

shinichi takahashi's visions of hell

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An unusual exhibition of paintings by Shinichi Takahashi of Honolulu will open next Wednesday, October 14, at "The Dump", a new gallery situated at 1525 S. King St.

Hours are complicated: Monday 2-6pm, Tuesday through Friday 9am-1:30pm and 2:30-6pm, Saturday 9-6pm, Sunday closed.

The exhibition will close on October 31.

Each of the paintings has a poem by Artist Takahashi's wife, Kiki on it, as illustrated.

Jean Charlot has written a critique of the paintings, which follows.

By Jean Charlot
Exclusive to the Hochi

Japanese art styles cover a wider range than most of us ever had occasion to contact. The paintings of Shinichi Takahashi offer a rare opportunity to enlarge our experience.

Painted in the traditional method of **sumi** ink and water-color on paper their esthetic,

and their intent as well, clash starkly with those of items of export art—screens, fans, hanging scrolls—feared by most interior decorators. At first sight, his works are apt to scandalize the timorous. Rooted that they are into some of Japan's noblest and oldest traditions, it would prove a singularly rewarding experience to look at them unhurriedly.

A while ago, in a morning lecture given at our Academy of Arts, a famed Japanese connoisseur, no less than the curator of the Shoso-in of Nara—a repository of imperial treasures since the 8th century—told this story: In the days of old, a famed swordsmith forged on the **tsuba**, or sword guard, of his masterpiece a duel between a hero and a demon. In this miniature bas-relief he surpassed even his own high standards.

The features of the vanquished demon were so twisted by helpless fury and thirst for an impossible revenge that no

one could look at the sword guard without experiencing these frightful moods.

All connoisseurs praised highly the masterpiece, but one. He remarked that certain boundaries exist that no man should ever dare to cross. The swordsmith agreed with his critic. Over the demonic mask of fury and of hate he meekly placed an open iron fan, then a usual accessory of the samurai armor. But all understood that, under its silver and gold inlay of a single twig of cherry blossoms, the agonized face of the vanquished demon lived intact.

This story goes farther than a biographical anecdote. From it can be rightly inferred that, in Japan as is true wherever man dwells, great art springs from unsuspected depths that would prove frightful, should one be bold enough to scan them.

The first contacts of the West with the art of Japan were deceptively simple and exhilarating. In the second half of the last century our artists

and collectors experienced sheer delight from the colorful woodcuts of the **ukiyo-e**. The Japanese refer soberingly to these mannered glimpses into the more restricted quarters of 18th century Edo as views of a floating, fleeting world. The Westerners were quick to acclaim them as signposts to a new paradise: dressed in brocades, its dwellers idly toyed with trifles, blossom viewing, moon gazing, and such. A whiff of decadence hovered over it all, to blend effortlessly with Europe's own **fin-de-siècle** aroma.

Artificial paradises need for balance the realities of a Hell. Japanese and Western theologians concurred. Simultaneously since medieval times, poles apart though they were in their choice of craft and style, great artists, East and West, depicted these twin Hells in horrendous details. In the West, theirs was carved into the stones of gothic cathedrals. In the East, brush poised vertically over silk or paper, illumined

visions of hell

地ニ、命オク

スベテノ生物ハ、

本能的ナ衝動ニ身ヲフルワセ

ロデイワレタ平和ナゾ

無意味ナ事トシツテイル。

自然ノダイナル変遷ノ中デ

人類ハ造ラレタ感情ニ

ウモレ、アエギ、朽ル。

On the earth
all living things
are instinctive
tremble with urge.
Senseless to talk of empty peace
Have sense

In changing Nature,
the taught, perfected feeling
covers man
gasping,
buried,
rotting.

nators detailed the Buddhist Hell along the length of scrolls.

There were differences. Dante's Hell is a place rigorously fenced off from the world of the living. Begging to differ, Japanese theologians spilled their Hell all over this same world. Its lowest echelon of devils lack even the black halo of hate. More hapless than men, they gather invisibly wherever humans congregate. Crippled ones hitch a hike on the bent back of rice farmers. Hungry ones pant for what morsels pile up in latrines or, joining families who rejoice at the birth of a son, scavenge among midwives' discards.

Scroll painters described still another kind of Hell, this one



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totally shorn of any aura of the supernatural. It simply is a catalogue of the ills and vagaries of the flesh. The dwarf, the grossly fat woman, the giant, the skeletal thin man, inhabit it. Present are the blind oldster tapping his cane, the legless beggar strapped in his box, the scrofulous, the insane. Desirable death eludes them.

Shinichi Takahashi's visions have much in common with this

earthly Hell. Despite their showy display of vultures' talons and bat wings, his demons materialize mostly for judicial purpose, to affix their seal on a thoroughly documented report concerning our human bondage.

To look at these paintings with respect should help one to discover how pity is the key that unlocks the meaning of these apparently pitiless images.