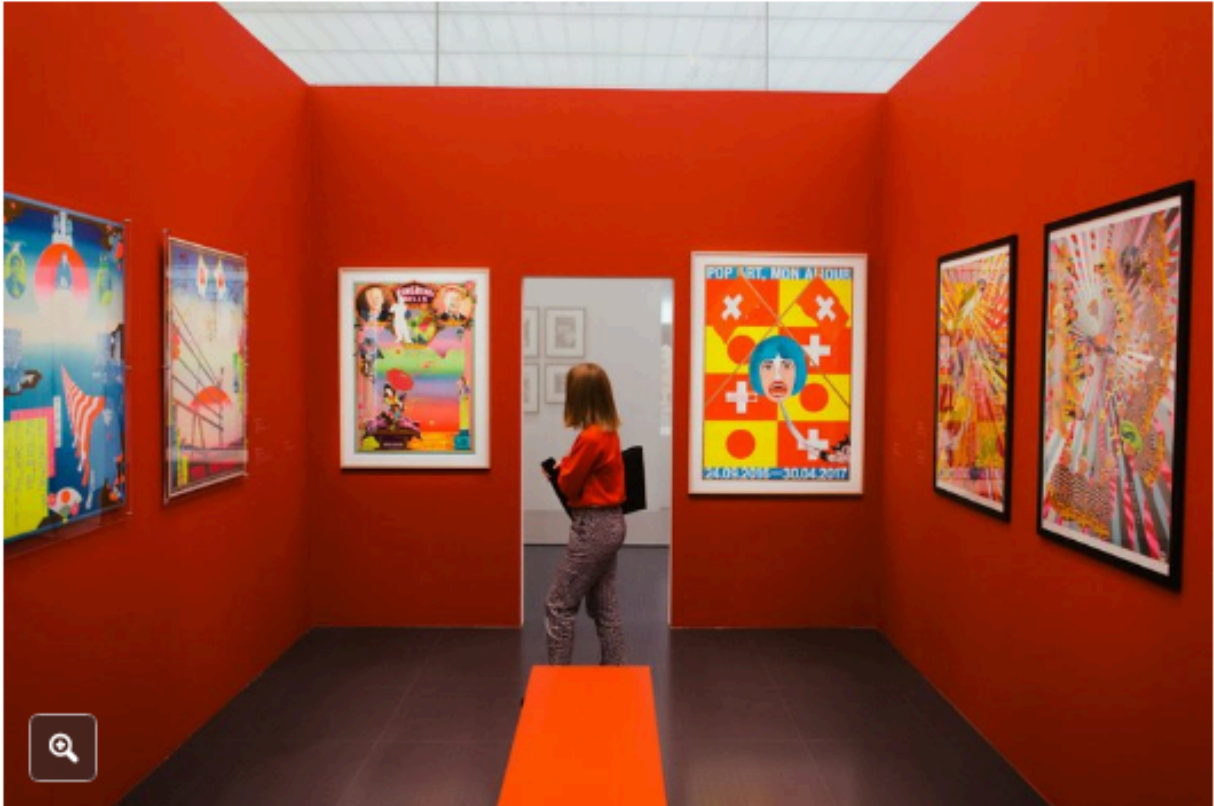


# Japanese Art, on Its Own Terms



"Japanorama" at the Pompidou Center in Metz updates and expands on an important exhibition of Japanese art held in 1986. Dmitry Kostyukov for The New York Times

METZ, France — French and Japanese flags flap in tandem at the Pompidou Center here, hailing the fall program at this sister venue of the Paris museum of contemporary art. Its exhibitions include one about Japanese architecture from 1945 to the present day, and the recently opened "Japanorama," a survey of Japan's contemporary art since 1970, on view through March 5.

"Japanorama" picks up where an important 1986 exhibition at the Pompidou Center in Paris, "Avant-Garde Arts of Japan 1910-1970," left off. That show presented some important Japanese artists abroad for the first time — but it examined their work as influenced by, and even dependent on, Western art traditions. Aomi Okabe, who was part of the 1986 show's curatorial committee and is currently artistic director of exhibitions at the Japanese Culture House of Paris, said that, at the time, "the French public considered modern Japanese paintings of the early 20th century copies of European art, especially from France."

Moroz, Sarah. "Japanese Art, on Its Own Terms," The New York Times. October 30, 2017.

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The Pompidou Center in Metz is holding two Japan-themed exhibitions in its fall program. Dmitry Kostyukov for The New York Times

The subtitle of “Japanorama” is “New Vision on Art Since 1970,” the year that Japan began to reassert its own cultural identity, spurred by the new confidence it found at Expo ’70 in Osaka. The show is a “discovery of what was overlooked,” the curator, Yuko Hasegawa, said. While Japan wrestled with complicated issues of modernization and heritage, its culture was understood in the West through clichéd binaries: The ascetic Zen of a rock garden on one hand, the gleeful kitsch of Hello Kitty on the other.

and pull between tradition and technology, individual and collective, have shaped the culture in unique ways. For European audiences, what’s new about this “New Vision” is examining contemporary Japanese art on its own terms.

The exhibition corrects this reductive caricature, examining the way the push

European interest in Japanese art dates back to the 19th century — van Gogh collected Ukiyo-e prints, Monet modeled his water lily pond at Giverny on Japanese gardens — yet many of today’s art institutions rarely showcase non-Western contemporary art. There have been piecemeal exhibitions in Paris over the past year, among them shows at the Palais de Tokyo, Le Bal, Fondation Cartier and the European House of Photography. But no exhibition here in France has examined Japanese creativity across eras, mediums and generations.

In 2016, the French and Japanese governments announced Japonism, a diplomatic initiative to highlight Japanese culture through exhibitions and events in France in 2018. The cooperation is a mixed blessing, according to the Franco-Japanese gallerist Jean-Kenta Gauthier, who represents both European and Japanese artists. “I’m really happy about this — the Japanese scene is worthy of being presented in depth and detail,” he says. However, “there’s the fear of returning to orientalism.” He added, “There’s nothing worse for an artist than becoming a curiosity.”



“Electric Dress,” by Atsuko Tanaka, was created in 1956 but prefigures today’s evolving relationship between the physical and the digital. Dmitry Kostyukov for The New York Times

How to prevent flattening cultural context while encouraging foreign audiences to embrace the unfamiliar? Ms. Hasegawa tackles that question in “Japanorama.” Having previously presented Japanese contemporary art in Brazil, Britain and Germany, she “looked very carefully at the past 10-15 years: what was organized, what kind of Japanese contemporary art has been collected in

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public institutions in Europe.” She continued: “I want to bring awareness to context behind what people misunderstand, to the social commentary behind the works.”

Ms. Hasegawa’s vast and thoughtful synopsis encompasses six themes (called “archipelagos”) that bridge art, architecture, video, fashion and music. She porously connects movements and multimedia across two floors, with a mise-en-scène conceived by the Tokyo architects SANAA. (The Pompidou Center Metz itself was designed by the Japanese architect Shigeru Ban).



Visitors watch silicone oil rain down without making a splash in Kohei Nawa’s “Force”.  
Dmitry Kostyukov for The New York Times

The first section, “Strange Object/Post-Human Body,” confronts visitors with “Electric Dress,” a multicolored cluster of lights, created in 1956 by Atsuko Tanaka, that prefigures today’s evolving relationship between the physical and the digital. The piece resonates with Comme des Garçons garments on display, which present an alternative approach to Western ideas of beauty and body image.

Transfigurations unfurl throughout this section: Ms. Hasegawa notes “traumatic ideas about the atomic bomb

and pollution-activated mutation” in two “very weird, very critical” late 1960s cocoon pods by Tetsumi Kudo). New technology informs the work of the ’80s collective Dumb Type, the techno-pop musical outfit Yellow Magic Orchestra and the programmers and artists behind Rhizomatiks. Rhizomatiks contributes a visualization of Bitcoin’s blockchain system rejigged according to live transactions, in a digital ballet that shows a forward-looking evolution of Japanese creativity.

Within the Pop Art sphere, Ms. Hasegawa has highlighted works with a strong conceptual background and Japanese specificity. She wishes to undercut the way in which Japanese pop culture is often understood as sunny or silly: The graphic kitsch is, in fact, inherently critical, she says. “It’s vernacular — but also very sophisticated,” she added. The artist Takashi Murakami’s work in this vein, is perhaps the most well-known, but it is also the most misunderstood. The painted smileys of his “Cosmos” are not just bright and fun — the composition owes everything to 18th-century Edo paintings. His lesser-known “Polyrhythm Red” canvas, adorned with Tamiya soldier figurines, reflects, Ms. Hasegawa said, “Japanese culture becoming childish,” and a malaise about violence and vulnerability.

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The exhibition also overturns the seeming naïveté of “kawaii,” Japan’s signature brand of cute, to reveal assertions of sociopolitical frustration. A 2002 kimono using Bingata, the traditional dyed fabric of Okinawa — where the artist Yuken Teruya grew up, near a United States Army base — is especially striking. The cheery flowers and trees on the garment are, upon closer inspection, composed of fighter planes and parachutes.

The exhibition concludes with a section on “Materiality and Minimalism,” highlighting examples such as Hiroshi Sugimoto’s calm photographs of horizon lines and Ryoji Ikeda’s trancelike work based on numerical data. “It’s a landing,” Ms. Hasegawa said of the exhibition’s finale, to “look at something sublime.”



The photographer Hiroshi Sugimoto’s “Seascapes” series, in a section of the exhibition titled “Materiality and Minimalism.” Dmitry Kostyukov for The New York Times

Kohei Nawa’s breathtaking “Force,” an installation of viscous black silicone oil, which rains down without making a splash, appears soothing, but this is deceptive: Its subject is radioactive fallout. Like many works in “Japanorama,” it shows that simple does not mean straightforward, that beautiful things can contain disquieting fears.

To grapple with these nuances requires being open to another perspective. In this sense, the show’s most emblematic piece is by the artist Shimabuku. His video “Then, I Decided to Give a Tour of Tokyo to the Octopus from Akashi,” is as gently funny as it is affecting. He collects an octopus from his hometown and brings it to the metropolis on the bullet train — takes it to the fish market, introduces it to another octopus there — and eventually releases it back into the sea. It’s a fitting narrative for visitors to the exhibition, who, at the end, are returned to their usual setting, more enlightened for having explored an unfamiliar territory.

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