

# 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  
& Credits

### ISHII SHIGEO

Ishii Shigeo (1933–1962) became a reportage painter not by visiting remote villages or participating in demonstrations, but by exploring his country's uneasy subconscious. Hobbled by debilitating asthma after a nearly fatal childhood attack, Ishii studied classical painting as a teenager but developed a distinct style of social critique in his oil paintings and etchings through his association with Ikeda Tatsuo, Nakamura Hiroshi, and other reportage and avant-garde painters. Conflating his own excruciating affliction with his country's postwar predicament, Ishii, who died at 28 in 1962, left a large body of work still mostly neglected.

Because Ishii's father was a bureaucrat in the Ministry of Finance with a secure salary, his mother was able to nurse her frail son, providing him with art lessons to compensate for the formal education his illness frequently absented him from, and paying for art supplies as his talent and passion for his increasingly morose vision became apparent. His younger sister remembered Ishii reading the entire newspaper every day in grade school. "He was the first to go and get the newspaper. I think he had his antennae out, waiting for information." His friend Ikeda Tatsuo recalled,

*When I got to know him, he had a nihilistic way of talking and an ironic smile. But he was always making remarks that were right on target. He was only 20 years old, but he'd already read Jean Genet and used to quote him.*

His older brother remembered Ishii's bookshelf "lined with Japanese translations of Sartre and Camus."

Ishii's dominant works belong to a series of over 15 paintings he produced between 1955 and 1957, which he collectively titled "Violence." The series includes "Judgment," "The Room," "Floating Skulls," "Under Martial Law III," "Under Martial Law IV," "Acrobatics," "The Trap," "The Wall," "Fissure," and "Pleasure." Some of the works are highly allegorical, but his intention was to map the basic contradictions of postwar Japan—the humiliation of occupation, collusion in a neighboring war, political entrapment, and social inequality. Ishii delineated his unambiguous artistic mission in a brief essay he wrote in 1957:

*The force driving any individual attempting to create a work of art in our modern world must be his desire to revolt against the inhumane mechanism of his society in order to transform it. Without that craving it is impossible to create art.*

### *Ishii Shigeo's 1955-1957 Series "Violence"*



*"Judgment"*

[anp3029]





*"The Room"*

[anp3015]



*"Floating Skulls"*

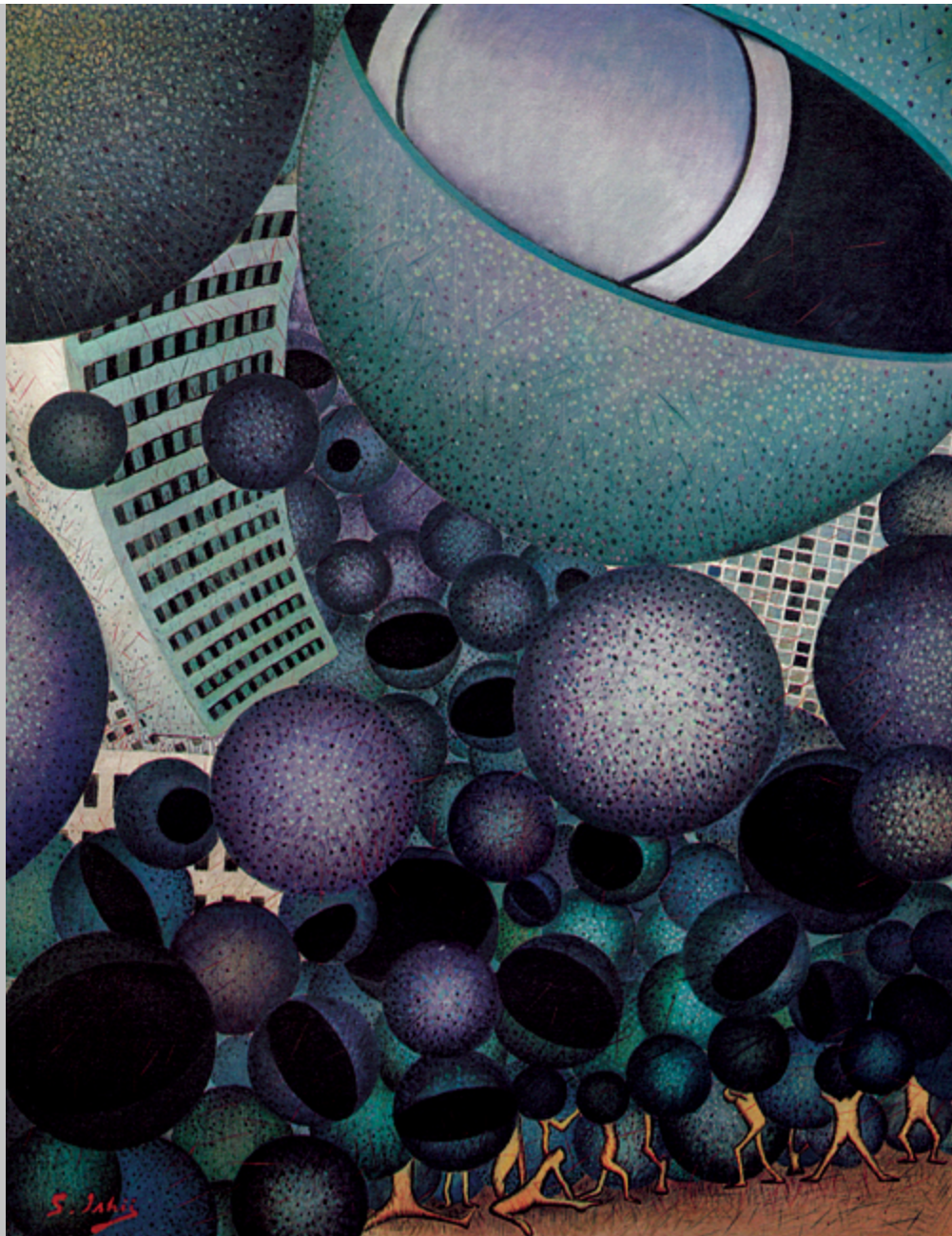
[anp3027]





*"Under Martial Law III"*

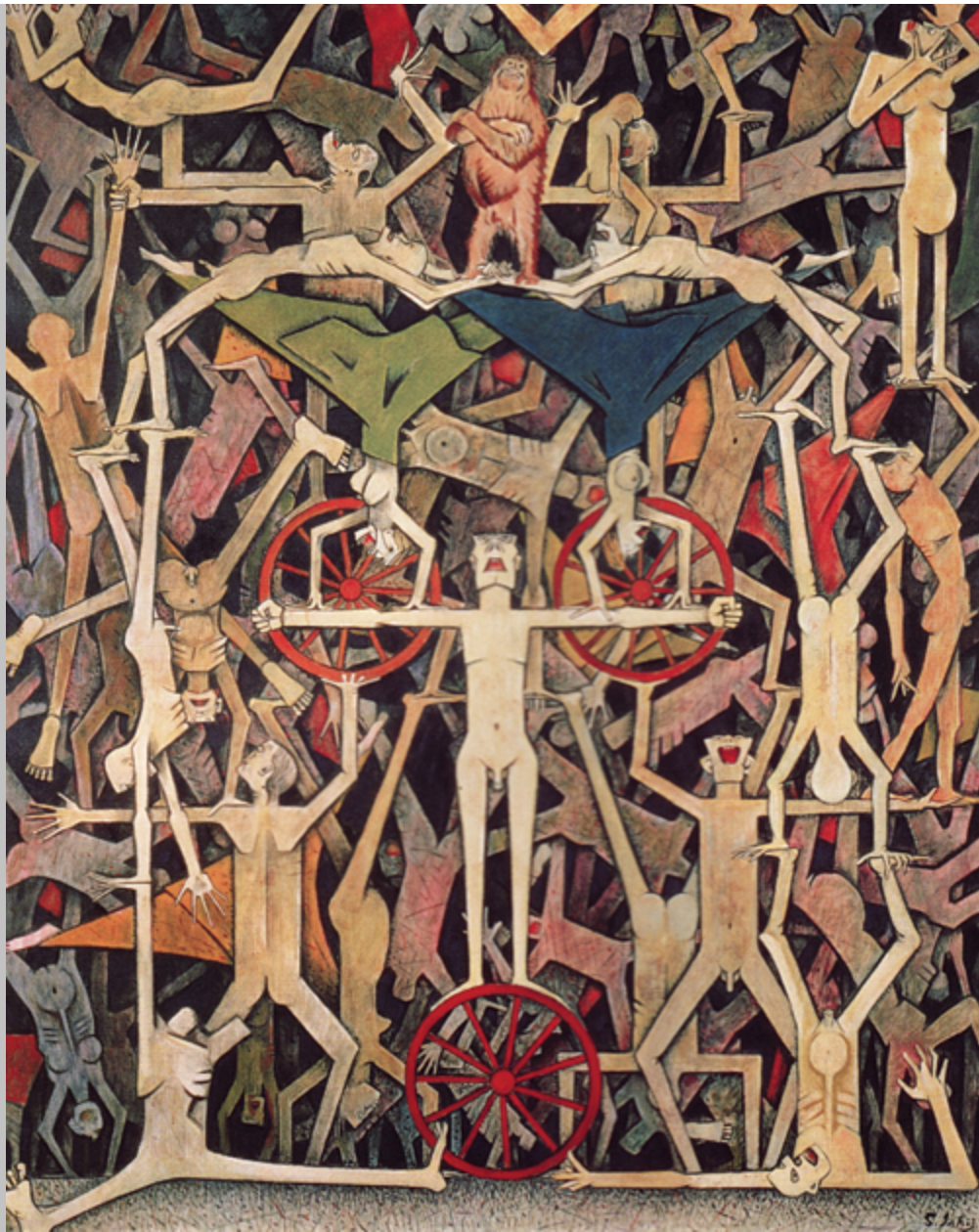
[anp3001]



*"Under Martial Law IV"*

[anp3002]





*"Acrobatics"*

[anp3024]



*"The Trap"*

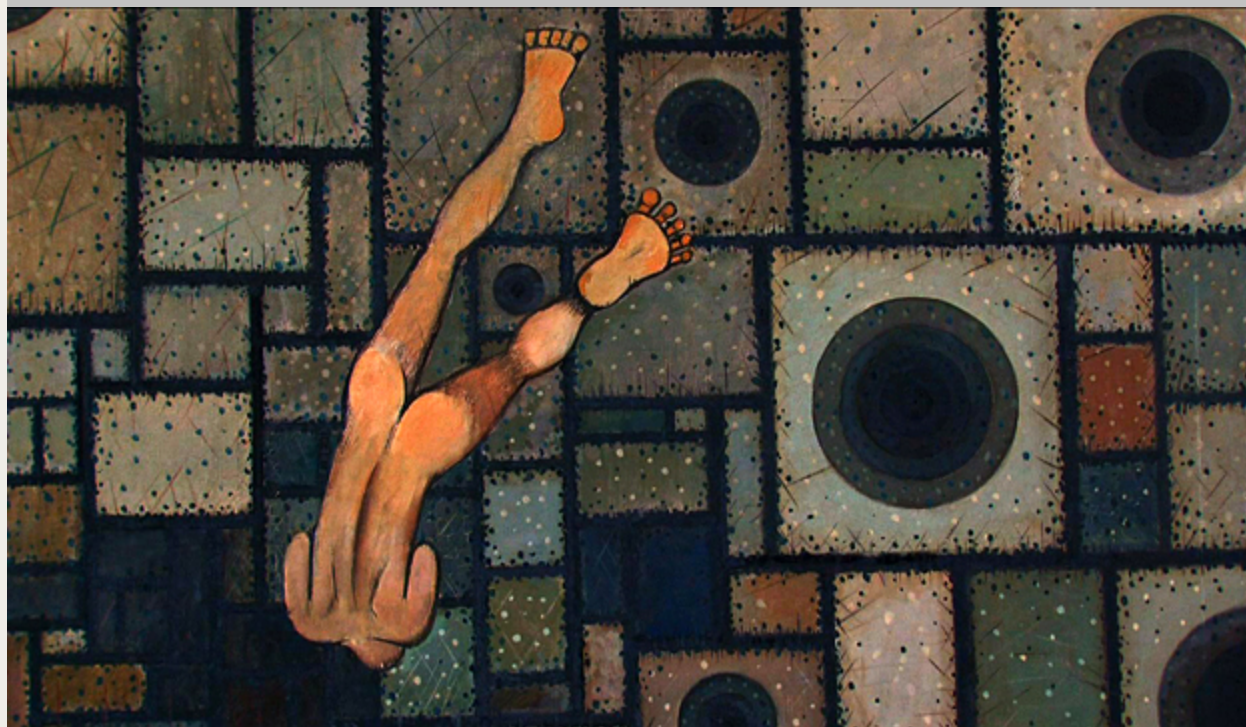
[anp3008]





*"The Wall"*

[anp3016]



*"Fissure (detail) "*

[anp3014]



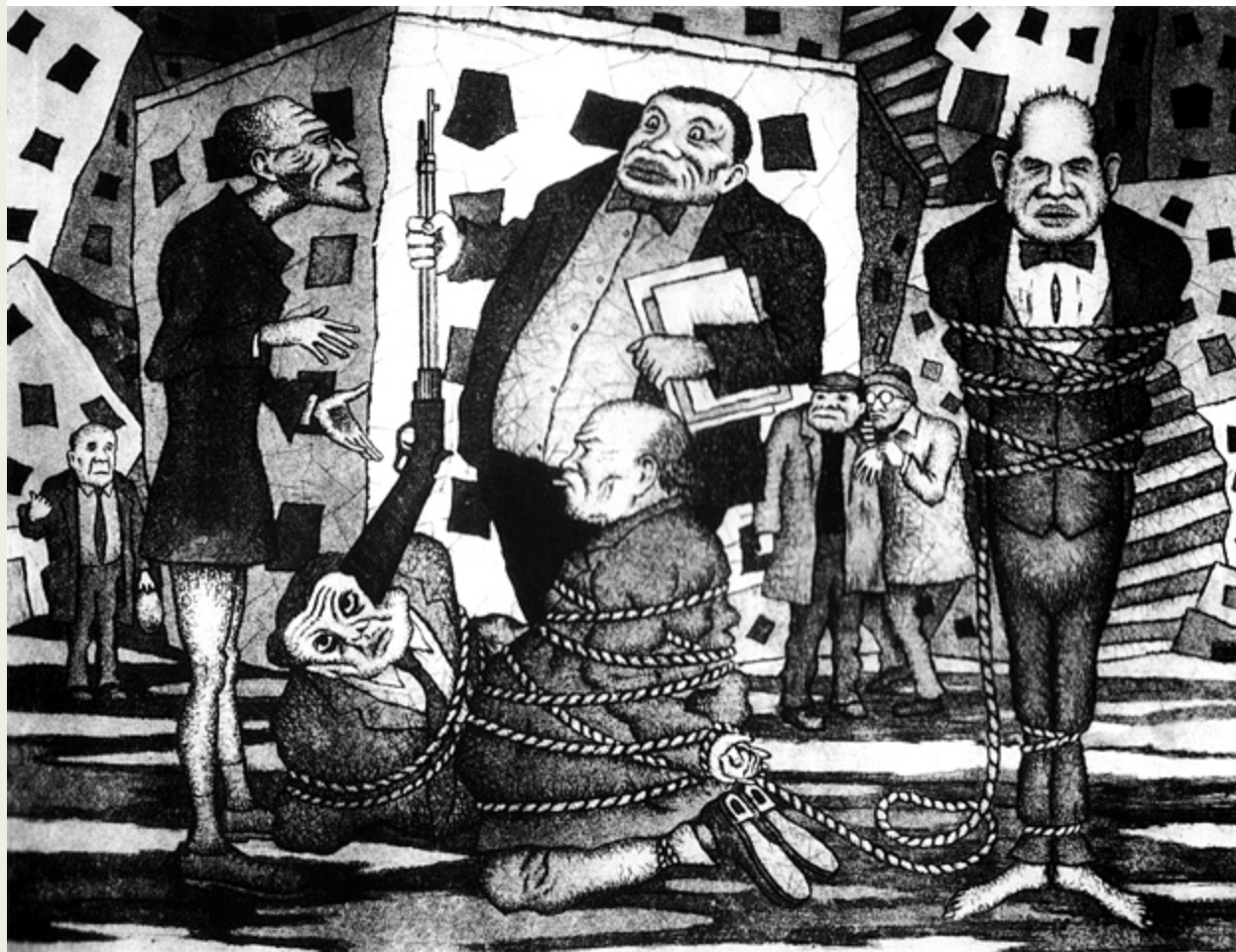


*"Pleasure"*

[anp3032]

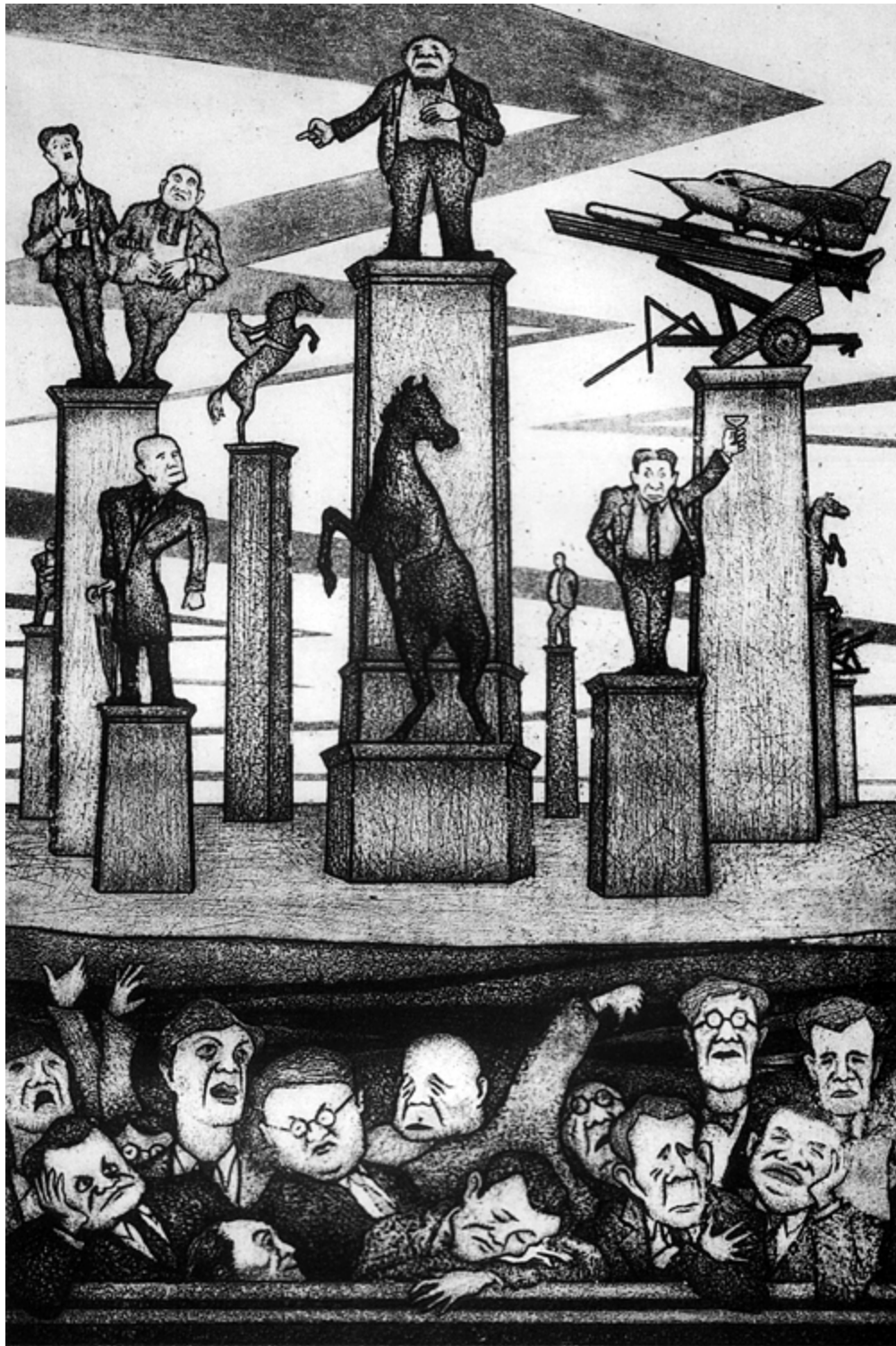
In several works, Ishii set his sights on specific targets, such as war profiteers in "Untitled (Bound Men)" and warmongers in "Untitled (Monuments to Heroes)," two etchings produced in 1958. Though Ishii never named the fat-lipped, large-eared man who looms over "Decoy," a striking painting done in 1961, the year before his untimely death, it is likely he wanted viewers to imagine it was Kishi Nobusuke, the prime minister who had presided over the extension of the U.S.-Japan security treaty in 1960. In an essay published in the Association of Avant-garde Art journal in 1961, shortly before his death, Ishii referred to Kishi's forced ratification of the ANPO treaty as "a perfect crime."





*"Untitled (Bound Men)," 1958*

[anp3026]



*"Untitled (Monuments to Heroes)," 1958*

[anp3028]



*Ishii's 1958 etchings target war profiteers and warmongers. The fat-lipped figure looming over rows of petrified faces in the painting "Decoy" (below) is almost certainly Prime Minister Kishi, who rammed renewal of the bilateral security treaty through the Diet in 1960. In the top row—a spectator's gallery?—a helmeted head joins others that are upsidedown.*



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