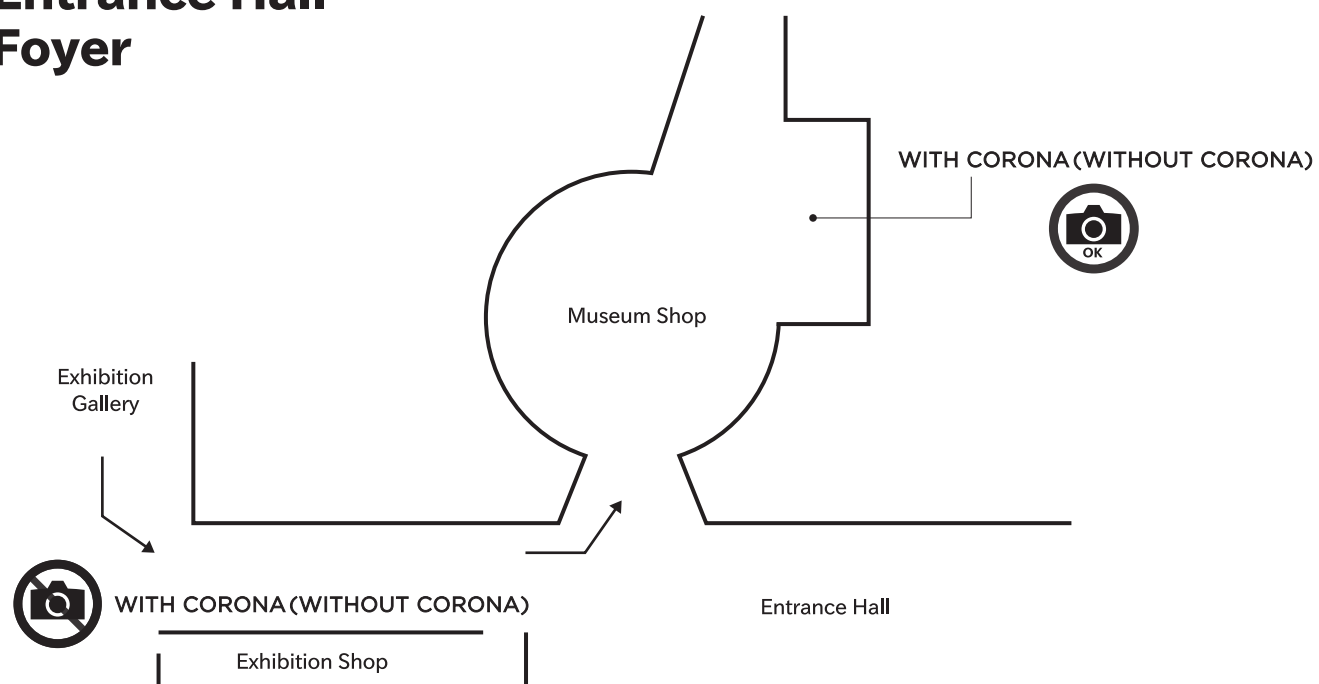




Archive

Yokoo's oldest extant work, *Musashi and Kojiro (Copied from a Picture Book)*, depicts the legendary duel between Miyamoto Musashi and Sasaki Kojiro on Ganryu Island. Yokoo copied the picture when he was five from an illustration in a picture book called *Miyamoto Musashi* published by Kodansha. However, because Kojiro's legs are cut off at the ankles by the bottom of the page in the original illustration, Yokoo added someone else's feet from another page in the book to complete the picture. In effect, these are early examples of copying and collage, two of the key elements that later came to characterize Yokoo's art. Yokoo's first oil painting, *Rock and Water*, was made while he was in high school. The painting's texture, created by combining sand with paint, the Cubist-like treatment of the motif, and the dark color tones, exhibit a level of completion that is not indicative of a high-school student's work. Around the time that Yokoo graduated from high school, his work *Textile Festival (Nishiwaki City)* was selected for inclusion in a poster contest. It was this poster that opened the door to his career as a designer.

1F Entrance Hall Foyer



WITH CORONA (WITHOUT CORONA)

In May 2020, as the novel coronavirus continued to spread, Yokoo began dispatching the mask-collage series, WITH CORONA, to the entire world via Twitter, Facebook, and his own blog. The series makes use of a variety of images, including some from Yokoo's own works and photographs, and news items from TV and newspapers. (In April 2021, the series was renamed WITHOUT CORONA.) At present, July 2021, the total number of works in the series has reached approximately 700, and it continues to increase every day. Yokoo has said that the masks provide the finishing touch for the works. In effect, the image of the masks completely changes the meaning and atmosphere of the works, prompting the viewer to consider a variety of things. These works might be seen as a reflection of our times, marked by the unprecedented circumstances of the corona crisis.

Organized by: Museum of Contemporary Art Tokyo operated by Tokyo Metropolitan Foundation for History and Culture / The Asahi Shimbun / TV Asahi / Agency for Cultural Affairs, Government of Japan / Japan Arts Council
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Text: Yusuke Minami (Curator of the exhibition)
English translation: Christopher Stephens

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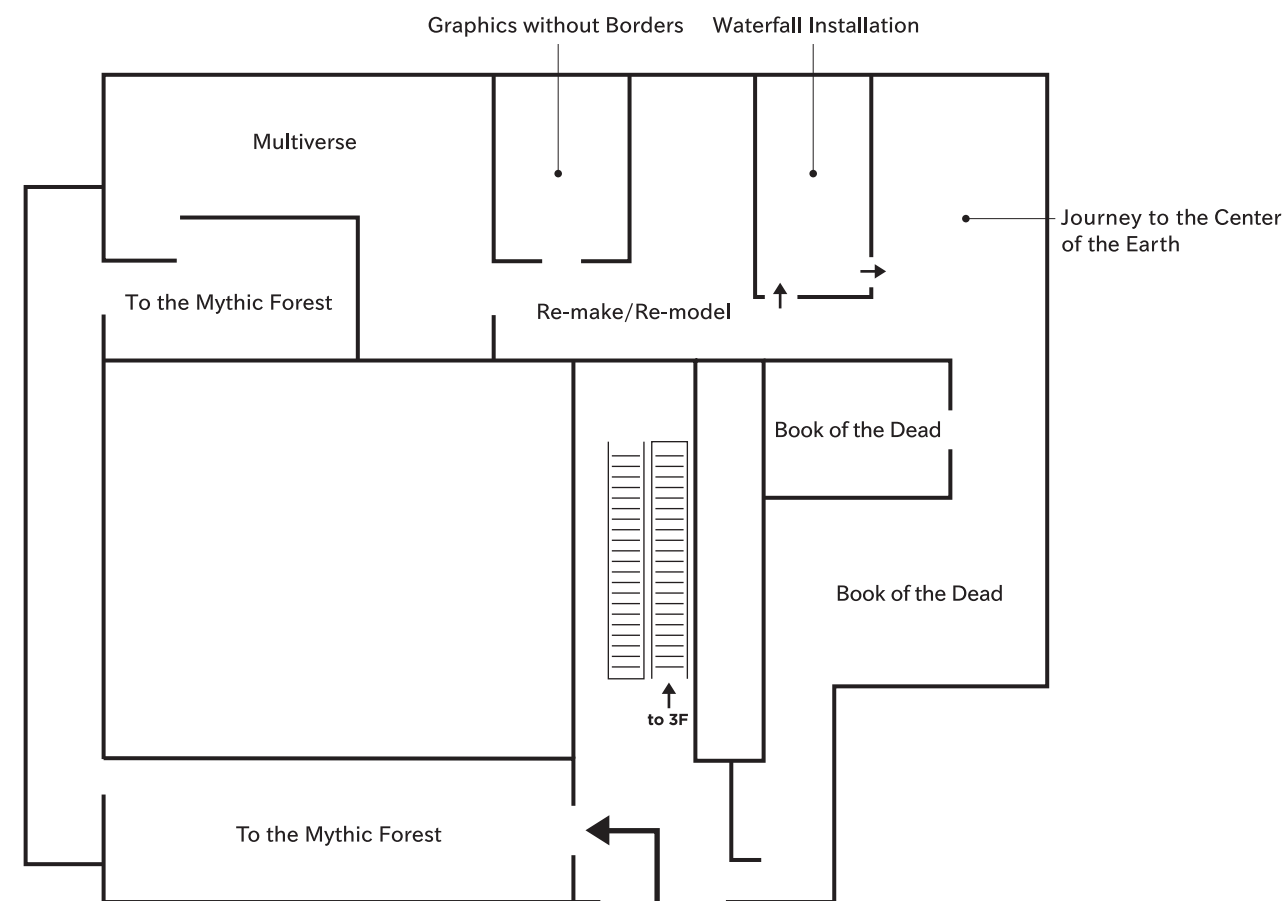


GENKYO YOKOO TADANORI

2021.7.17 sat—10.17 sun

Exhibition Guide

1F



To the Mythic Forest

A major Picasso retrospective held at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York in the summer of 1980 inspired Tadanori Yokoo to shift his field of activity from graphic design to painting. This so-called "painter's declaration" was born out of a magazine headline on the artist's activities rather than an actual statement made by Yokoo. Throughout the '80s, while encountering the Neo-Expressionist movement that had emerged around the world, Yokoo undertook a series of trials and errors in a quest to find his own direction in painting. This resulted in a succession of works that brought him international acclaim. In some, Yokoo pursued the physicality of painting by depicting nude figures in the forest, in others he dealt with Japanese mythology, and in still others, he created collages made up of disparate objects, such as mirrors, decorative lights, bird bones, and taxidermy.

Multiverse

In Yokoo's so-called "multidimensional" paintings (including "canvas on canvas" works in which he attached pieces of canvas to the main canvas), he created intricately combined collages out of images from a variety of sources such as art history and film. The works, a veritable "tapestry of references" that incorporated cinematic temporality and storytelling, might be seen as the culmination of Yokoo's unique postmodern style of painting. Gradually, his interest shifted to the depths of his inner self in waterfall paintings that stemmed from dreams, and a series based on the Annunciation, which expressed his inspiration as a painter.

Re-make/Re-model

Yokoo's first solo exhibition of paintings, held in 1966, included a provocative series depicting vacant and ill-mannered contemporary woman (referred to at the time as après-guerre, or post-war, girls). In the 2000s, Yokoo remade these works, also known as Pink Girls, in myriad reiterations and transformations. Repetition is a technique that Yokoo has on occasion adopted, and it is one of the most important features of his art. After first painting five works inspired by Henri Rousseau in 1967, Yokoo returned to the theme in the '00s in a series of "transformations" of the artist's pictures. These works also convey a profound sympathy for the "Sunday painter," who wove fantasy and poetic sentiment out of ordinary life.

Graphics without Borders

Yokoo’s graphic works of the 1960s, conceived as a revolt against modern design, are aggressively patched together from a wide range of elements with varied origins, including indigenous motifs derived from the labels of matchboxes made for export, and brilliant Pop colors. The works received international acclaim early on, and among other things, were acquired by the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in 1967. In addition to being pioneering examples of postmodernism, the works are imbued with a critical view of design itself and commercialism. Yokoo would continue to explore some of these themes, such as presenting a process and nudes in utopian natural settings, after making the transition to painting in the 1980s.

Waterfall Installation

Yokoo began to collect picture postcards of waterfalls from all over the world as source materials for his waterfall paintings. But this soon exceeded his original intentions, as the cards topped 13,000. Sensing a mysterious force in the vast number of postcards, Yokoo assembled *Waterfall Installation* as a kind of “offering.” Waterfalls have been an object of worship since ancient times due to their inherent ability to purify the spirit. While postcards are mere images, they also function as a means of conveying messages. In a sense, encountering the torrents in a waterfall postcard is akin to exposing one’s body to cosmic power.

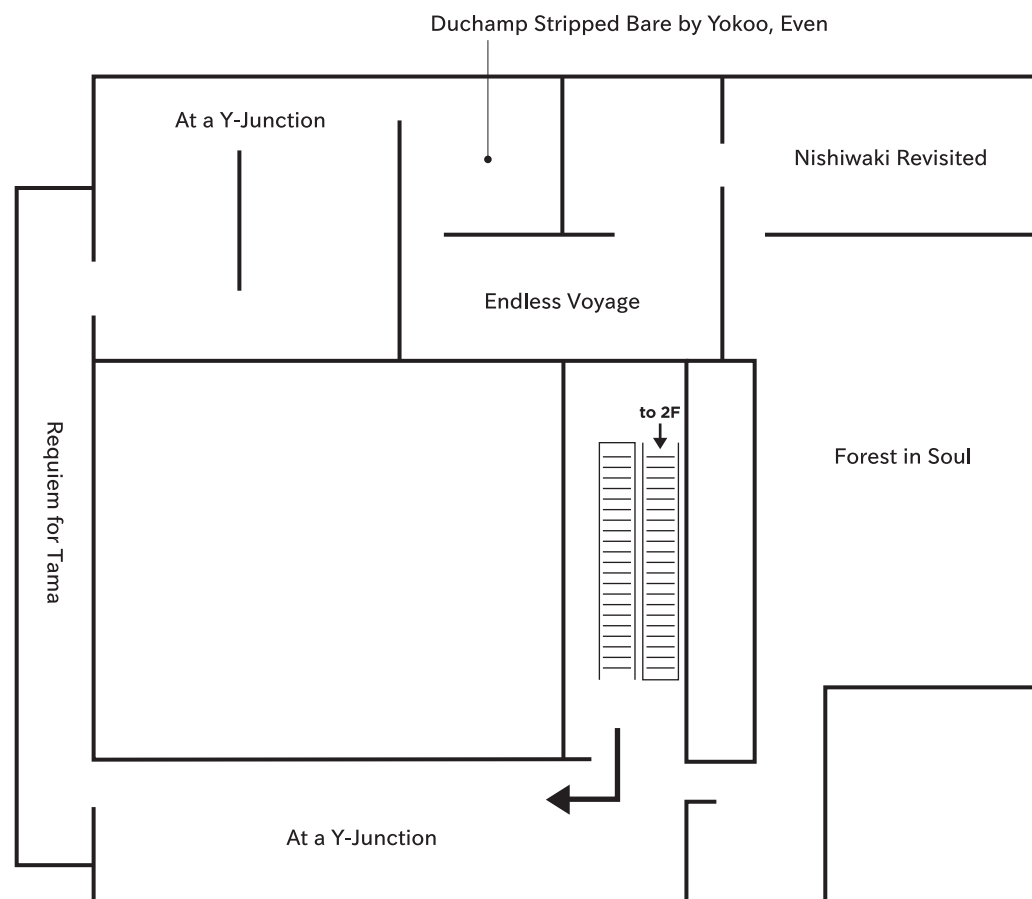
Journey to the Center of the Earth

After pursuing the theme of waterfalls, Yokoo’s focus turned to his inner psyche and his memories. These works featured elements from the “blood-tingling,” “flesh-quivering” adventures that were a familiar part of his childhood, including motifs from Tarzan movies, detective stories by Ranpo Edogawa, adventure stories by Yoichiro Minami, illustrated stories by Soji Yamakawa, and picture books published by Kodansha. At the same time, Yokoo adopted a stylistic approach with a magical-realist flavor, in which a parable-like story unfolds within the space and time of a dream. Yokoo has said that infantilism is an indispensable quality for an artist.

Book of the Dead

Tadanori Yokoo developed an early interest in death as a theme in his works. His childhood memories of growing up in Nishiwaki, Hyogo Prefecture were inextricably linked to memories of the departed, his adoptive parents among them, and the war. Yokoo has said that as a boy he saw the night sky stained a deep red by air raids beyond the edges of the mountains. His series of red paintings are linked, via these memories, to the realm of the dead while also expressing aspects of the cosmos and the transmigration of the soul. On the other hand, by depicting the “unseeable,” Yokoo’s series of works in which women’s faces are concealed might be seen as a reference to death.

3F



At a Y-Junction

One of Yokoo’s most important works, the Y-Junction series, was inspired by the universal quality that transcended the artist’s personal nostalgia for a photograph, which showed the former site of a demolished model shop that he had frequented as a child. We are drawn into these works by the dynamics of the Y-junctions. While imbued with a sense of nostalgia and remoteness, these divided roads also have the air of a forgotten relic from another age. The series comprises myriad variations (daytime Y-junctions, black Y-junctions, etc.), and the motif seems to function as a matrix in Yokoo’s paintings. The phrase, “It’s not what to paint, It’s not how to paint, It’s how to live,” is contained in the eponymous work, part of the Aurora Series. With this as a turning point, Yokoo entered a new phase in which he set out to reconsider life as the essence of pictorial practice.

Requiem for Tama

Tama was Yokoo’s beloved cat with whom he lived for 15 years. This series begins with two sketch-like works in which Tama seems to be on the verge of dying before our very eyes. These are followed by a number of other pictures, based on photographs and other sources, showing the cat in a variety of poses from bygone days. While thinking back on Tama’s appearance, depicted with the unaffected brushstrokes of a weekend painter, Yokoo’s act of carefully portraying the cat in each work might best be described as a ritual performed for the repose of the animal’s soul. By painting Tama, Yokoo was perhaps hoping to make his lost pet reappear or to bring him back to life. In that sense, the series has parallels with the origins of painting.

Duchamp Stripped Bare by Yokoo, Even

Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968), a 20th-century art master sometimes called the forefather of conceptual art, is widely known for his object works, known as “readymades.” These include *Fountain* (1917), an untouched urinal that he attempted to exhibit as a work of art. While Duchamp is said to have rejected painting, Yokoo has continued, particularly in the ’00s, to quote details from Duchamp in his paintings, repeatedly playing around with the old master. Yokoo’s approach, an attack on contemporary art modeled on Duchamp’s oppositional style, is resolutely anachronistic. But the fact that it is anachronistic makes it seem like the true essence of the Duchampian approach. Although he might seem to be as far as you can get from Duchamp, Yokoo might actually be the most Duchampian artist of all.

Endless Voyage

While working intermittently on the Y-Junction series, Yokoo was inspired by a host of other things to create new series based on an assortment of themes. His public-bath and hot-spring series exemplify the abundance of variations in Yokoo’s paintings. Adventure and artists were themes that Yokoo repeatedly explored in the part, but by approaching these subjects from a different perspective, he arrived at a comprehensive style of work. In Yokoo’s water-ripple series, based on the motif of Leandro Erlich’s *Swimming Pool*, an installation at the 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art, Kanazawa, he explored the themes such as the symbiosis of abstraction and figuration, and the written word in painting. As suggested by these multidimensional developments, Yokoo’s pictorial endeavors are part of an “endless voyage.”

Nishiwaki Revisited

In 1996, 2017, and 2018, Yokoo paid three visits to the Sugihara Paper Research Institute (Taka-cho, Taka-gun, Hyogo Prefecture), located in the vicinity of his hometown of Nishiwaki. There, he created a group of collages using handmade washi (Japanese paper). In these works, Yokoo assembled a number of items that were closely connected to Nishiwaki, the town where he spent the first 19 years of his life, including scraps and labels from cotton fabric (known as Banshu-ori) made for export, and photographs of B-29 bombers. The memories and feelings that these materials evoke are crucial as they represent the essence of creation to Yokoo. The artist’s handmade-paper collages can be seen as a kind of specimen case, which sheds light on these things.

Forest in Soul

Underlying the stylistic changes in Yokoo’s recent works are an integration of the abstract and figurative, and the physicalization of painting. These richly colored pictures, assembled out of sketch-like brushstrokes, suggest an incipient and autonomous pictoriality, seemingly capturing the instant when an image takes form. The theme of Yokoo’s latest series is Hanshan and Shide (known in Japanese as Kanzan and Jittoku). These two legendary figures from Tang-dynasty China (618-907 CE) are often mentioned in reference to Zen, both in China and Japan, and have served as the subject for a wide range of suiboku-ga (ink paintings) and bunjin-ga (literati paintings) as a manifestation of unworldliness. With these works, Yokoo appears to have arrived at a new state of freedom. The dim outlines of these holy fools emerge from the spaces, filled with bright vital colors, through tremulous brushstrokes, in what seems like the true embodiment of freedom in painting.