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Title: The quiet chameleon

Lead: From psychedelia to suicides and lusty, busty wenches, Tadanori Yokoo's artistic themes have always shocked his audiences. Now the artist is quietly contemplating retirement.

By Stephanie Gartelmann (now Oley)

Artist Yokoo Tadanori is a busy man, and it shows. There's his output, for starters: tens of thousands of graphic pieces produced over a fifty year-plus career, and there are clashing colours and strident Japanese motifs. Rising sun flags, woodblock-style courtesans and flowing calligraphy appear with overlapping references to a dizzying array of themes.

There are the art history references, to Hokusai, Matisse, Picasso and Rousseau (Yokoo is also an avid collector). There's love, religion, waterfalls and death – depicted most famously in his poster for the 1965 Tokyo exhibition *Persona*, which hinted at his own suicide with its hanging man and the caption: "Made in Japan. Having reached a climax at the age of 29, I was dead".

Yokoo (pronounced 'Yok-oh') himself is intense, reclusive and polite. At exhibition openings he stays in the background and rarely smiles for the camera – despite having appeared in numerous films and TV shows throughout his career. Still, curator Miki Tsukada of the Setagaya Art Museum – which held a giant Yokoo exhibition in April – feels that "daring" is the best way of describing him.

"His work has always interpreted the subject in a boldly personal way, which meant that, as a designer, he often had to fight clients' wishes. He lost numerous commissions as a result," Tsukada notes.

But that exuberant individuality is his hallmark: Yokoo's style has evolved constantly. "I would say he is one of the greatest artists in the world. He comes out of that great Japanese tradition of graphic art, but his work also mixes Surrealism, Pop, old and new," says his long-time friend, the pre-eminent US illustrator Paul Davis, who first met Yokoo at *Persona* in 1965.

Born in 1936 in Nishiwaki, near Kobe, Yokoo showed an early aptitude for the arts. An Art Deco-like poster for his high school's annual festival in 1954 is considered his earliest published piece; by 1956 the young artist was a contributor to the newspaper *Kobe Shimbun* and by the early 1960s, a multi award-winner. In 1968 he participated in his first overseas exhibition, the *Words and Images* show at New York's Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), for which he also designed the poster.

His work has appeared in solo and group exhibitions every year since, in Japan and abroad. He's won a swathe of awards, including grand prize at the Tokyo Art Director's Club in 1973 and gold at the New York Art Director's Club in 1997, along with accolades from UNESCO, several International Print Biennales and the Japanese government.

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The artist is a compulsive collector. On one visit to Davis in the US, Yokoo bought some 2,000 postcards of waterfalls from a "barn-sized" junk store in Maine, which he later compiled into a book. Another time, the artist became obsessed with figurines in a sideways-reclining position. "When I visited his house in Tokyo, the figurines were lined up and down the stairs, through the rooms and on the dining table – religious ones, medical ones, old and new," Davis marvels.

Yokoo uses allegory to convey his rich and intertwining themes. His fascination with death is often expressed via characters from Japanese comics, or action heroes like Tarzan. "Death, along with life and love, has always been an important theme for me," the artist says. "I've often shown death via themes of adventure, which is a way of experiencing an 'other' world, physically, through the body.

These adventure themes also appear in the handful of short animations Yokoo made. The 1965 piece 'Kachi Kachi Yama' (literally, 'bang-bang mountain') unfolds like a surreal, truncated gangster film, with its lovers cavorting in salubrious hotels, its masked gunmen and its black, white and red graphic imagery.

Yokoo also has a deeply spiritual side, which intensified after 1970, when he emerged from hospital after a traffic accident only to hear Mishima had just killed himself in the gory *seppuku* style – disembowelment by Samurai sword.

Buddhist themes were already evident in his work – even a 1965 *butoh* dance poster, 'À la Maison de M. Civeçawa', manages to squeeze in some mysterious gurus in the background – and these became more pronounced. Yokoo became a near-fanatic believer in UFOs and developed an affinity with otherworldly forces: on visiting Paul Davis in the US once, Yokoo "swore" there was a ghost in the house, Davis recalls.

His radical works were considered psychedelic, although, with mind-altering drugs almost unheard of in modest post-war Japan, it's fair to say that Yokoo's own imagination was the real force.

His unconventional themes resonated with Western musicians, including The Beatles, Santana, Cat Stevens and Quincy Jones, who all commissioned Yokoo to design record covers in the 1960s and 70s. "Santana visited Japan often and, thanks to Yoko Ono, John Lennon became a close presence at one stage," Yokoo recalls.

Yokoo also endlessly depicts themes of love – erotic love, dying love, lasting love. Yasue, his wife of 50 years (they married in 1957 and have a son, Ei, born in 1961 and a daughter, Mimi, in 1964) has always appeared in his work – and so have a bevy of brazen nudes. Bare-breasted, strident femmes – often depicted with mouths agape, shouting – are the central figures in the well-known 'Elises's cry' and 'Autobike,' and in several commercial designs, including a saucy series of posters for Tokyu department store in the 1970s.

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"Love is something that's certain and uncertain at the same time," Yokoo says. He won't elaborate on his own life. "What I will say is that, if love was taken from me, I'd find no point in being alive," he says. "Also, love has to start from within. I myself must first love my artistic themes, my studio, my paintbrushes. And when it comes to loving others, love must never be a shackle. Love is inextricably linked to freedom."

In 1981 he declared a formal move from graphic design to fine art, although commercial-art techniques such as collage and digital media still feature alongside his newer, lush oils.

His 'Y junction' series, begun in 2007, are painterly oils showing three-way crossroads in jumbled inner-city areas. He walks Tokyo's streets for hours at a time, snapping its older, shabbier neighbourhoods. The scenes are rearranged as fictions on his canvas: "I don't like Tokyo's streets any more – urbanisation is ridding it of all charisma," he explains. These nocturnal fantasy scenes exemplify another motif Yokoo describes as symbolic of death: the sense of "standing on the threshold of one world, gazing into another."

Now aged his early seventies, he has declared a retirement of sorts although he still paints daily, rising at 5 or 6am and working at his own pace before sleeping by 10. During breaks, he reads – classical pieces by the likes of Dostoevsky, Nietzsche or Japanese philosopher Kanazaki, which he says he didn't read enough while young – or rearranges things in his studio.

On occasion, the artist slips into despondence. Days before we speak, on his blog, he'd written: "I'm tired. I never understood how painters could want to stop making art, but now I want to stop." For an April studio break, he scrapped plans to visit a theme park and waterfalls in favour of "reading books and just pottering around." Today, he is more upbeat, declaring painting as being "inseparable" from his life. "I just want to age gracefully. I'm not trying to stop the passing of time; I simply want to stop being so busy," the artist explains.

That may seem hard to believe, given that Yokoo has just published his first novel, *Blueland*, and his 2008 calendar is well padded out with group and solo exhibitions. Two big retrospectives are coming up in Japan: August 2009 in Kanazawa and a 2010 show in Osaka. And at a recent exhibition talk, Yokoo tossed around ideas with his old friend, science-fiction writer Hiroshi Aramata, to produce an illustrated book on the theme 'what was 21st century art?' Whether the book ever comes to fruition remains to be seen. Of course, Yokoo's fans already know the artist's oeuvre already resembles one giant commentary on human creative, and personal, endeavour.

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