

5 Essential Japanese Artists

BY DARRYL WEE, MODERN PAINTERS | MARCH 24, 2016



Installation view of Takashi Murakami's "The 500 Arhats," 2013.
(Mori Art Museum, Tokyo, Takashi Murakami/Kaikai Kiki Co., Ltd)

Even as Chinese contemporary artists continue to fetch high prices at auction, the market has also recently seen resurgent interest in postwar Japanese avant-garde painters and sculptors from key art movements that originated in the decades following World War II, such as Gutai and Mono-ha, which received their first comprehensive reckoning at Alexandra Munroe's ambitious 1994 survey "Japanese Art After 1945: Scream Against the Sky," at the Guggenheim Museum in New York. More recently, important retrospectives of Gutai ("Gutai: Splendid Playground" at the Guggenheim, 2013) and postwar Japanese avant-garde art ("Tokyo 1955–1970: A New Avant-Garde" at New York's Museum of Modern Art, 2012) have done much to boost the international profile and visibility of Japan's most prominent postwar artists.

But what about the younger generations of Japanese artists who are steadily winning international and critical acclaim? Here, we offer a short list of talents whose practices collectively demonstrate the diversity of approaches, aesthetic philosophies, and political stances embodied by the contemporary Japanese art scene today.

Takashi Murakami

Although Japanese contemporary art's most ebullient ambassador needs no introduction, Western viewers perhaps may not fully appreciate the tricky political dimensions that have long surrounded the diverse output of this most chameleonic of artists, nor the significance of his ambitious one-man presentation, which opened at the Mori Art Museum in Tokyo in November 2015 and remained on view through early March.

Takashi Murakami: The 500 Arhats," his first solo exhibition in Japan in some 14 years, centers on the titular 328-foot painting depicting 500 gnarled and wizened Buddhist disciples in various states of grotesque mutation that collectively memorialize the physical and psychological suffering endured by Japan in the wake of the great East Japan earthquake of March 11, 2011. Despite its monumental proportions and incredible detail, *The 500 Arhats* took Murakami a mere eight months to complete before it was shipped off and gifted to the nation of Qatar, in recognition of its being the first country to offer aid after the disaster. It was displayed at the "Murakami-Ego" exhibition hosted by the Al-Riwaq exhibition hall in Doha in 2012.

According to Akiko Miki, curator for the Mori exhibition, Murakami has never prioritized his native country as a venue for showing his work. "For Murakami, no meaning could be found in staging a revolution from within the context of Japanese museums—or rather, contemporary art in a global sense, to his mind, did not exist in Japan, and as a result, these museums had no need for his art—and so having a solo exhibition at a Japanese museum was always a contradictory act," Miki explains. Apparently, Murakami was only narrowly convinced to take up the Mori Art Museum's offer "out of respect for the late Minoru Mori (the former chairman and CEO of Mori Building), who possessed an intense, future-oriented vision to build a city out of nothing," Miki notes. Mori, who idolized Le Corbusier's tabula rasa visions of architectural modernity and pioneered a certain high-rise, mixed-use redevelopment model for real estate in Tokyo (Roppongi Hills, Toranomon Hills, Ark Hills), provides a good analogy for the way Murakami has always functioned in the global art world—with one eye firmly trained on Western standards that might otherwise be deemed too revolutionary or iconoclastic back home in Japan.

Murakami's "return" to Japan after a 14-year hiatus foregrounds a larger discussion about his love-hate relationship with the country's art world and the system from which he originates. Critic Kyoko Nakano points out that Murakami's unbridled success abroad has led uneasy pundits to label him something of a conniving, self-promoting climber who has made a career out of selling cheapened, sensational pictures of Japan to foreigners. "The image that people have of Murakami is not that of an artist, but a moneymaking entrepreneur. Even if these insults are the inevitable price that one pays for fame, this statement suggests, rather interestingly, that the status of an artist is higher than that of an entrepreneur," writes Nakano. "Leaving this aside, it is a fact that Murakami is an entrepreneur. He employs legions of people to help him, producing a self-image and artworks that he sells to make a profit."

The scale of production found at Murakami's studio has often prompted comparisons with Andy Warhol's Factory. In truth, however, anyone who has visited his studio in Miyoshi, Saitama Prefecture, would have to admit that the comparison is far-fetched. This is no glittering social hub, but a staunchly industrious "small-town workshop" (kojo) made up of three banal buildings covering nearly 100,000 square feet, which operates 24 hours a day, staffed by young art-college graduates who have survived the "cram-style system" of Japan's educational institutions. Obsessively regulated for maximum work efficiency, Murakami's studio is a workaholic Japanese corporation at heart, adopting many standard corporate protocols like morning assembly, mass exercise sessions, daily productivity reports, and a profusion of manuals laying down, to the letter, every detail of the artwork production process.

It is this draconian system, however, that is responsible for the incredible capacity of Murakami's "factory" to produce massive artworks, such as *The 500 Arhats*, a painting partially inspired by the complex compositions of classical Japanese painters Soga Shohaku and [Nagasawa Rosetsu](#). Miki notes that this magnum opus contains key elements of Murakami's wayward aesthetic and omnivorous influences while also embodying key universal themes. "In this work, the sacred and the profane, beauty and ugliness, life and death, and meaning and meaninglessness come together in seeming harmony to create an impression of a powerful force released in a single spurt. Here, Murakami emphasizes deformation and monstrosity, as well as a form of natural, animistic expression," writes Miki in the exhibition catalogue. "What would ordinarily be seen as defects, or things far removed from Western standards of beauty, such as unbalanced composition, bizarreness, and a certain Asian astringency, are all pushed to the forefront, creating a strange sense of both harmony and vigor."

Hiroshi Sugimoto

Although best known for his tranquil photographic depictions of seascapes, empty theaters, and natural-history dioramas, Sugimoto is one of the most learned, polymathic artists of his generation, distinguished by the breadth and wide-ranging historical consciousness of his pursuits.

His most extensive showcase in Europe to date, "Lost Human Genetic Archive," which opened at the Palais de Tokyo in Paris in April 2014 after another large-scale solo outing titled "Past Tense," at the Getty Center in Los Angeles earlier in the year, displayed his unique, historiographical approach to exhibition-making. Here, Sugimoto juxtaposed his well-known photographic works with objects and artifacts sourced from a range of historical periods and geographical and cultural origins, offering viewers a series of enigmatic, anecdotal setups that seem to have been drawn from some fictional archive of world culture—a provocative yet measured rumination on the fragile fate of the human race.

Sugimoto's impressive grasp of both Japanese history and contemporary aesthetics has also made him something of an international ambassador for his country's arts beyond the strict realm of the visual. For example, he has directed productions of the Japanese Bunraku puppet-theater play *The Love Suicides at Sonezaki* in Madrid, Rome, and Paris.

Written by Chikamatsu Monzaemon in 1703, the play tells the story of a young clerk and his courtesan lover, who end up killing themselves after realizing that their relationship is doomed because of a debt the clerk incurs after refusing to go ahead with an arranged marriage to another woman. “The basic narrative of this play revolves around a sentiment or morality that Western audiences are probably not very familiar with,” explains Sugimoto. “In Shakespeare’s play, both Romeo and Juliet commit suicide, but that was more the result of a misunderstanding. In contrast, you might say that the Sonezaki tale is an exposition of the Japanese, or Buddhist, spirit of eros—the two lovers consummate their affair by committing a double suicide because they believe that their souls will thereby be ushered into a paradise in the afterlife.” In recent years, Sugimoto has also tackled an increasing number of projects that go beyond the realm of photography and visual art, moving into architecture and the painstaking design of various environments. To coincide with the Venice Biennale of Architecture in 2014, for instance, Sugimoto unveiled a newly commissioned temporary pavilion, the Glass Tea House Mondrian, on the island of San Giorgio Maggiore. Complementing the mission and purpose of Le Stanze del Vetro, a cultural facility dedicated to the art of glassmaking and located on the same island, Mondrian features an open-air courtyard that adjoins a walking path leading up to a luminous glass cube where a tea master may regale two guests with the tea ceremony. Venetian mosaics are deployed in the reflecting pool, while the fence that encircles the pavilion is fashioned out of cedarwood harvested from parts of the Tohoku region in Japan that were affected by the 2011 earthquake and tsunami.

In Tokyo, Sugimoto has also turned his design sensibility toward fine-dining environments. Poised dramatically over the stone staircase leading up to Sasha Kanetanaka, in Omotesando, a branch of the well-regarded Japanese haute cuisine *ryotei* establishment in Shinbashi, is a slender, tapered sculpture by Sugimoto resembling a giant stalactite, called *Kukkyo-cho*. Surrounded by gray-toned panels and dusky granite, the deep-set, imposing stone-walled entrance, which narrows as it leads up to the second floor via a staircase, evokes the hushed atmosphere of an ancient shrine while maintaining a sense of contemporary sleekness.

Slightly farther afield, in the Kiyoharu Art Village, a tranquil conglomeration of buildings designed by leading Japanese architects like Tadao Ando and Yoshio Taniguchi, nestling in a scenic mountainous area of Yamanashi Prefecture, is Stove, a top-tier French restaurant located in a newly refurbished wooden house designed by Sugimoto that opened in late 2013. Formerly located in the Kamakura residence of the editor, essayist, and painter Tosei Kobayashi, the restaurant was transplanted into an old, two-story wooden house dating from 1941 and comprehensively reworked by Sugimoto, featuring a luxurious cypress counter carved from a single piece of wood, and a custom-made iron stove taking pride of place in the center of the restaurant.

The culmination of all these design efforts is now under way on a coastal plot of land southwest of Tokyo, where Sugimoto is currently building the Odawara Art Foundation, a museum of his own design with dramatic, overhanging cantilevered galleries, which is slated to open in 2017. Among the meticulously planned features are an underground tunnel from which visitors can watch the sunrise once a year, during the winter solstice; a Japanese teahouse; and a Noh theater equipped with a stage that seems to hover above the sea. An outspoken critic of overly fussy and convoluted museum designs, Sugimoto is perhaps a forward-thinking pioneer among artists who are now directly reclaiming some artistic and creative license over the environment in which their works are displayed.

Chim↑Pom

Formed in 2005 in Tokyo, the art collective Chim↑Pom (Ryuta Ushiro, Yasutaka Hayashi, Ellie, Masataka Okada, Motomu Inaoka, and Toshinori Mizuno) is known for its provocative video installations and documentations of actions that veer between social satire, obnoxious prank-playing, and mordant humor.

The year 2015 proved a productive, profile-raising one for the group: After winning the prize for Overall Best Emerging Artist at the Prudential Eye Awards in Singapore, Chim↑Pom went on to hold a solo exhibition at the Saatchi Gallery in London in September to coincide with the Start fair of emerging international art, then another show at Tokyo's Watari Museum of Contemporary Art in the autumn. Their most ambitious and conceptually challenging project, however, was a site-specific undertaking dealing with the aftermath of the Fukushima disaster, called *Don't Follow the Wind*. For this project, Chim↑Pom, along with the curatorial team of Kenji Kubota, Eva and Franco Mattes, and Jason Waite, invited 12 international artists to install their work in the uninhabited exclusion zone in Fukushima surrounding the site of the 2011 nuclear accident.

Chim↑Pom's Ushiro describes *Don't Follow the Wind* more as a conceptual proposition rather than an actual display designed to receive visitors. "Until the blockades are lifted, nobody can go and actually see these works. So the exhibition at the Watari Museum served to extend the conversation on Fukushima by including new related works by the artists that function as interpretations of the pieces in the zone, as well as documents and voices of the displaced residents," explains Ushiro.

Without resorting to direct political activism, Chim↑Pom's project has successfully driven consciousness toward this massive no-go zone that opened up in Japan. "You don't experience the works or exhibition visually, let alone in person, but through your imagination," Ushiro notes. "So we're targeting both a present audience and a future one. For the present, I think this is an experiment in whether audiences actually make an imaginative attempt to engage with, or recall, the energy produced by the exhibition."

In addition to their own practice, Chim↑Pom are also fervently devoted to promoting the work of other artists whom they consider undervalued and neglected, most recently through their own gallery, called Garter, in Tokyo's Koenji district. Housed in little more than a rickety shack that dates from before World War II, Garter opened in the summer of 2015 with an inaugural exhibition devoted to cult filmmaker Shion Sono. The short walk from Koenji station to the gallery is an eye-opening experience for anyone who knows only the high-rise, cyberpunk modernity of central Tokyo. This is a rather rough-and-tumble district of vintage and secondhand stores, live music venues, and small, quaint eateries and bars, and is home to an anarchist collective called Shiroto no Ran. "There aren't any galleries or museums around. Everyone here respects each other, but my sense is that we can all coexist here and make extreme, radical things happen," Ushiro muses.

Although Chim↑Pom's work tends to be pegged as political, the group seems far more nonchalant about the label. "Unlike activists who work to realize a particular political agenda or objective, we have more abstract ends," Ushiro stresses. "Rather, I would say that our works are a record of how we try to make sport of society, to trifle with it—how individuals living in a particular society and political system stage all manner of pranks with rats, crows, living together with garbage. It's just a reflection of living within society."

Yuko Mohri

A painstaking collector and bricoleur of familiar, discarded objects and materials, Mohri transforms these things into delicate, kinetic installations that include blinking lights, solar panels, magnetic fields, and whirring motors, and pieces that move in response to the force of gravity, centrifugal force, and friction. Born in 1980 in Kanagawa Prefecture, Mohri is a versatile practitioner whose activities constantly transcend boundaries. During her early career, she performed live in underground music clubs and spaces together with other pioneers and emerging figures on Japan's diverse sound-art and performance circuit—including Otomo Yoshihide, Atsuhiko Ito, and Tetsuya Umeda—while picking up honors at top international sound-art and new-media festivals like Transmediale and Ars Electronica.

Shihoko Iida, an independent curator and associate professor at Tokyo University of the Arts who prepared a solo exhibition of Mohri's work that opened in February at the newly inaugurated art space Minatomachi Art Table in Nagoya, notes that the artist's sensibilities can be traced to musical elements rather than to a strictly visual, art historical context. "Mohri was particularly interested in sound art when she was a student and gradually became more influenced by experimental music and multidisciplinary practices that incorporate sound, visual, and sculptural elements," says Iida. "Her interest in chance operations and randomness owes an artistic debt to Marcel Duchamp, John Cage, Jean Tinguely, and Fischli/Weiss, as well as to important historical movements like Dada, Arte Povera, Fluxus, and Jikken Kobo (Experimental Workshop)."

Iida, who also curated an installation by Mohri that was juxtaposed with Fischli/Weiss's *The Way Things Go*, 1978–79, which visualizes a series of chain reactions of various invisible energies caused by fire, water, and ordinary objects, notes that Mohri's work speaks to "a certain dynamism of discarded everyday objects and the materiality of Arte Povera, and even a certain punk aesthetic."

Mohri had a busy 2014 that included appearances at the Yokohama Triennale and the inaugural Sapporo International Art Festival, as well as a stint as set designer for a performance of Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring* at Festival/ Tokyo, where she riffed on her ongoing series "Urban Minin." The set featured an installation made out of used streetlight poles perched on a platform of compressed cans that light up and turn off in a seemingly random fashion.

More recently, Mohri won the Grand Prix at the second Nissan Art Awards for *Moré Moré (Leaky): The Falling Water Given #1–3*, 2015, which consists of a room-size shambolic assemblage comprising scrap wood, umbrellas, hoses, plastic bottles, and other everyday objects, partially inspired by the makeshift contraptions occasionally seen in the underground passages of the Tokyo subway that are hastily assembled to catch the rivulets of rainwater dripping from a leaky ceiling. For Mohri, these ingenious, slapdash constructions may be fashioned from synthetic or artificial materials but are actually akin to organic, adaptable organisms that serve as stopgap measures and quick fixes in our urban environment. For Iida, Mohri's *Moré Moré* project is an "acknowledgment of the anonymous creativity found in the attempts to stop water leaks in underground stations."

Koki Tanaka

Based in Los Angeles, Tanaka has seen significant strides in his career over the past few years. After having picked up a special mention at the Venice Biennale in 2013 for his Japan Pavilion exhibition, "Abstract Speaking—Sharing Uncertainty and Collective Acts," Tanaka went on to win the Artist of the Year award from Deutsche Bank in 2015.

Tanaka's Venice presentation, curated by Mika Kuraya, chief curator at the National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo, retained the roughly hewn wooden columns and other selected elements of the previous year's Japan presentation at the architecture biennale, which was a direct response to the aftermath of the March 11, 2011, quake and tsunami that rocked northeastern Japan. While making subtly oblique references to the state of Japanese society and the national psyche two years after the disaster, Tanaka was more concerned about exploring the elusive prospect of communication and dialogue among increasingly heterogeneous societies.

Such videos as *a haircut by 9 hairdressers at once (second attempt)*, 2010, *A Piano Played by Five Pianists at Once (First Attempt)*, 2012, and *a pottery produced by five potters at once (silent attempt)*, 2013—all included in the Japan Pavilion—depict individual protagonists who find themselves struggling to overcome a sense of mutual rivalry as they “collaborate” to complete the task at hand. Although they occasionally resemble comic sketches that illustrate the truth of the hoary chestnut “Too many cooks spoil the broth,” Tanaka’s deftly edited films are also microcosms of contemporary society, where values that naturally diverge from each other are forced to coexist. Socially conscious without ever devolving into mere didacticism, Tanaka has a reputation for an artistic practice that explores the subtle nuances of the idea of community in a global world. On the occasion of his winning the Deutsche Bank prize, MAXXI artistic director Hou Hanru praised Tanaka for being a “savvy mobilizer of collective actions...encouraging sharing and exchange among participants to produce a common sense of creativity and imagination.”

Although it demonstrates evident links to relational art and aesthetics, Tanaka’s work has also, interestingly, been read within a framework of Buddhist thought and philosophy. Mami Kataoka, chief curator at the Mori Art Museum, notes that Tanaka’s exploration of the difficulties that arise when nominally independent individuals come together to engage in dialogue or collaborate with each other to accomplish various tasks can be seen as a manifestation of the concept of *engi* (interdependent arising), one of the central pillars of Buddhist thought. “*Engi* posits that all things in this world are not single, independent entities; every single creature and thing is reciprocally connected and related to all the others, and exists as a result of those causal relationships,” says Kataoka. In this, Tanaka is an eternal optimist, an advocate for the possibility of genuine human connection and communication at a time when these utopian prospects have become sabotaged by backward-looking conservatism, xenophobia, and a fear of the Other.

“About five or six years ago, I became fascinated with this idea that perhaps only one soul exists in this world, and that this soul travels through each one of us, through the past, present, and future—one soul permeating everything, connecting each of us to everyone else,” Tanaka muses. “In this sense, you might say I’m an optimist about the possibility of real communication between individuals who each carry a bit of this common soul within them, no matter how divided they might seem to be on the surface.”

This month saw the opening of Tanaka’s first major solo show in Europe, at the Deutsche Bank Kunsthalle in Berlin, while last month a solo exhibition, on view through May 15, “[Koki Tanaka: Possibilities for being together. Their praxis](#)” debuted at the Contemporary Art Center, Art Tower Mito, just outside Tokyo.

Although many observers have noted that Tanaka's recent work has spotlighted the difficulties of true collaboration, the artist counters that his more immediate interests have shifted slightly of late. "Actually, I'm more curious about how we can live together with others. We're currently facing difficulties in living together with people whom we don't know. We start to label them our enemies," Tanaka explains. "Here, I am talking about the hate-speech incidents directed at Japanese-born ethnic Koreans in Japan, for example, or discrimination against Muslims after the Paris attacks. We are moving further and further away from true collaboration, and a documentation of democratic consensus."

At Art Tower Mito, Tanaka is showing some 220 minutes of video footage shot during a six-day workshop of "living together situations" conducted with six participants and a film crew in a dormitory-like setting. As the participants read, eat, make pottery, and have free discussions with one another, Tanaka captures that awkward sense of an obligatory, ambiguous social contract that inevitably unfolds among people meeting for the first time who are required to be together for reasons outside their control. In the artist's words, the work is about "the possibility of being together, despite our differences."