

# Art and Memory in the Work of Roger Shimomura

## Antonio Sergio Bessa

Life is a mixed-media affair — John Ashbery<sup>1</sup>

An Autumn Afternoon (1962), Yasujiro Ozu's masterful movie about an aging military officer's dealings with his old friends and growing children, is striking for, among other things, its infusion of Western visual elements in what is otherwise a quintessential Japanese chamber play. Throughout the film a series of modern objects signals the cultural changes introduced in postwar Japan as the country embraced the industrial model. Thus, traditional Japanese interiors are infiltrated by mass produced icons such as juice cartons, soda bottles, electric rice cookers, golf clubs and kitchen clocks. Outside, images of factory chimneys and a baseball arena alternate with scenes of urban life amid neon signs mixed in with rice paper lamps. Ozu's juxtaposition of old and new might be considered an early instance of the Pop Art aesthetics that would inform a few years later the films of Jean-Luc Godard that captured the city of Paris rebounding after World War II.

But the art of juxtaposition, of course, is not a postwar invention. In *The Futurist Moment: Avant-Garde, Avant Guerre, and the Language of Rupture*, literary critic Marjorie Perloff dedicated an entire chapter to the subject, noting that collage is "perhaps the central artistic invention of the avant guerre."<sup>2</sup> In an effort to understand the relevance of the technique, Perloff traces its origins to the tradition of pasted papers in twelfth-century Japan, whose haphazard style she differentiates from the rigorous structure of juxtaposition that characterizes the work of early twentieth century avant-gardists. The latter, she writes, incorporate "directly into the work an actual fragment of the referent, thus forcing the reader or viewer to consider the interplay between preexisting message or material and the new artistic composition that results from the graft."<sup>3</sup>

Roger Shimomura eschews anything extraneous attached to the surface of his paintings and prints, and yet his work can also be discussed in terms of juxtaposition. The central question as one goes about exploring his work relates, of course, to the referent. Or putting it differently: what do Shimomura's juxtapositions refer to? For, to quote Perloff again, juxtaposition, or collage, seems to be "an intuitive grasp of how the world might be put together."<sup>4</sup>

Born to second generation Japanese American parents in Seattle in 1939, Roger Shimomura's world underwent serious turmoil in the aftermath of Pearl Harbor as his family was incarcerated in Camp Minidoka in Southern Idaho. Memories of life in the camp as registered by the mind of a three-year-old boy have been the impetus in several of Shimomura's previous works. Throughout his career, haunting images related to that specific period of his life are often mixed up with broader reflections on the rages of war, militarism, and patriarchal rule. And in order to put together his visions of the world, Shimomura delves into an eclectic repository of art styles, both from Western and Eastern traditions, mixing traditional Japanese woodblock print imagery with manga and American comics, packed with art historical references. One could say, a war of styles?

Shimomura's series *Great American Muse*, inspired by Tom Wesselmann's series *Great American Nude*, continues his exploration of the method he has pursued since the early 1970s. As in previous works, American Pop Art is a complicated influence, at once liberating and constrictive. As in the films of Ozu and Godard, Pop Art indicates that America has won the cultural war by infiltrating every crevice of local traditions with its own brand of modernity. The utopia of high modernism, represented here through references to Mondrian, is literally placed in the toilet, or otherwise relegated to the area of fashion. Thus, Shimomura's juxtapositions tell a story, a complicated one for that matter. And its main stakes are only revealed slowly, depending on how far the viewer is willing to go.

The first painting in the series, for example, depicts a Japanese woman smiling in the foreground, while in the background an airplane is in full attack. Is the woman naked lying in bed, or sitting by her kitchen? Is there really an attack going on in the background, or is that an artwork by Roy Lichtenstein? Furthermore, one might ask: is the work about the war or a sexual pun? In this work and in those that follow, memory, history and art juxtapose in complex ways hinting at narratives that never resolve themselves neatly. Consider yet the ambivalence of *Great American Muse #32*, in which a young girl faces the image of a raging pilot. Is the girl a possible casualty in a war field or is she in a museum looking at another Lichtenstein? Equally puzzling is the next painting in the series that shows two cartoon kids in front of a Lichtenstein parody of Picasso. With their perfectly round heads, the kids are abstractions just like the kind pursued by Picasso and Lichtenstein. On second inspection, however, they also hint at genetic deformity caused by chemical warfare or over the counter drugs such as Thalidomide, made available after the war.

The Pop era, as recycled by Shimomura, was indeed a complicated affair. One might consider that by drawing from the exciting graphics of comic books, artists like Roy Lichtenstein made the violence of war more palatable to American audiences. In contrast, works like Martha Rosler's photo-collage series *House Beautiful: Bringing the War Home* (1967-1972) offered an alternate narrative of the era by simply throwing together in the same frame the disparate visual information disseminated by American media. I suggest that Shimomura's strategy is closer to Rosler's than that of the classic Pop artists that he so genuinely admires. Consider for example his six-panel work *Rape of Nanking* (1997), in the collection of the Bronx Museum. The work was inspired by the 1937 siege of the city of Nanking by the Japanese, and Shimomura drew on a number of popular cultural signifiers and different styles of illustration from Japan and China to convey the complex power struggle between the two nations.

Compared with *Rape of Nanking*, the works in the *Great American Muse* series might strike the viewer as less forceful, a mere exercise in style. That would be a serious error of judgment, which might be corrected by a closer examination of the elements in the mix. Consider, for example, the scene of two women talking across a barbed wire fence in *Great American Muse #21* cheerfully rehashing the artist's anguished memories of Minidoka. The two women, Shimomura suggested to me in an email, could "possibly have been classmates before camp separated them." And there we have, in one snapshot, the complicated mixed-media affair that life is made of.

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<sup>1</sup> Ashbery, John, *Collages: They Knew What They Wanted* (New York: Tibor de Nagy Gallery, 2008).

<sup>2</sup> Perloff, Marjorie, *The Futurist Moment: Avant-Garde, Avant Guerre, and the Language of Rupture* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1986), xviii.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 72.