

Stephen Friedman Gallery

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Travelling exhibition of Japanese prints makes its stop in Cairo
Reham El-Adawi
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Organised by the Japan Foundation Cairo Office, the exhibition took place at the Salah Taher gallery, Cairo Opera House grounds.



Image: Kosume Kimura's "Out of Time 24", silkscreen, lithograph, in 1970

Recently at the Salah Taher gallery, Cairo Opera House, the Japan Foundation Cairo Office held its travelling exhibition "Photographic Images and Matter: Japanese Prints of the 1970s" (17 December-4 January).

On the occasion the Japan Foundation Cairo Office director Yoo Fukazawa said, "It's my great pleasure to present a real Japanese fine art exhibition to the Egyptian audience through this distinguished exhibition, as part of our cultural activities, on top of which, presenting a grand exhibition annually, we organise a travelling exhibition on a yearly basis in all countries around the world. Such artworks are part of the Japan Foundation's own collection. This newly organised travelling exhibition, focuses on print expressions from the 1970s as seen in the works of 14 artists who facilitated the development of the print movement in the world of Japanese contemporary art."



Image: Tetsuya Noda's "Diary Aug. 22nd", 1968

The exhibits were classified into "An Age of Photographic Expression" on the ground floor, featuring work by Tetsuya Noda (born in 1940), Kosuke Kimura (born in 1936), Akira Matsumoto (born in 1936), Satoshi Saito (1936-2013), Hideki Kimura (born in 1948), and Sakumi Hagiwara (born in 1946), and "Images of Autonomous Matter" on the first floor, with work by Jiro Takamatsu (1936-1998), Katsuro Yoshida (1943-1999), Koji Enokura (1942-1995), Shoichi Ida (1941-2006), Tatsuo Kawaguchi (born in 1940), Lee Ufan (born in 1936), Mitsuo Kano (born in 1933), as well as Arinori Ichihara (1910-2010).

In 1957, the Japanese government launched the International Biennial Exhibition of Prints in Tokyo as a special feature of its post-war culture policy. Awarded the International Grand Prize in the sixth edition of the biennale in 1968, Tetsuya Noda transformed photographic portraits of his family into prints. His works were significant in that they exemplified the huge changes that were underway in prints internationally, confirming that there were parallels between trends in contemporary prints and contemporary art and suggesting future developments in the latter.

Later in the 1970s, there was a rapid increase in Japanese works that adopted Noda's method of converting photographs into prints, leading to a golden age in the medium. The era also saw the rise of works that stressed allowing the materials used in printmaking (print blocks, paper, ink, etc.) to speak for themselves, which was lauded as a new trend in the medium. Another significant trend was the emergence of prints with an extremely strong materiality in which the image was transformed into a material. These autonomous expressions of the photographic image and matter in the 1970s dramatically expanded the field of prints and also exerted a strong influence on trends in contemporary art.

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On the occasion of the Cairo show, Kyoji Takizawa, curator of Machida City Museum of Graphic Arts, spoke about the evolution of 1970s Japanese prints: "Due to the fact that Ukiyo-e prints," that is, "pictures of the floating world", a style of Japanese woodblock print and painting from the Edo period depicting famous theatre actors, beautiful courtesans, city life, travel in romantic landscapes, and erotic scenes, "were well known all over the world, especially in the West, and also that contemporary Japanese prints had been highly acclaimed at various international exhibitions, the International Biennial was launched.

"Against a backdrop of the image-based society that had emerged with the proliferation of television, printmaking flourished due to the rapid spread of silkscreening, which made it easy to incorporate photographic images. One special feature of this approach was the ability to eliminate anything unnecessary and emphasize the essential information. This made it possible to technically manipulate a photograph in various ways, such as reducing the density of an image by using dots to create something much grainier. This enabled the artist to remove lyrical elements from the original photograph and change it into information. Thus, photographic images came to be a tool for conveying the artist's personal concepts.

"The Japanese contemporary art world of the 1970s reacted strongly to currents such as pop art, which mechanically appropriated vulgar and widely circulated images from comics, ads, and TV; minimal art, which consciously set out to eliminate illusory elements through the use of simple, uniform shapes and colours without any trace of handiwork; and conceptual art, which expressed ideas and concepts intellectually through the use of language, diagrams, and photographs. In a show of solidarity with these cool expressions, there was an increasingly strong effort to create objective, realistic work that dispensed with any vestige of the hand. The method of silkscreening, which could be used to convert photographic images into information, was the perfect response to the times. In a sense, the photographic works created using this technique can be seen as the expressive format demanded by the age."



Image: Satoshi Saito's "Untitled A", silkscreen, 1976

Needless to say, however, each of the 14 artists made use of these techniques in their own way. In order to express the tumult and gloom of contemporary society, overloaded with information, Kosuke Kimura compiled fragments of miscellaneous photographic images as bits of information in an encyclopedic form (assemblage). Akira Matsumoto repeated the operation of making a realistic photoengraved image even more realistic by replacing it with a group of dots, as a way of addressing issues such as the multiplicity of prints and the line separating real from virtual images. To examine the plane and its spatial qualities, Hideki Kimura used perspective technique to arrange photographic images depicting fragments of various things to express the ambiguity of images and objects on a plane. Satoshi Saito explored the structure (reality) of sight, identifying its disparate and discontinuous qualities by taking pictures of scenes that were a mixture of photographic images and actual scenes. Sakumi Hagiwara, who is also a filmmaker, imbued his work with temporality by converting several video frames into a silkscreen print.

"There was an extension of an art movement known as Mono-ha," Takizawa says, "which received much attention between about 1968 and the early 1970s for works in which simple substances such as stone, wood, paper, cotton, and steel sheets were presented as works, sometimes alone and sometimes in combination with each other. In the late 1960s, we began seeing work that questioned our visual perception of the outside world, which exerted a strong influence on the Mono-ha movement. In the late 1960s, Jiro Takamatsu shifted his focus from the subject of human beings to a quest for things in the outside world as a means of examining our limited ability to perceive the world through the sense of sight. These works exerted a strong influence on Mono-ha and subsequent trends in art.

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“In fact, the tendency to endow matter with autonomy in printmaking was closely related to the recent flourishing of photographic expression. In broad terms, the act of using photographic images to limit the presence of the hand and the act of allowing the materials to speak for themselves by suppressing human agency indicated a similar artistic objective. As proof, one need only turn to artists such as Katsuro Yoshida, Koji Enokura, and Shoichi Ida, who printed photoengraved images on paper in an attempt to give matter an autonomous voice. However, their intentions were clearly different from those of artists who used photographic images as information. Rather than using images as a tool to convey their own concepts, Yoshida and the others expressly viewed them as matter, and their primary consideration was to grant them their independence.

“Yoshida is particularly notable for converting photographic images into prints in a dispassionate manner without any sort of emotional involvement, and for striving to allow the images to speak freely. Making use of photoengraved images, Enokura created prints that dealt with the relationship between the print block, support medium, ink, the state of the ink seeping into the paper, and the act of printing. In the 1970s, Lee Ufan, who developed the theory on which Mono-ha was based and is represented here by some prints from the 1990s, also produced works that questioned the relationship between the material used to make the print block, the act of making the block and of printing, and the state of the ink on paper, re-examining the fundamental structure of prints. Ida attached special importance to the paper’s surface, where the image had been attached through a collision of vertical and horizontal energy and the application of pressure. He created works based on the fundamental structure of prints that differed from both Enokura and Lee’s approaches. And by bringing completely disparate materials like metal and paper into contact with each other, Tatsuo Kawaguchi made prints that dealt with the theme of relationships and traces...”