

Artist Talk: Yuken Teruya in conversation with Jonathan Watkins

Monday 10th October 2022, 18.00 - 19.00 BST

Jonathan: The first question I'd like to ask you is how did you decide on the combination of works for this exhibition?

Yuken: I thought that this exhibition would be a good opportunity to show a series of my kimono works which are made with Okinawan traditional dye and a kimono patterning technique called *bingata*. This kimono showed not only traditional methods of making patterns and colours, but also conceptually to me, they show a deeper message. It is not just a style but a transformation or "translation" from the past when Okinawa was the Ryukyu Kingdom. When this traditional pattern becomes stylised, it is the voicing of the past, and we can use it to examine what is happening in our time. It is my "visual-translation" system, and so it was very important for me to bring the kimono to this exhibition.

Jonathan: The earliest one that we see was made in New York, and you have the kimono as a sort of format for decoration which is really interesting. You combine the traditional configurations with motifs like parachuting soldiers and aeroplanes, so there is a strong reference to the American presence in Okinawa.

Yuken: Yes, exactly. The kimono that you mentioned is called 'You-I, You-I' which is on display and it is also my first kimono design in this series. It shows a cherry blossom tree falling from the shoulder, and I replaced some of the flowers with bomb explosions or parachutes, and you can see the fighter jets along the shoulder pattern. I felt this was an investigation of where we stand on this issue of military bases in Okinawa, and that we were stuck in talking about it politically. I thought maybe there was another way to communicate, to find a solution. I was invited to show my work in Tokyo and I used this as a platform to bring this issue to a new place outside of Okinawa, and the same opportunity was presented here [at Daiwa].

Jonathan: It's interesting that work was made in New York, as you first went to art school in Tokyo and you feel the political difference between Okinawa and America very keenly. For instance your work with newspapers, "Capital" is where you show all these regional newspapers and none from Tokyo, giving the idea that you are trying to convey the fact that there are many points of view, not just the metropolitan one. But then you go to America, and America has had a huge impact on Okinawa. What was it like for you when you first arrived, and the fact that ironically, it was where you started to see yourself more as Okinawan?

Yuken: My motivations were very simple at the time. I had shown work about Okinawa within the frame of Japanese art humility, and I thought I better go to the US, an environment where contemporary art has more involvement with politics. I needed more of an influence from contemporary art in the US.

Jonathan: You've also made a number of works that deal with colonialist politics and imperialism, going from Japan to the States. There are a number of works in this exhibition which also reference

British identity. Can you talk about colonialism and the impact that has in terms of cultural heritage? Particularly in a place like Okinawa where in the seventeenth century Ryukyu culture was annexed and then in the nineteenth century it became a prefecture of Japan. This place which is so far away and so distant is suddenly being claimed by a centralised government. I know that you are very interested in cultural value vis-a-vis colonial power and politics.

Yuken: I think cultural heritage like *bingata* is a tool and a hope to see our issues and colonial power differently, through visuals. Instead of exchanging communication through text or language there is a visual element. This may have a different impact on the audience, and it has a wider connection to our sensitivity. Music or food has a historical background that we don't need to rely on language to understand, we can feel it and sense it through the style, pattern, and colour. There is a portrait of Elizabeth II in the other room which has been made through the aesthetic view of *bingata*. It's not my decision to make *bingata* style of Elizabeth, but it is all fully controlled by historical decisions, mostly by craftsmen I work with directly. The visions and processes are detached from the usual political conversations, it has its own way of communication. That's where I found hope and I believe there is potential to find other solutions to this issue.

Jonathan: To some extent, I think it is a counter-action, *bingata* as I understand it was "finished" by the time of American occupation in the 1940s. There is also the question of language, and this refers to the video downstairs of an American-Okinawa performer singing in Ryukyu and it is almost like a retrieval of something that was lost. Language was suppressed by the central government in Japan in the same way *bingata* as a technique was lost. Are you concerned with the retrieval, or pulling back of a cultural heritage that could be lost?

Yuken: For me, it is already there, I don't feel that it is lost. Well, the technique and efforts of the craftsmen were once lost after World War Two, but the technique was then relearned, and I am taking advantage of all their efforts from the past.

Jonathan: I'm particularly sensitive to it as we have been working on a project with a woman from Hokkaido who is Ainu. There is profound sadness in that she can't speak the language even though she considers it her native tongue. It is a very similar story with the suppression of rituals or art forms such as the tattooing that was traditional for Ainu women that was made illegal. So much of what she does seems to be to bring back these aspects of her life. There is the other thing too that interests me, that the annexation of Okinawa coincided with about the arrival of Europeans in the mid-nineteenth century, and you are dealing with cultural activity which would conventionally be considered craft, such as *bingata*. But now through your activity it has been co-opted into a world of fine art, *bijitsu*, which is a European concept brought to Japan. Do you distinguish between art and craft, or through your practice are you trying to blur the lines between the two?

Yuken: To be honest I have stopped thinking about it, I used to think about it a lot because I questioned myself and my focus on craft. To make my concept works the kimono should stay within the definition of *bingata*. To keep their voice active in our present times I have to understand their aesthetic point of view and traditional methods. But I am taking this element to contemporary art exhibitions or theatre plays. I am taking this element from craftsmanship to somewhere else, to contemporary art exhibitions or theatre plays. That is what makes me excited, and that is what I feel is my role as an

artist. In the same way, I take old elements that have been inherited from the past, but I am more interested in the future, how we can reactivate these elements to fit our reality. I am hoping to continue this concept in my future work, I think that is my recent interest.

Jonathan: There is your interest in museum culture. To some extent it is expressed here in the gallery with the monopoly assemblages, where you have a plan of the British Museum and the Metropolitan Museum in New York. Again, these are institutions which optimise a culture that was brought to Japan and Okinawa from outside with the notion of fine art. You are interested in them as institutions within a world of luxury and high value. I wondered how you saw your participation in an art market, essentially a luxury market, with an idea of art that comes, ultimately, from the outside.

Yuken: Dealing with the art market in New York definitely became part of my inspiration for my work and practice. For instance my use of Tiffany & Co. shopping bags which I have remade into trees. I am interested in using existing value and adding different values and materials. could originally be seen as value-less, so I take the idea of value and materiality, and mix or flip them. There is another example of my use of high-heels from luxury brands and I add living chrysalis. What happened conceptually is changing the purpose of the sandal where these butterflies are now hatching. There is also the question of how we define beauty. We view luxury brands as aesthetic, and maybe there is a connection to nature where there is common ground between humans and other animals or insects. I try to expand the idea of luxury to discuss sustainability and the environment, instead of focusing on fine leather or other fine materials. This is something I wanted to convey in this series.

Jonathan: Could you tell me how life changed for you in New York, because you now live in Berlin and it is almost like you arrived as a chrysalis and then became a butterfly and flew to Berlin. You arrived in New York as a student, and then made your way in the art markets. Is there a difficulty and almost cognitive dissonance where you are critical of that world of luxury as it relates to value and capitalism? What is it like to have to participate in that system?

Yuken: I believe there are artists in this group who have had a similar experience. Becoming a full-time artist, to me, was dealing with the art market. That is not easy but what I discovered and how I understood and positioned the art market, is that I proposed a new value to the market. Hopefully, galleries agree to promote this new value maybe by showing sprouts over newspapers, or trees cut out of MacDonald's shopping bags. For me, in proposing a new value I need a partner to promote this to the art market, to help its acknowledgement and add another level of value. This is my battleground, which I am still in.

Jonathan: I am so aware of that as something many artists deal with. The interesting thing is that you left New York and moved to Berlin. I wondered what prompted you to do that?

Yuken: I felt a need to reinvent myself. I was in New York for twenty years, and I thought I should experience a different environment and train myself in a new skill, activity, or method. Also, my partner and artist whom I have always respected, Linda Havenstein, helped me, and encouraged me to go to Berlin. And it did change my style. I was taking those luxury brands and shopping culture as part of my elements, as living, everyday materials. After I moved to Berlin, I started seeing people more closely. Being in Europe helped me to work with people from different backgrounds, and with

Linda, who is an interdisciplinary digital artist, I began working with more video works with more people not only me. I began to start making more works that involved more people and their cultures, moving away from the individual object.

Jonathan: Your work is now noticeably more relational and participatory. There is your work here, *La Mer* with the fish, and your father's grand game where people are flipping cars over, referencing protests in the 1970s where American cars were vandalised and there was rioting, did your father participate in those?

Yuken: Actually, my father didn't, but his generation had a big part in it.

Jonathan: I have one more question, but I was asked if I had some questions to give to Yuken before the talk, so he had a sense of where I was coming from, and it has almost been interesting for me to see an artist whose work is so loaded with political content. I read for example in the introduction to the exhibition that for you the "modest practice of drawing is not only to observe hierarchies but to rebalance them," the idea that art can be a political agent of change. Every gesture you make is very loaded and arising out of research and a strong and philosophical position. My question is: do you ever fantasise about being an abstract painter?

Yuken: It's my fantasy to explore abstraction. It's been more than twenty years and I feel like I am becoming a mirror of what is happening outside of me, or how I think about the issue of Okinawa and taking elements from things around me. I believed that was my style. But as a fantasy, I began thinking: what if I just had myself, am I able to bring something just from myself? That became my question as well. There are four watercolour paintings in this exhibition, and while still being figurative expressions, these gave me a sense of freedom and were a good exercise for me to explore fluidity. It was a nervous step towards abstraction.

Q&A

Guest: When walking around the exhibition, I noticed that a lot of your work is disconnected from its use. But the kimono are different, and one of them is shown on a mannequin. Did you make the kimono thinking that they could be worn and used?

Yuken: I think so, and also having a kimono on a mannequin will really help to feel the person with that pattern of kimono. I thought it was important to include that element because the space is not a museum and I wanted to keep that sense of a person, that it can be available for you.

Guest: You mention your *bingata* expressing the voices of the past in the present, and I wondered what voices you are referring to? I have the impression that *bingata* to be quite a luxury thing, and I don't have a picture of ordinary Okinawan people wearing *bingata*, I thought it was very luxurious.

Yuken: A big motivation for using *bingata* was searching for a visual identity which could hold the people of Okinawa strongly. Yes, this dress was mostly used in court dances and designed by royal family of the Ryukyu kingdom at the time. The style may not belong to the local people of the Ryukyu kingdom, but it is one of my desperate efforts to grasp something to help us discover who we are and

how we relate to the past. Everything has disappeared, literally everything is gone. Maybe if the war did not happen I would chose something different, or other elements could be suggested to represent Okinawan people. Perhaps this is just the beginning, an introduction to my journey of finding a visual identity of Okinawa. I think this gave a lot of encouragement to Okinawan people, that it had universal, timeless beauty. It is a good opportunity to find other options for visual identity.

Guest: What do you think of Japan from an Okinawan point of view, is it different to other countries?

Yuken: I have a Japanese passport, but I am not comfortable considering myself Japanese. The Japanese government focuses a lot on mono-culture; one culture, one origin, and I am not part of that. I am happy to promote Japan as a plural, as *Japans*, because it has diversity. I want to be more engaging and multiply the recognition of the many layers of Japan. I have felt like a minority, an outsider of Japan as an Okinawan, I still do. There are many minorities in Japan including Ainu and Zainichi, and they are part of Japan but they do not feel like part of the system. My work is also about acknowledgement, it may not say yes or no, or show some sort of ambivalence, but I want to show an acknowledgement through my artwork. I don't need to bring a strength of whether it is good or bad, but sharing acknowledgement is important. If I show Japans, it tells them: we are here!