

IRYKOP
MURKOP
XELPILIP



Untitled, 2002
Clay, beeswax, resin, pigment
20 x 24 x 8.5"
Collection of the artist



**CURATOR: MIDORI YAMAMURA
INSTALLATION BY YUMI KORI**

**RYOBU
TODOKU
KUREPHERS**

MEPHISTOPHELEAN UNDERWORLD: RYO TOYONAGA'S UNCANNY OBJECTS

MIDORI YAMAMURA

In Goethe's *Faust*, Mephistopheles introduces himself as "the spirit that negates all." He is "part of the power that would/do nothing but evil, and yet creates the good."¹ For Goethe, Mephistopheles is a symbol of modern progress. "Just as God's creative will and action are cosmically destructive, so the demonic lust for destruction turns out to be creative."² In Japan, this destructive creativity culminated with two atomic bomb explosions in August 1945 that put an end to Japan's imperial aggression.

"The superficiality of today's Japanese culture," wrote Takashi Murakami, in his groundbreaking 2005 exhibition catalog, *Little Boy: The Arts of Japan's Exploding Subculture*, "is a collective effort to transform Japan's horrendous experience of nuclear annihilation." According to Murakami, a second-generation post-World War II Japanese artist (b.1962), this repressed, morbid anxiety of the war continues to haunt postwar Japanese art and popular culture, a phenomenon similar to what Sigmund Freud described in his 1919 essay,

"The Uncanny." Freud believed that long-forgotten, repressed, morbid anxieties occur instinctually as part of a repetition-compulsion syndrome.³ Murakami thus considered the recurring notion of explosion: "Art is explosion!" the statement made by Japanese surrealist Tarō Okamoto (1911–1996) as the starting point of postwar Japanese art.⁴ Okamoto's work left a strong impression on another second-generation postwar Japanese artist, Ryo Toyonaga, who today vividly recalls "making hundreds of drawings" of Okamoto's *Tower of the Sun*, a gigantic centerpiece for the 1970 Japan World Exposition (Expo '70).

¹ Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Faust*, 61st ed., trans. Yoshitaka Takahashi (Tokyo: Shinchō Sha, 2000), line 1335.

² Marshall Berman, "Goethe's *Faust*: The Tragedy of Development," *All That Is Solid Melts into Air* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1982), pp. 47–48.

³ Sigmund Freud, "The Uncanny," in *On Creativity and the Unconscious* (1919; reprint, New York: Harper, 1958), pp. 122–161.

⁴ Takashi Murakami, ed. *Little Boy: The Arts of Japan's Exploding Subculture* (New York: The Japan Society; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), p. 4.



FIG. 1 Ryo Toyonaga
Untitled, 2005, cast bronze, 31 x 12 x 9"
Collection of the artist

FIG. 2 Tarō Okamoto
Tower of the Sun, 1970

The impression was to linger: one of Toyonaga's ceramic-based objects from 2002 (FIG. 1) shows an affinity for Okamoto's influential work (FIG. 2). Both sculptures are vertically oriented conic shapes with attachments in the middle. In *Tower of the Sun*, two bands of red shoot like lightning bolts down the body of the tower, manifesting what Okamoto described as "*bakuhatsu*" (explosion). The symbolic burst of energy conveyed by the two painted lines in Okamoto's monument are replaced in Toyonaga's sculpture by countless eerie, small protuberances resembling the two arm-like projections in Okamoto's work. Between each pair of protuberances, Toyonaga situates an orifice that evokes a kind of respiratory organ existing beneath the uneven surface of the growth, suggesting its metamorphosis into things yet unknown.

Unlike Murakami, whose works encompass popular Japanese culture, Toyonaga purposely evades the popular imagination. Toyonaga, a graduate of Shinshū University with a major in psychology, says that when he is molding his sculptures, he feels as if he is "looking into the deep sea of the collective unconscious and trying to formulate the unknown things that wriggle in the deepest part of its structure."⁵ He does not title his sculptures, believing that the chaotic and possibly irrational energy of the unconscious is impossible to "verbally manifest" on the surface. Despite the differences between these two representatives of second-generation postwar Japanese artists—Murakami's subversive use of the repressed dark elements in popular Japanese culture and Toyonaga's deliberate evasion of it—the acceptance of the works of both is complicated in a society where mass communication technologies not only increasingly influence but also dictate the play of people's imagination.

As early as 1970, during Expo '70, social dissidents in Japan reacted strongly to the government's deliberate manipulation of reality. The exhibition's theme, "Progress and Harmony," seemingly a clear statement of peace and positive sentiment, belied behind-the-scenes political maneuverings. At that time, the Japanese government was eager to finalize the revised Japan–U.S. Security Treaty, initiated during the U.S. occupation (1945–1952).

Behind what was touted as democratic freedom and demilitarization, it was evident from

censorship materials brought back by Gordon W. Prange, Chief Historian of General Douglas MacArthur's staff,⁶ that the United States-led Allies were, in fact, exerting strict control over Japanese society. Information was manipulated through a centralized clearing

⁵ Ryo Toyonaga, correspondence with the author, December 13, 2008.

⁶ The Gordon W. Prange Collection, McKeldin Library, University of Maryland.

system, initially established by the imperial government for the purpose of censoring anti-American statements and the atrocities of war—especially any mention of the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. In short, the media were forbidden from discussing these disastrous actions. The objective of controlling information in this way in Japan was to facilitate civic acceptance of the United States, and ultimately resulted in the protection of U.S. political and commercial interests. Throughout the occupation, American democratic values and ideals clashed with American security and material interests, with the latter winning out. Capitalist demands ultimately compelled the United States government to restore the careers of Japan’s prewar right-wing government officials and capitalist entrepreneurs, or *zaibatsu*.⁷ More than anything, however, it was the United States’ procurement of Japanese military products during the Korean War that radically improved the nation’s postwar economy.⁸ With the fall of China in 1949 to the Chinese Communists under Mao Zedong, Japan, along with the Philippines, became the most important bulwark of anti-Communist containment in the Far East during the Cold War.⁹ The Japan–U.S. Security

Treaty was enacted as part of a global rearmament effort, and as a consequence, the Japanese military industry was revived and resumed full operations.

The decades intervening since the war have not, however, dimmed memories of it, and related images keep recurring in popular Japanese culture. Murakami points out, for example, “the scull-shaped mushroom cloud that announced the villains’ demise at [the] end of each episode”—the inevitable happy ending—of *Time Bokan*, a popular 1970’s anime television series.¹⁰ Two earlier television series along similar themes, which aired in the late sixties during prime time on Sunday evenings, also became instant hits. *Ultraman* (1966–1967) and *Ultraseven* (1967–1968) centered around conflict between a good alien, who lived on Earth, and monsters and other sinister threats.¹¹ It was these monsters to which the Guggenheim curator Alexandra Munroe was referring when she wrote of the affinities between Toyonaga’s art and popular Japanese culture: “[His] works ... recall the hybrid monsters of Japanese TV animation films.”¹²

Toyonaga denies this association. Rather, he says, his sculptures “express the timeless connection and friction between man and nature. It is a consequence of this approach that the images I perceive and interpret in my art are often of the monsters that inevitably feed on

⁷ Howard B. Schonberger, “James S. Killen: American Labor’s Cold War in Occupation Japan,” *Aftermath of War: Americans and the Remaking of Japan, 1945–1952* (Kent, OH, and London: The Kent State University Press, 1989), pp. 90–110. For United States government support for the political right wing, see David F. Schmitz, *The United States and Right-Wing Dictatorships, 1965–1989* (Cambridge, UK, and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

⁸ Schonberger, “Joseph M. Dodge: The Integration of Japan into the World Economy,” *Aftermath of War*, pp. 161–197.

⁹ Schonberger, “John Foster Dulles: American Bases, Rearmament, and the China Question in the Making of the Japanese Peace Treaty,” *Ibid.*, pp. 198–235.

¹⁰ Murakami, *Little Boy*, p. 14.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

¹² Alexandra Munroe, “The Fisherman,” *Ryo Toyonaga* (New York: Charles Cowles Gallery, 2006), n.p.

¹³ An image of Gomora appears in Murakami, *Little Boy*, p. 27, plate 9h.

¹⁴ Tohl Narita’s illustration in Murakami, *Little Boy*, p. 31, plate 11d.

¹⁵ Toyonaga, correspondence with the author, December 13, 2008.

¹⁶ Munroe, 2006, n.p.

¹⁷ Yasuhiko Taketomo, handwritten note, c. 1962, Yayoi Kusama Archives, Tokyo.



FIG. 3 Ryo Toyonaga
Untitled, 2000, clay, 13 x 16.5 x 10"
 Collection of the artist

FIG. 4 *Ultraman vs. Gomora*
 © Tsuburaya Productions,
 This image is a reprint from *Little Boy
 the Arts of Japan's Exploding Subculture*

FIG. 5 Ryo Toyonaga
Untitled, 2000, clay, 12.5 x 13 x 11"
 Collection of the artist

FIG. 6 *Ultraseven vs. Narse*
 © Tsuburaya Productions,
 This image is a reprint from *Little Boy
 the Arts of Japan's Exploding Subculture*

FIG. 7 Ryo Toyonaga
Untitled, 2001, clay, 30 x 18 x 8.5"
 Collection of the artist

this conflict." Whether intentional or not on the part of the artist, an indisputable formal affinity, nevertheless, exists between Toyonaga's art and these hybrid television monsters. In one of his sculptures from 2000 (FIG.3), the contrasting fields of smooth and rough surfaces bring to mind similar opposing textures of Gomora, a hybrid monster from the *Ultraman* series (FIG. 4);¹³ and the spooky perforated surface of another figure from 2000 (FIG.5) recalls the decorated body armor of *Ultraseven* (FIG. 6).¹⁴ Indeed, the children of Japan grew up surrounded by such iconic images from popular TV series—they were, after all, nearly ubiquitous, appearing on a vast range of consumer goods, from stationery to snack packages. Is it not possible, then, by virtue of being overexposed to this two-dimensional animated world that Toyonaga developed a preference for two-dimensionality? In this respect, Toyonaga wrote that, "Despite my work's three-dimensionality, my work is linear. While modeling my sculptures, for me, the two-dimensional outer lines of my objects are especially important, in that by assembling them in my head, I interpret the work's form and make my decisions."¹⁵ This perspective is prominent in Toyonaga's sculpture from 2001 (FIG.7). The outer lines of the ridges on the top of this work, made out of perforated, peanut-like objects, mimic the layered lines of drawing, which, when assembled together, became three-dimensional.

Toyonaga also counts Yayoi Kusama (b.1929), a member of the first generation of postwar artists, as one of his influences,¹⁶ in particular her "Accumulation" series. After Kusama's December 1961 encounter with Yasuhiko Taketomo, a Freudian psychiatrist in New York, she became intrigued by the doctor's scientific interpretation of her work. In his opinion, her creativity was driven by an obsessive-compulsive disorder, an aspect of the anxiety neurosis from which she was suffering. Among her personal papers, there exists a handwritten note from Taketomo in which he explains Kusama's disorder in both English and Japanese.¹⁷ According to the note, the patient, suffering from obsessive-compulsive disorder, exhibited irrational thoughts (obsession)



FIG. 8 Ryo Toyonaga
Untitled, 1990, clay, 25 x 19 x 7"
 Collection of the artist



FIG. 9 Ryo Toyonaga
Untitled, 1990, clay, 29 x 20 x 10"
 Collection of the artist

that would result in repetitive behaviors (compulsion). This insight prompted Kusama to probe deeply into her psyche for feelings that Freud labeled “uncanny”¹⁸—something that feels familiar, yet unknown—which Kusama described as *kyōfu* (literally, “fear”). This resulted in a formal representation in her art of the phallus attached to various household objects.

Toyonaga describes his source of creativity as the deep sea of the collective unconscious, but when compared with Kusama’s household objects, it becomes apparent that his subject matter is deeply rooted in personal feelings. One of the earliest sculptures Toyonaga produced in his Manhattan studio in 1990 (FIG. 8) is characterized by geometric structures that penetrate germinating seeds, which then blossom into two mucky surrealist flowers.

The valves on the pipes evoke the plumbing and waterworks of an urban infrastructure that recall Japan’s unprecedented growth during the country’s 1980’s bubble economy. Rapid gentrification and wide spread development of rezoning projects, spawned by large capital investments, ravaged traditional landscapes and

disrupted the lives of ordinary people, and resulted in highly commercialized spaces. Restrictions and administrative constraints on public space are conveyed in Toyonaga’s work through the thrust of a pipe that firmly fixes the growth from the seed in another sculpture from the same year (FIG. 9).

The struggles between control and resistance in Toyonaga’s work echo in his personal life. He may be considered a refugee from abundance, or an emigrant from a painless society. The artist grew up during Japan’s economic boom period in the 1970s, and first became aware he lacked a sense of personal fulfillment when, as a university student, he traveled to India, and for a while, led an austere life. After he graduated from university, he moved to New York City, where his feelings of psychological dislocation forced him to reexamine his life. A few years later, he found clay to be the perfect medium with which to express his deepest and most earnest feelings.

Toyonaga explores and tries to embody qualities that exist beneath utter consciousness. His sculptures create a tension between control and resistance, between the artificial and the organic, and between homogeneity and disturbed individuality—pointing, perhaps, to a long forgotten event or trauma. His works thus provoke, and can be unpleasant, triggering in their viewers memories of pain and suffering.

¹⁸ Freud, “The Uncanny,” pp.122 – 161.



FIG. 10 Ryo Toyonaga
Untitled, 1995, clay, 14 x 19 x 13"
Collection of the artist



FIG. 11 Ryo Toyonaga
Untitled, 2002, clay, beeswax, resin,
pigment, 20 x 24 x 8.5"
Collection of the artist

Toyonaga's sculptures also seem to be shaped by the environment he inhabits. Between 1991 and 1996, he worked as a studio assistant at the Clay Art Center in Port Chester, New York. At this suburban studio, pipes that originally represented urban infrastructure metamorphosed into organic shapes, conjuring plants and torsos. A sculpture from 1995 (FIG. 10) calls to mind a conch shell or a fossil; and despite its organic outer shape, an eerie robotic growth seems to penetrate from within. These objects reveal an earthen, reddish hue, characteristic of reduction fire, to which a distinctive dark tinge has been added by extracting oxygen from inside the clay.

Between 1995 and 2003, Toyonaga secluded himself in a cabin in the Catskill Mountains, at his Redkill studio, where, driven by a powerful energy welling up from the dark field of his subconscious, he produced some three hundred objects. These works, which were never intended for sale or exhibition, have a nightmarish quality. Two of them, the aforementioned figures from 2000 (FIG. 5) and 2001 (FIG. 7) evolved into extraordinary homogeneous surfaces produced by oxidation firing. They impart distressing feelings through the dozens of ominous orifices; and a mouth-like open structure, more than anything, seems to convey a silent scream. Such disturbing images evolved yet again following the horrific events of September 11, 2001, into clusters of scarlet nodules made up of pigmented beeswax (FIG. 11).

In discussing his sculptures, Toyonaga denies that they carry any message, whether explicit or implied.¹⁹ It cannot be denied, however, that his works tug at the strings of memory and resurface buried images in the minds of their viewers. In this way, his provocative sculptures seem to dispel the anesthesia transmitted by today's highly bureaucratic, depersonalized society, in turn raising a whole host of disturbing issues relevant to our times.

¹⁹ Toyonaga, correspondence with the author, December 13, 2008.

PLATES



Untitled, 1995
Clay, 14 x 19 x 13"
Collection of the artist





Untitled, 1994
Clay, 10 x 15.5 x 8"
Collection of the artist





Untitled, 2000
Clay, 27 x 15 x 8"
Collection of the artist



Untitled, 1994
Clay, 37 x 18 x 13"
Collection of Fiorenza Mignucci



Untitled, 2000
Clay, 13 x 16.5 x 10"
Collection of the artist





Untitled, 1996
Clay, 48 x 20 x 15"
Collection of the artist



Untitled, 2001
Clay, 22 x 15.5 x 14"
Collection of the artist



Untitled, 1995
Clay, 12 x 17 x 15"
Collection of the artist





Untitled, 2000
Clay, 12.5 x 13 x 11"
Collection of the artist



BIOGRAPHY



RYO TOYONAGA

EDUCATION

BA, Psychology, National University of Shinshū, Matsumoto, Japan

STUDIO AFFILIATIONS

80 Beaver Street, New York City (current)

RedKill Studio, Catskill Mountains, New York (1995 – 2003)

Clay Art Center, Port Chester, New York (studio assistant), (1991 – 1996)

Art Life Studio, North White Plains, New York (stone carving), (1992 – 1994)

Lively Earth Studio, New York City (1989 – 1991)

Greenwich House, New York City (1987 – 1989)

EXHIBITIONS

Group show, *Other Ideas*, Charles Cowles Gallery, New York City, July 2008

Group show, Cavin-Morris Gallery, New York City, Oct. 2007

Solo show, Charles Cowles Gallery, New York City, May 2006

Group show, Charles Cowles Gallery, New York City, July 2005

Group show, *Now Then, Before*, Roxbury Arts Center, Roxbury, New York, Oct. 2003

Group show, *Terrors and Wonders: Monsters in Contemporary Art*, DeCordova Museum and Sculpture Park, Lincoln, Massachusetts, Sep. 2001 – Jan. 2002

Group shows, Clay Art Center, Port Chester, New York, 1992 – 1995

Honorable Mention, *New Ceramics*, Creative Arts Workshop, New Haven, Connecticut, 1993

Solo show, Clay Art Center Gallery, Port Chester, New York, 1993

Group show, Azuma Gallery, New York City, 1990

Two-person show, Greenwich House, New York City, 1989

Group shows, Greenwich House, New York City, 1987 – 1988

YUMI KORI

EDUCATION

M.S. Architecture, Columbia University
B. Architecture, Kyoto Prefecture University, Japan

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

Lecturer at Nagoya Institute of Technology, Department of Architecture and Design, Japan (2005 – present)
Adjunct Assistant Professor at Columbia University, New York (1996 – 2006)
Lecturer at Yale University, School of Architecture, 2003
Design Consultant, Japan Nationality Room, Pittsburgh University, 1997
Lecturer at Parsons School of Design, 1997
Principal Architect, Studio MYU Architects Co. Ltd., Tokyo (1991 – present)
Awarded Japanese First Class Architect License, Feb. 1990

SELECTED ART INSTALLATIONS, EXHIBITIONS

Kanata, Group show, *Inner Outer Space*, Mattress Factory, Pittsburgh, Apr. 2008 – Jan. 2009
Another Sky MAM, Museum of Modern Art Bahia, Salvador, Brazil, Mar. – May 2008
Shinkai, Group show, *Making a Home: Japanese Contemporary Artists in New York*, Japan Society, New York, Oct. 2007 – Jan. 2008
Hyohaku no Hakobune, Kobe Biennale 2007, Japan, Oct. – Nov. 2007
Jukai, David Winton Bell Gallery, List Art Center, Brown University, Sept. – Oct. 2007
Portable Infinity Device, Two person exhibition, *Big in Japan: MEDITATION ROOMS*, Shigeo Bork Mu Project, Washington, DC, May – June 2007
Infinitation/SESC, SESC PINHEIROS, San Paulo, Brazil, Sept. 2006 – Jan. 2007
Shinkai, ISE CULTURAL FOUNDATION, New York, Nov. – Dec. 2006
Green Box /VT, Firehouse gallery, Burlington, Vermont, June – July 2006
Utakata Warteck, Guest Atelier, Basel, Switzerland, May 2006
B^B LMCC, Swing Space, Lower Manhattan Cultural Council, New York, Oct. 2005
Infinitation COCA, Center on Contemporary Art, Seattle, June – July 2005
Defragmentation/iscp, International Studio & Curatorial Program, New York, May 2005
Defragmentation/krems, Minoriten Church Kapitelsaal, Krems-Stein, Austria, Apr. – May 2005
Green Balloon (interactive installation), Phatory Gallery, New York, Dec. 2004 – Jan. 2005
Open Studio ISCP, International Studio & Curatorial Program, New York, Nov. 2004
Sho-An, Ozone Plaza, Tokyo, 2004
Panta Rhei, Maison Hermes Forum, Tokyo, 2003
Green Library, Group show, *Green Box*, *Green Voice*, Old Musashino Public Library, Tokyo 2002
Machina Temporis, Klosterruine, Berlin, 2002
Defragmentation/red, Prenzlauer Berg Water Reservoir, Berlin, 2000
Defragmentation/blue (in collaboration with sound artist Bernhard Gal), Studio Five Beekman, New York, 1999

STAGE DESIGN

Ruptable, Set design for Sally Silvers and Dancers, Saint Joseph Ballet, Irvine Barclay Theatre, California, May – June 4, 2007
Puppy Skills, Set design for Sally Silvers and Dancers, PS 122, New York, Nov. 2005
Scrambles, Set design for Sally Silvers and Dancers, The Construction Company, New York, Apr. 2005
Spaced Out, Set design for Sally Silvers and Dancers, DTW, Dance Theatre Workshop, New York, Feb. 2003

SELECT AWARDS

Kobe Biennial, Art in Container Award, Japan, 2007
Architectural Cultural Award, Chiba, Japan 2006
LMCC, Lower Manhattan Cultural Council, Swing Space Award, 2005
ISCP New York, awarded a grant by Japan Agency of Cultural Affairs, 2004
The ar+d award, The Architectural Review, London, 2002
Cityscape Award, Osaka, Japan 2002
Architectural Cultural Award, Chiba, Japan 2001
The ar+d award, The Architectural Review, London, 2001
Housing Reform Award, Japan Reform Center, 1999
Housing Design Award, Tokyo Gas Living Design Center, 1999
Tokyo Architectural Award, Tokyo Association of Architectural Firms, 1998
Residential Architecture Award, Tokyo Society of Architects & Building Engineers, 1998
Interior Planning Award, First Place, Japan Architectural Education Center, 1998
Passive Solar House Prize, OM Solar Organization, Japan, 1997
Good Design Award, INAX Design Corporation, 1997
Interior Planning Award, Japan Architecture Dissemination Center, 1992



Yumi Kori,
Panta Rhei
Mar. – June 2002
Installation
Maison Hermes Forum,
Ginza, Tokyo

Yumi Kori (in collaboration
with Bernhard Gal)
Defragmentation/krems
Apr. – May 2005
Installation
Minoriten Church Kapitelsaal,
Krems-Stein, Austria

