Artists as Madmen: Yamashita Kiyoshi and Matsumoto Shunsuke’s “Disabled” Bodies

The spirit wishes to be a madman rather than remaining mediocre, The spirit yearns for being [at least] a madman if it cannot be a genius, How many times have men seriously thought about it, Men wish to be humans with limitless imaginations —Yanagi Sōetsu, “Batsu,” 1939

INTRODUCTION

The preceding chapters focused mainly on those artists who occupied dominant positions within Japanese society in the 1930s and 40s. Yet the majority of artists active at that time were not as privileged as those who achieved their fame in the field of military propaganda or in the national art institutions, such as Fujita, Miyamoto, Yasui, or Umehara. A number of younger artists were sent to the front not as painters but as soldiers, and many never made their way back home. Those artists who were perceived as “deviants,” such as Communists, pacifists, the disabled, and homosexuals, found it extremely hard to survive, and some were indeed under threat in this period of increasingly oppressive mobilization policies.

This chapter investigates how those labeled as “deviants” were represented or represented themselves in the specific historical context of the Asia-Pacific War. Two artists marginalized during the war, who became extremely well known in the postwar period, are the main foci of this chapter: Yamashita Kiyoshi (1922–1971) and Matsumoto Shunsuke (1912–1948). Yamashita Kiyoshi was a mentally challenged painter. From 1934 he lived in the Yawata Institute (founded in 1928), a nursing home for children with impaired intelligence, and beginning around 1938, he attracted significant media attention as an “idiot savant” for his prominent talent in painting and especially hari-e (a form of collage using cut or torn pieces of colored paper glued together to make a picture). A craze for Yamashita and his art lasted for roughly two years until he suddenly disappeared from the institute in November 1940.

The popularity of Yamashita Kiyoshi provoked a series of debates over the value of the works of the mentally ill and the proximity of artistic genius to “madness.” While these debates involved a number of prominent artists and intellectuals, the yōga painter and essayist Matsumoto Shunsuke was among those who reacted most strongly against Yamashita. Matsumoto is considered one of the very few artists who expressed his anti-militarist views in the middle of the Asia-Pacific War. While
widely known as a “painter of resistance” (teikō no gaka) today, Matsumoto, too, was a socially marginalized figure at the time. Born in the 1910s, Matsumoto and a number of his fellow artists found themselves at odds with a society engaged in all-out war, mainly because, according to Kawata Akihisa, “they were too young to be established war painters and yet too old to become immediate targets of conscription.” Along with his ambivalent social position due to his age and the short length of his professional career, Matsumoto was deaf from the age of thirteen, which exempted him from conscription. The difficult position that he occupied in society, as many studies have already pointed out, may have allowed him to maintain a critical distance from the mainstream militant ideology and culture. Two monumental self- (or family-) portrait paintings of Matsumoto, *Portrait of a Painter* (1941) and *Standing Figure* (1942), are known today as bold manifestations of his resistance to militarism and assertion of the value of individualism (figs. 47, 48).

What has been almost entirely dismissed in Matsumoto’s practices during the Asia-Pacific War, however, is his great antagonism to the art of Yamashita Kiyoshi, which he expressed in essays written between 1939 and 41. As discussed in detail later in this chapter, Matsumoto’s reaction to Yamashita, which was truly blistering and relentless, constituted an important factor in his production of self-portraits.

Although Yamashita and Matsumoto were never in direct contact and are rarely discussed together, the popular reception of Yamashita, and Matsumoto’s strong reaction to it, provide us with a clue to one of the key issues pertinent to the theme of this book: the presentation of the male figure as a possible medium of negotiation for the politics of gender, the body, as well as health, during the Asia-Pacific War. At that time, being “healthy,” both physically and mentally, was the nation’s obligation, for men to be soldiers and for women to reproduce soldiers. Bodies perceived to be “deviant” from or “unfit” in relation to this standard not only met with severe discrimination, but also sometimes became the actual targets of punitive sanctions.

Yamashita and Matsumoto both were labeled as “unfit,” the former for his impaired intelligence and the latter for his hearing disorder, which ultimately exempted both from conscription. While this obsessive promotion of “health” and regulation of the body affected the entire population, these policies exerted a significant impact on the art community, which was already in question due to the widespread image of the artist as a social “deviant” or “madman.” The popular reception of Yamashita can be explicated, and Matsumoto’s denial of Yamashita and his rigorous production of self-portraits can be reexamined, within this specific political context, where discourses on “health,” “able-bodied/disabled body,” “insanity,” and “art” were all at stake during the implementation of Japan’s war effort.