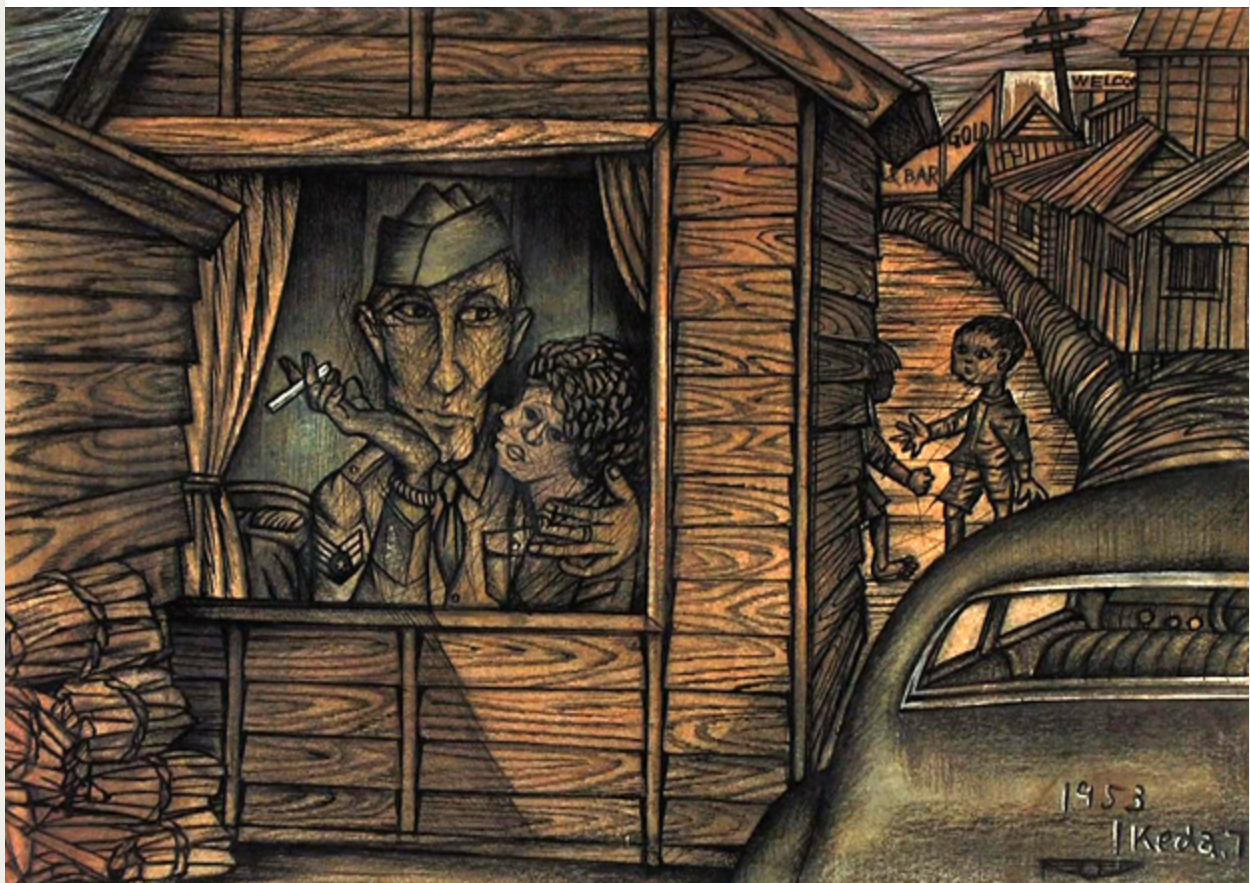
We could transform a black-and-white photo into a color painting. They could display it on the wall. It was very Japanese and must have been exotic.

Ikeda's uncanny rendering of this green-eyed blonde remained in his possession when the soldier who commissioned it was sent to the war front and never returned to claim it.



The Portrait, 1951

Like so many of his compatriots, Ikeda was acutely sensitive not merely to the oppressive physical presence of U.S. bases in his country, revved up for war in Korea or anywhere else in Asia, but also to the military-base milieu in which American soldiers lived, and their conspicuous fraternization with Japanese women. In a 1953 painting titled "American Soldier, Child, Barracks," he allegorized the predicament many young Japanese women faced after the war and into the post-occupation period. Often bereft of fathers or older brothers to provide for them, some looked to the foreigners for financial support for themselves and their dependents. Ikeda's depiction of the young woman in the GI's casual embrace captures her ambivalence, torn between abject gratitude and debilitating humiliation. The American automobile suggests affluence, while the barracks seem shabby. The identity of the child in the street, and whether he might be of mixed blood, is unclear.



"American Soldier, Child, Barracks," 1953

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A similar complexity pervades an almost cartoonish 1954 ink drawing by Ikeda titled "Resurrected Soldier," in which a veteran brandishes a rifle nearly his own height, his vision obstructed by an overly-large helmet. Despite his obscured identity, the soldier is obviously Japanese—his resurrection and deployment being what the U.S. government had adamantly urged their Japanese partners in Tokyo to undertake since the outbreak of the Korean War in 1950.



"More than anything, I am anti-war," Ikeda later commented. "The Korean War was a foreign war but I felt it was inevitable that Japan would get dragged into it, and that is what terrified me." His fear was not unfounded, for we now know that the United States was exerting great pressure on the Japanese government to rebuild ground forces quickly enough so that they could be deployed in Korea. In resisting this pressure, Prime Minister Yoshida Shigeru used the popular protests in Japan to explain why this was politically impossible so soon after the war.

"Resurrected Soldier," 1953

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The July 1953 armistice in the Korean War did not dispel the abiding fear that Japan was being dragged into a perilous remilitarized world. On the contrary, before a full year had passed the country was rocked by the Lucky Dragon incident, involving a Japanese fishing boat irradiated by fallout from U.S. thermonuclear-bomb testing in the Pacific. Rather than join the nationwide demonstrations calling for abolition of all nuclear weapons, Ikeda, as he explained it, "wanted to express myself as a painter, to express my protest that way." With great originality, he turned his eye and brush to the toxic, grotesque, almost anthropomorphic catch of the doomed fishing vessel in two paintings titled "10,000 Count" and "Buried Fish."



"10,000 Count," 1954

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"Buried Fish," 1954

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Ikeda's grim renderings of dead fish were inspired by the contamination of a Japanese tuna-fishing boat by fallout from a U.S. thermonuclear test in March 1954. One crewman died of radiation sickness. This shocking incident ignited a nationwide protest against nuclear testing that is commonly regarded as the beginning of an organized anti-nuclear movement in Japan.

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