

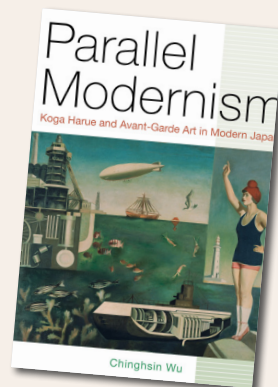
## BOOK REVIEW

### *Parallel Modernism: Koga Harue and Avant-Garde Art in Modern Japan*

By Chinghsin Wu

University of California Press, 2019  
ix + 236 pages.

Reviewed by Matthew LARKING



The critical year was 1929. The work of three painters, Koga Harue, Tōgō Seiji, and Abe Kongō, were exhibited in the Bunten secessionist forum, the Nikakai (The Second Society). These painters' seemingly surprising convergence of the uncanny in pictorial themes and artistic methods inaugurated Japan's visual Surrealism. The European allegiance, apparently spelled out in the title of one of Tōgō's works, *Surrealist Stroll* (1929), was then buoyed by the authority of Fukuzawa Ichirō who had been abroad when he submitted thirty-seven works from Paris to the Dokuritsu-ten (Association of Independent Artists Exhibition) in January 1931. These four, Koga, Tōgō, Abe, and Fukuzawa were Japan's early cardinal Surrealist points in oil painting (*yōga*), though their disagreements—including over who among them were actually Surrealists—leant a splintered character to Japanese Surrealism from the outset. Wu's *Parallel Modernism* privileges Koga for his sometimes ambivalent and personalized relations to European influence, and so her study is essentially a biographical and artistic monograph, bracketed by an introduction and epilogue of broader concerns.

In drawing scholarly attention to, and rehabilitating the careers of, a small number of Japan's modern Western-style painters, many of whom are overlooked outside of Japan, Wu joins the company of a number of mostly America-based scholars: Bert Winther-Tamaki, Gennifer Weisenfeld, Ming Tiampo, Alicia Volk, Justin Jesty, and Michael Lucken (France). The significance of this apparent surge in recent times, and Wu's addition to it, cannot be underestimated in a field which has long seemed intellectually complacent regarding Japanese modernism in general, and the dilemmas presented by Western influence on modern Japanese arts in particular.

Wu's narrative takes the reader through romanticized modern artist tropes, the last of which was Koga's untimely death. Growing up in a small town in Fukuoka Prefecture—his later-year contemporaries called him a “country bumpkin” (p. 207, n. 24)—Koga was at least partly a self-taught artist, befriended and instructed by another self-taught local Western-style painter of small repute, Matsuda Teishō. Koga dreamed of moving beyond mediocrity, and Fukuoka. As an outsider in Tokyo, he joined passé institutions, the Taiheiyo Gakai Kenkyūsho (Pacific Art Society Institute) in 1912, then the Nihon Suisai Gakai Kenkyūsho (Japanese Watercolor Society Institute) in 1913. His formative influences, like those of many of Japan's early oil painters, were eclectic, and forward- and backward-looking: Buddhist

iconography; the romanticisms of Aoki Shigeru and Takehisa Yumeji; El Greco's Mannerist compositions; a Croatian sculptor, Ivan Meštrović, who was influential among 1920s Japanese architects of the Bunriha Kenchikukai (Secession-school Architectural Society); and Paul Klee. Koga struggled for recognition until two of his paintings were accepted for the Nikakai in 1922. His quest for artistic freedom was bolstered by the momentum he drew from his Cubist period (1922–1925), then from Expressionism (1925–1929).

Koga's publicly and critically lingering achievements were in Surrealism, which he adopted, localized, and developed piecemeal and personally from 1929, at a time when earlier and contemporary overseas examples remained scarce in Japan, and when local understandings of Surrealism were especially fragmented.<sup>1</sup> Japanese Surrealism embodied little of André Breton's incendiary sketch in the Second Surrealist Manifesto (1930):

The simplest Surrealist act consists of dashing down into the street, pistol in hand, and firing blindly, as fast as you can pull the trigger, into the crowd.<sup>2</sup>

In contrast to the more ludic and lunatic moments in European Surrealism, Wu argues for the existence of a tempered scientific and technology-induced optimism in Japanese Surrealism. It was, however, only ever partly thus. This comment applies equally to Koga, the subject of Wu's study. Koga's fascination with the modern metropolis and mass culture, and the spectacles of industrial and societal innovation and change, also owes something to an earlier Baudelairean celebration of modern life, while his technology and machine thematic suggests an Italian Futurist inheritance. Koga's future-oriented robot-themed paintings are proximate to pulp science-fiction illustration.

Wu's especial address within Koga's oeuvre is to his collage paintings. The Surrealist collaging of popular culture and reproduced imagery as a form of visual automatism had begun with Max Ernst from around 1919, but Koga's approach was to clip and compose imagery culled from Tokyo's mass-culture publications before working them up into oil paintings. A crucially interesting feature of Koga's late-career work was that he often created poem-paintings to accompany his visual images. These painting "postscripts" arose in the period 1924–1931 (p. 203, n. 73). Wu's analyses of these visual/verbal pairings are among the best moments in her book, though it is unfortunate that she sometimes relegates significant information to her footnotes.

The book's framing generates a sense of unease. Wu states in her introduction, "Drawing inspiration from the concept of the quantum entanglement of parallel universes, found in the many-worlds interpretation of quantum physics, this book proposes a view of modernism in Japan as coexisting in close parallel with other modernisms around the world ..." However, for the most part she does not discuss "parallel modernism" (p. 5), and, in fact, she seems aware of the concept's minimal purchase. Wu notes the following: "The phrase *parallel modernism* has occasionally appeared in the arguments or titles of articles discussing modern art in non-Western contexts, but the term itself has not yet been fully developed or defined" (p. 194, n. 8). More problematic is that even Japanese

1 Ōtani 2003, pp. 20-21. Surrealist poetry and literature began to be introduced to Japan from 1925, and painting and the other arts from 1928, though more fully from 1930.

2 Breton 1969, p. 125.

modernism never constituted a single world; it was always composed of multiple art-worlds, mediums, genres, and idioms, with distinctively different casts, roles, and understandings of modernism and avant-gardism. Wu's "parallel modernism" is also a less compelling interpretative methodology here than what she considers to be the significant modernist moments and movements relativized to Koga's individual creativity. The implication is that there are as many parallel worlds as there are artists. Her approach somewhat isolates Koga (both from European contexts, and from his Japanese contemporaries), and this stands in distinct contrast to the inclusionary "global modernism" overtures Wu makes in her introduction.

The epilogue addresses Surrealism in wartime Japan after Koga's death, although the author covers little Surrealist territory except for the most well-known individuals. Practically none of the Surrealist-leaning exhibiting organizations are given their proper dues or appreciable discussion (for example, the Dokuritsu Bijutsu Kyōkai, Sōki Bijutsu, Bijutsu Bunka Kyōkai, Kyūshitsukai-ten, Ekōru do Tōkyō-ten). Overlooked, too, is the seepage of Surrealism into wartime artistic spheres other than oil painting, such as ceramic design (for example, Yagi Kazuo's Max Ernst-inspired vessel decoration), the mid-1930s photo designs of Ei-Q, or Surrealism in *nihonga* avant-gardism as found in the Rekitei Bijutsu Kyōkai (Rekitei Art Association). By taking the now well-worn route that authoritarian repression of the art world in wartime from the late 1930s resulted in Surrealism's quietus from 1941, Wu also overlooks a small number of variant and exceptional Surrealisms. These include the attenuated but still-Surrealist still-life paintings of Ai Mitsu in the early 1940s, and Yamashita Kikuji's striking *The Collapse of Japan's Enemy, the American Forces* (1943) as an outstanding example of Surrealism tuned into state support. She culminates her study with one of Matsumoto Shunsuke's self-portraits from 1942 (mostly unrelated to Surrealism in important ways), as if Surrealism had somehow led up to the assertion of individual self-expression via portraiture in wartime circumstances; this is a miscalculation. Markedly, Japanese Surrealism's late wartime repression resulted in its postwar reinvigoration.

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