

B C

INSIDE BURGER COLLECTION

6 4



TADANORI YOKOO

A Visionary Renegade

BY EDWARD M. GÓMEZ

TADANORI YOKOO, *Only 3.5cm Away*,
2015, acrylic on canvas, 45.5 x 53 cm.
Courtesy the artist and the Burger
Collection, Hong Kong.

In Japan, Tadanori Yokoo has long been recognized as a leading cultural representative of his generation. At 89 years old, the artist is still active and was undeterred even by a bout of Covid-19 last year that slowed him down just as he was preparing to open his exhibition of all-new works at Tokyo's Setagaya Art Museum.

Although nowadays the octogenarian tends to keep a low profile, he maintains a perpetual presence in Japan's cultural world. Many institutions around the country hold his works in their collections: in Kobe, for example, the Yokoo Tadanori Museum of Contemporary Art, which opened in 2012, focuses on the artist's accomplishments and legacy. Moreover, he has an online shop that sells a wide range of merchandise featuring his art (badges, stickers, books, tote bags, underwear, and even a Yokoo curry). Among younger creative types with knowledge of the history of Japanese modern art and pop culture, his reputation—that of a clever innovator who, in his heyday, upturned deeply entrenched norms in graphic design and, later, in painting—endures. Over the years, the establishment embraced the maverick: Yokoo has received distinguished, cultural-merit awards from the Japanese emperor as well as many other honors.

Still, Yokoo is something of an unwitting icon. He was born in 1936 in the small city of Nishiwaki in the hills north of Kobe, a large port and commercial hub in western Japan. Known for its textile industry and agriculture, Nishiwaki lies at the very center of the Japanese archipelago and bills itself as the country's "navel."

As a child, Yokoo displayed an artistic aptitude, copying the contents of picture books and submitting his drawings to one of his favorite *manga* (comic books) publisher. He was educated in public schools and became interested in oil painting thanks to the influence of a teacher who had studied at Musashino Art University. Although Yokoo initially attempted to enter the prestigious school on the outskirts of Tokyo himself, he ultimately abandoned that effort. As his teenage years came to a close, Yokoo, who had founded a friends-of-the-post-office club at his high school, set his sights on working for Japan's postal service. That plan did not come to fruition either, and he instead took up a job at

a printing company—an experience that allowed him to learn firsthand about the materials and technology of commercial printing, which would later serve him well in his work as a graphic designer.

Yokoo went on to produce illustrations for one of Kobe's leading newspapers. There, he met fellow employee Yasue Tani, whom he married in 1957. In the following year, he submitted a poster design to the annual competition of the Japan Advertising Artists Club, a high-profile showcase for up-and-coming talents. Yokoo clinched an honorable mention prize (whose name, in Japanese, may be more accurately translated as an "encouragement award"). At the age of 22, he had become a budding wunderkind worth watching. If Yokoo, who did not study at an art school or a university, was ever worried about his future, he never revealed his concerns. Indeed, in *Haran e!! (Heading for Turmoil)* (1998), a later version, in book form, of a serialized autobiography that began appearing in the Japanese magazine *HOMME* when Yokoo was 52 years old, the artist admitted that he tended not to worry about the future. As someone who had long been preoccupied with the concept of death and intrigued by notions of reincarnation, he wrote in this anecdote-rich memoir: "With a really inexhaustible interest in imagining what people's fate might be, even now, when I think, 'What could tomorrow possibly bring?,' my heart beats fast."

Not long after winning the advertising association's prize, Yokoo landed a job as a designer for Nashonaru Senden Kenkyūsho, an Osaka-based advertising firm that sent him to work at its branch office in the capital. In *Haran e!!*, Yokoo recalls moving with his wife to Tokyo, where, as two young country bumpkins adjusting to the rhythms and protocols of a dynamic metropolis in the throes of postwar reconstruction, they had to learn the local names for certain foods and dare to think big. He also recognized the importance of television and bought a black-and-white set as soon as he could afford to do so—in retrospect, this points to Yokoo's instinctive understanding of the symbiotic relationship between mass media and the postwar era's burgeoning forms of popular culture.

Around the time of his move to Tokyo, Yokoo learned that the well-known graphic designer Ikko Tanaka (1930–2002) and some of his fellow luminaries were planning to establish their own agency, which would become known as Nippon Design Center. Its goal: to serve corporate clients in search of cutting-edge design of high artistic character that would make an impact in a growing, competitive, consumer-minded marketplace.

In time, Yokoo did join Nippon Design Center, where he stayed for several years before leaving to found, with two other partners, a short-lived design studio. Thereafter, he became totally independent. His stardom continued to rise as he created radical poster designs not only for mainstream commercial clients, but also for underground theater troupes and films. Bridging and dissolving the border between fine art and graphic design, Yokoo's personal works further established him as a visionary renegade—one whose creative impulse defied familiar stylistic categorizations. For example, he bucked the dictates of stripped-down, 20th-century graphic design with its use of sans serif typefaces and spare imagery. Instead, Yokoo dipped into a rich grab bag of source materials and historical references, packing them into compositions that felt simultaneously elegant, subversive, and sophisticated.

As the influential critic Yoshiaki Tōno (1930–2005), who played a key role in introducing Pop art and other foreign, modern-art developments to Japanese audiences in the 1960s and '70s, noted in *Artforum* in 1983: "In 1965 [Yokoo] did a poster, *Tadanori Yokoo*, his first to attract attention, that shows the artist as a man who hanged himself. In one corner is Yokoo's photograph at age one and a half; an English caption reads, 'Having reached a climax at the age of 29, I was dead.' Thus Yokoo's first popular work was a 'death announcement.' What he was in fact pronouncing dead was the rational, abstract design in the Bauhaus style that dominated the Japanese design world of the time."

In his distinctive posters and other graphic design work, Yokoo included elements from or referring to antique typography; traditional Japanese decorative motifs from family crests or kimono labels; Japan's pre-World War II Rising Sun flag; the stylistic flourishes of old, consumer-goods packaging; details from *ukiyo-e* woodblock prints; and even sex and the conventions of staged, pornographic imagery. One such piece, which can be found in the collection of the Museum of Contemporary Art Tokyo, is *Torture* (1969), a three-unit silkscreen print showing a half-clad woman whose feet are tied with a rope.

In his graphic design work, Yokoo's handling of his source material and subject matter never becomes decorative kitsch, nor does it merely traffic in the kind of postmodernist-pastiche, appropriationist gestures whose detached, ironic pose has become so tiresome and tired today. Instead, in his posters and prints of the 1960s and '70s—that portion of his vast works for which he would

become best known outside Japan—Yokoo chose each compositional element like a film director constructing the visual textures and rhythms of a scene.

He also had an intuitive sense of drama, however ambiguous his images' suggested narratives might have felt or appeared. In his commercial work, a client's brand or sales message could be overwhelmed by Yokoo's eccentric artistic vision and voice. For instance, in a series of posters for a department store's Christmas-season sales, he used images from what used to be called "girlie magazines."

In 1972, the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York presented an exhibition of the still-young Yokoo's graphic design creations, including posters, record album covers, book and magazine illustrations, and more. In its press release for that early-career survey, the museum quoted Yukio Mishima (1925–1970), whom Yokoo had become close with after meeting him at his 1965 solo show at Tokyo's Yoshida Gallery. Yokoo later collaborated with Mishima on cover designs for the writer's books and referenced him in some of his poster works. (Not long after his debut solo gallery exhibition, Yokoo made his first paintings, which feature female swimmers in plastic swim caps splashing around in a moat surrounding an old Japanese castle.)

As cited in MoMA's communiqué, Mishima had written in his foreword for *The Posthumous Works of Tadanori Yokoo* (1968), the first collection in book form of Yokoo's oeuvre: "In his concretized satire, the crueler realities of life unwind as from a tightly coiled spring within his inner world. He sees the world as singular, vast, and ridiculous—but different from that of a madman, which is constantly bent toward his inner life. His range is, in effect, what constitutes the 'health' of his art."

During the late 1960s and '70s, Yokoo became a visible figure in Japan's art and pop culture landscape. He appeared in Nagisa Ōshima's 1969 film *Diary of a Shinjuku Thief* and traveled to Europe and several countries in Asia—including, notably, India, about which he wrote in detail. Like many artists of his generation, he was interested in the Beatles and news about the art scene and youth culture of such faraway places as "Swinging London." He was featured in *LIFE* magazine, and made several trips to the US, in particular to New York, where he met John Lennon and Yoko Ono, Andy Warhol, and other famous artists of the era.

This sketch of Yokoo's trajectory provides a backdrop against which to examine the work of those early decades of his career that earned him a place in Japanese modern art's canon and, more broadly, in that of the still-unfolding narrative of modern art's international evolution. Today, ideas and information move relatively swiftly among artists, but in the pre-internet world, often they depended on books and magazines for valuable visual material. (Today, Yokoo's studio in Tokyo overflows with books, including many of the volumes he picked up during his travels as a younger man.)



Installation view of **TADANORI YOKOO**'s posters at the Museum of Contemporary Art Tokyo. Photo by Edward M. Gómez. Courtesy of the Burger Collection, Hong Kong.



Installation view of **TADANORI YOKOO's** *Back of Head* series, 1980, at albertz benda, New York, 2018. Courtesy the artist; albertz benda, New York/Los Angeles; and the Burger Collection, Hong Kong.

It was during one of Yokoo's overseas trips that his career took a sudden, dramatic turn. In 1980, he traveled to New York to see MoMA's career-spanning survey of the multifaceted work of Pablo Picasso. The sprawling retrospective featured some 1,000 pieces from MoMA's own collection and other institutions around the world. Yokoo has often stated, "I entered that exhibition as a graphic designer and I exited it as a painter."

When I visited the Japanese artist at his studio in late 2025, I pressed him on that point. Exactly what was it about Picasso's work, ideas, or vision that had moved Yokoo to the extent that, upon returning to Japan, he dropped graphic design, picked up a brush, and dedicated himself to painting, a practice he has continued right up until the present?

Yokoo recalled: "The museum was packed. It was nearly impossible to walk from one work to the next. What I experienced had nothing to do with Picasso's work or any recognition of his sensibility or vision. It wasn't a spiritual experience or an epiphany. It was an unexpected moment of inspiration. There's no word to describe what I felt. It

was a kind of power, and in that moment, I understood what I was going to do next."

Searching for a word to explain the unprecedented sensation he experienced that day, Yokoo used a Japanese term meaning "brainwashing" as a way of emphasizing how completely transformed he had felt. "It's as though another person had entered me and, with great force, brainwashed me," he said. "Suddenly, I made the decision to stop doing graphic design and become a painter. As I continued making my way through the Picasso exhibition, I looked at the works on view but I didn't understand anything—so overcome was I by the power that had seized me."

I first met Yokoo in the mid-1980s while living and working in Japan as the recipient of a foreign research grant. My work at the time focused on postwar Japanese modern art history. During that period, I saw some of the first public presentations of Yokoo's works from the earliest phase of his painting career, including an exhibition at the now-defunct Seibu Museum of Art in Tokyo. There, he showed canvases featuring men in

suits being pulled into the vortexes of fiery holes in the earth or the sky, and portraits of Yukio Mishima with the 19th-century German composer Richard Wagner or the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche.

By then, Yokoo had already produced his *Back of Head* series (1980), 22 of which now form part of the Burger Collection. When I asked the artist about these lesser-known watercolor-on-paper paintings, he said: “Until you mentioned them, I had forgotten about them. In fact, they were among the first works I made as I began shifting my focus to painting.” These unusual images depict not the sitters’ faces but, instead, the backs of their heads. What had prompted the artist to create these portraits—or rather, anti-portraits? Reaching back through the years, he said: “I wasn’t interested in conveying a sense of their characters, which would have come through if I had painted their faces. Painting the backs of their heads meant that I didn’t have to deal with personalities—this became a more abstract, more avant-garde approach.”

In effect, Yokoo’s extensive career comprises two main chapters, each of which consists of numerous subchapters related to the various artistic projects he has developed and realized. There is the two-decade stretch during which he distinguished himself as a pioneering graphic designer—a period whose accomplishments solidified his reputation at home and abroad. It was followed by the much longer phase, which still continues, of his work as a painter. Within this ongoing latter stage, he has remained true to his preferred working methods and fearless sense of experimentation.

Both in his writings (from travelogs, essays about art and aesthetics, and conventional diaries to a dream journal and a fantasy-autobiographical novel) and his artmaking, Yokoo has been unstoppably prolific. Some observers might conclude that, along the way, he could have used a team of editors, but he has always trusted his instinct and his unsinkable hunch that, somehow, tomorrow will bring good news.

This combination of gumption and gusto fueled two of his most ambitious projects, each of which represents an explosion of creativity late in his long career. One was a large series of paintings, which he began working on during the Covid-19 pandemic. That effort culminated in the exhibition “Tadanori Yokoo: 100 Takes on Hanshan and Shide” at the Tokyo National Museum in late 2023. In the 100 tableaux he showcased there, Yokoo’s subjects were the Tang Dynasty-era Buddhist monks Hanshan and Shide (“Kanzan” and “Jittoku” in Japanese), both of whom were prevalent figures in East Asian Zen painting.

Here, Yokoo had created stylistically varied works, offering a zealous exploration of the many techniques and tropes of canonical modern art, with multicolored, stormy brushstrokes in some canvases and tamer draftsmanship in others. In one painting, Yokoo portrayed Hanshan and Shide as companions of a nude nymph in a send-up of Édouard Manet’s *Le Déjeuner sur l’herbe* (1862–63); in another, they became Picassoesque, Cubist figures—jumbles of squares and boldly outlined, geometric forms animated by their own unwieldiness.

Last year, Yokoo debuted a large group of paintings in the exhibition “Tadanori Yokoo: River of Renga” at Tokyo’s Setagaya Art Museum. He appeared in high spirits, if a bit frail and wearing a face mask, at the opening, where he addressed his audience with good cheer and explained

that he had just recovered from a case of Covid-19. He noted that he had been surprised by his own productivity, but that he still had many ideas he wanted to explore—and that he was far from being done with painting.

Perhaps inevitably, many of the works on view exuded an elegiac air. The river in the exhibition’s title referred poetically to the flow of memories that colors the seasons of old age. Yokoo’s use of the word *renga*, which he spelled using the Japanese characters meaning “linked paintings,” was a play on a homonymous Japanese term that denotes a linked verse. Naturally, as a visual artist, Yokoo’s linked memories would take the form of vivid images; understandably, too, many of them evoked such themes as friendship, creativity as an expression of his life force, and, inescapably, his own mortality.

Yokoo’s peculiar pictures of the backs of women’s heads that found a home within the Burger Collection are unusual, even for him, the artist told me. “I’m glad to learn that they’re going to be recognized,” he shared with me on a sunny afternoon in his studio. He added, “For me, their reemergence feels like the discovery of another part of the flow of my river of memories.”

Tadanori Yokoo was born in 1936 in the Kansai region of western Japan, where he showed an early affinity for art, expressing a keen interest in picture books and *manga* (Japanese comic books). After high school, Yokoo worked at a printing company and for a newspaper in Kobe. Hired by an Osaka-based advertising firm, he was transferred to its Tokyo office, where, during the ‘60s, he earned acclaim for the bold, radical imagery and content of his posters for underground theater troupes and films, and for corporate clients. After seeing a Picasso exhibition in New York in 1980, Yokoo gave up graphic design and dedicated himself to painting. He remains a leading cultural figure in his homeland, and an iconic emblem of his generation of Japanese and Asian modern artists.

Edward M. Gómez is a graphic designer, critic, art historian, translator, and curator specialized in Japanese modern art and outsider art. The founder of *brutjournal* and the *brutjournal Annual*, he has written for many newspapers and magazines in the US, Europe, and Japan, and has authored or co-authored numerous books on art, design, and Japanese art and culture. He is a member of the advisory council of the Collection de l’Art Brut in Lausanne, Switzerland, the world’s leading museum in its field, as well as the director and co-producer, with Chris Shields, of the film *Valton Tyler: Flesh is Fiction* (2017). Gómez divides his time between Japan and Switzerland, and is currently working on a critical biography of Tadanori Yokoo.