ALMINE RECH

Keiichi Tanaami

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Almine Rech Shanghai is pleased to announce Keiichi Tanaami's latest presentation with the gallery, on view from October 27 to December 2, 2023

The Pop Art movement, characterized by its enduring global resonance until today, has embarked on a fascinating journey across cultural landscapes worldwide since its origins in 1950s America and Great Britain. The movement flourished in Japan in the late 1950s and early 1960s, melding Western Pop Art sensibilities with distinct Japanese cultural and social contexts. A new generation of Japanese artists embraced the Pop Movement's ethos, driven by a desire to challenge the conventional traditions of Japanese art. This creative awakening was a response to Western materialism and popular culture in postwar Japan.

Keiichi Tanaami (Born 1936 in Tokyo), an influential figure in Japanese Pop Art, stands out among his contemporaries. A hugely prolific artist whose career spans illustration, animation, experimental cinema, and painting, he explains, "My life is not a straight shot with one central theme running through it." His works have been widely exhibited worldwide and have been collected by major international art institutions, such as the New York MoMA, The Art Institute of Chicago, Hong Kong's M+ Museum, Washington's National Portrait Gallery, and the Nationalgalerie im Hamburger Bahnhof in Berlin.

Tanaami produces images that are now part of both Japanese and American cultural landscapes, and have influenced art movements in Japan, most notably the Superflat movement spearheaded by Takashi Murakami and Yoshitomo Nara. Tanaami's affinity for American culture can be traced back to his youth in Tokyo, where movies offered him escapism. "I loved movies so much since it was the greatest entertainment in the post-war time. I watched more than 500 movies in a year, but most of those were B movies. However, I was thoroughly enchanted and started to like American culture," remembers Tanaami. This enchantment with American culture is also echoed by Japanese writer Haruki Murakami, who said in a 1992 interview: ‘American culture was so vibrant back then in the 1960s, and I was very influenced by its music, television shows, cars, clothes, everything.’

This exchange, however, was not merely a one-sided assimilation of American values; instead, Japanese artists reinterpreted American influences, infusing them with their unique sensibilities to create a modern art movement that is distinctly Japanese. In many of Tanaami's large-scale works, American pop iconography is placed into complex conversation with historical Japanese art forms, such as traditional ukiyo-e woodblock printing, which the artist cites as a profound influence over him. The artist's very first visit to the United States in 1968 introduced him to the work of Andy Warhol, whose interdisciplinary approach seamlessly navigated the realms of art and advertising and would inspire Tanaami's own path of creativity.

He would later visit Warhol's Factory in 1975 as the first art director of the Japanese edition of Playboy magazine. "Warhol was in the process of shifting from commercial illustrator to artist, and I witnessed and experienced firsthand his tactics and his incision method in the art world. His strategies were identical to those employed by advertising agencies. He used contemporary commercial icons as motifs in his works and, for his other activities, put together media such as films, newspapers, and rock bands. Like Warhol, I decided not to limit myself to one medium, to fine art or design only, but instead to explore many different methods," explains Tanaami.

Having first gained recognition as a graphic designer and illustrator, Tanaami contributed to influential Japanese publications, including the avant-garde manga monthly Garo, in addition to his album cover art for legendary American rock bands The Monkees and Jefferson Airplane. His bold and imaginative designs, often featuring psychedelic and pop art elements, were pivotal in bringing this burgeoning art form to the Japanese masses. Since then, the artist has continued to pioneer an in-depth exploration of the friction between dichotomous forces such as East and West, violence and innocence, commercial imagery, and high art.

Many of his traumatic childhood experiences during World War II, appear in his art, whether it is air raids or explosions, coupled with mesmerizing visuals inspired by psychedelic shapes and figures of the 1960s, creating an altogether enigmatic construction of his dreams and memories. "Today, I still create works that deal with my experience of war as a child. This moment of fear that a whole city can disappear just within a moment is a memory that has been recorded deep in my mind; it does not go away." Tanaami's paintings, with their blazing hues, kaleidoscopic layers of imagery, and juxtaposition of American and Japanese cultural references, portray the movement and energy of a society that is at once in constant motion and in search of much-needed inner peace.

Fast forward to 1981, and Tanaami was suddenly near-death— likely the result of a decade of exhaustion after countless nights of drinking until morning, just to work in a delirious state the next day and repeat. He was hospitalized for four months, and during this time he experienced bouts of fever and hallucinations every night for months that would, too, influence his work in the years to come, with motifs of death and figures he remembers from this altered state. Tanaami's life was recently disrupted again, this time by the pandemic. With projects and exhibition plans put on hold and postponed, the artist considered taking a break due but found his old habits hard to break. He took notice of a dusty canvas on the floor of his studio, a reproduction he had made of Picasso's painting, "Mother and Child". In Tanaami's version, Osamu Tezuka's well-known fictional superhero Astro Boy took the place of the child in the mother's arms.

Picasso's *Mother and Child* have had a lasting impression on Tanaami, and he has since made replicas of it from time to time. During the period of Covid isolation, the process of reproducing the image helped him find solace. "I never thought that the simple act of just copying what I liked without giving it much thought could be so amusing, and it also helped to stabilize my mind and body. I feel that the process of copying colors and shapes...is similar to the practice of hand copying buddhist sutras," the artist reflects. He has since created a collection of over 400 Picasso-inspired paintings.

As Tanaami a continues to obsess over Picasso, which is driving a current wave of productivity, the artist also reflects on his innate urge to paint, rooted in an enduring childhood memory consisting of colors and crayons. "The memory of that tactile sensation remains vivid, and even today, I feel a physiological pleasure when I am layering on coats of paint. My approach to painting hasn't changed at all since my childhood days." Tanaami himself has never had any preconceptions about how his artistic trajectory might evolve. Nonetheless, he is committed to continue carrying on painting as he is now.

— Athena Chen, art researcher