

ESSAY

Brut Force

IN JAPAN, WHERE FINE CRAFTSMANSHIP ABOUNDS, REMARKABLE WORKS BY SELF-TAUGHT ARTISTS—SO-CALLED *ART BRUT*—HAVE EMERGED AND ARE BEING NOTICED. BY EDWARD M. GÓMEZ



Issei Nishimura, two untitled paintings, paint and ink on canvas boards.

AFTER DECADES of development and discoveries in the field of outsider art, mostly from Western Europe and North America, dealers and aficionados are hungrier than ever for big, new, impressive finds, particularly from regions of the world that are less familiar and have been less explored. Thus, in recent years, Asia has loomed large on their collective radar screen, and some strong work by self-taught artists from Japan has been attracting attention.

For better or worse, the adopted foreign term “*art brut*” has come into common usage in Japan—far more than “outsider art”—in a field that has developed rapidly there in little more a decade. The term was coined in the 1940s by the French artist Jean Dubuffet, who had begun collecting works by non-trained artists whose creative impulse was urgent and compelling. He called such creations, some of which were produced by persons with mental illnesses, “*art brut*” (“raw art”) in recognition of the discernible energy that had shaped them and that they exuded. As Dubuffet saw it, *art brut* artists created primarily for themselves, not to present publicly or in dialogue with established art history.

As a market for work made by talented self-taught artists developed during the latter

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From left: Chie Kariya, *Flower*, pencil and acrylic on paper, 48.75 x 30.25 inches; Itsuo Ozasa, *Cats at Play*, 1982, acrylic on canvas, 23.86 x 28.62 inches.

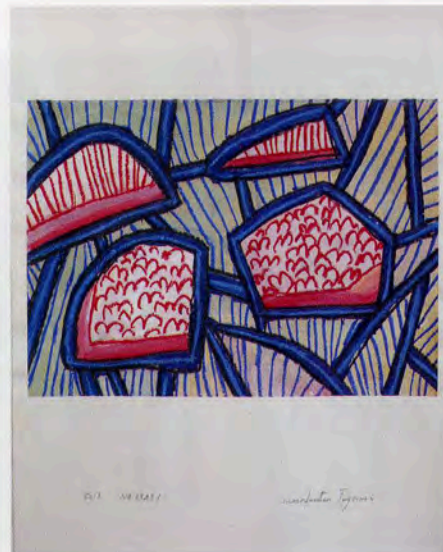
half of the 20th century in Europe and North America, the term “outsider art” emerged, especially in the United States. It was used to describe works that had been produced by artists who could still be regarded as occupying positions on the margins of mainstream society and culture but whose circumstances in life and creations did not always precisely fit Dubuffet’s strict definition of *art brut*.

In Japan, some art historians, curators and a very few dealers have in recent years searched locally for examples of *art brut*. While they have discovered some high-quality bodies of work produced by skilled and original self-taught art-makers, they have primarily looked to art-therapy programs run by so-called social welfare organizations for notable finds. At the same time, influential administrators or government officials who have been associated with them have embraced the French term “*art brut*,” which, when first encountered, usually means nothing to the average Japanese reader or gallery-goer. This label, transliterated into Japanese phonetics, becomes “*aaru buryutto*.” For most Japanese audiences, such a term needs to be explained. (By contrast, to refer in Japanese to the art of a “*dokugakusha*,” or “self-taught person,” is to be more easily understood.)

In practical terms, as dealers such as Yukiko Koide (of Yukiko Koide Presents, a gallery in Tokyo) and Yutaka Miyawaki (of Galerie Miyawaki in Kyoto) point out, in Japan today, “*art brut*” has become synonymous with “art made by disabled people.” It has even earned some kind of trendy cachet. In an e-mail message from Japan, Koide sent me news about an apartment building and a racehorse, both of which had been named “*aaru buryutto*.” In effect,

the term has become something of a brand name designating any kind of artistic-looking productions made by disabled persons. Generally speaking, there is little critical-aesthetic discussion surrounding such creations, as various Japanese-government agencies strive to promote them in a feel-good manner that links their underlying creative impulse with a vague notion of community spirit. One social-welfare organization administrator in Tokyo even sent out a Twitter message late last year declaring, “Japanese *art brut* delivers gentleness and peace.”

As “Signs of Life: Shiga and Art Brut,” a recent exhibition at the Shiga Prefectural Museum of Modern Art in Ōtsu, Shiga’s capital, pointed out, this region of south-central Japan has a history of operating social-welfare organizations to aid disabled children and other individuals. Some of its first such institutions were founded in the immediate post-World War II period. Oval-shaped Shiga Prefecture surrounds Lake Biwa and is famous for Buddhist temples filled with artistic treasures. Also known for its ceramics-making tradition, it is the home of the Shigaraki Ceramic Cultural Park. In 2004, the Borderless Museum NO-MA opened in the 16th-century-castle town of Ōmihachiman, just northeast of Ōtsu. First operated by a government-connected social-welfare organization that permutated into a kind of private entity that still benefits from public funding, this venue for self-taught artists’ works is housed in an old traditional-style Japanese residence. Over the years it has presented exhibitions of genuine *art brut* from Europe and has published high-quality books to document its shows. It has provided a high-profile showcase for art made by self-taught



artists in and from Shiga and in doing so has tended to emphasize the role of disabled persons as producers of “Japanese art brut.”

One of the true stars to have emerged from his association with the organization behind the Borderless Museum NO-MA is the Shiga-based ceramicist Shinichi Sawada. His works have been exhibited in Japan and Europe, and were prominently featured in the main group survey, “The Encyclopedic Palace,” at the Venice Biennale in 2013, which brought together a range of art forms produced by academically trained and self-taught artists from around the world. Sawada, who was born in 1982, is autistic and once worked in a bakery. He has become known for his unusual sculptural works, which are fired in a wood-fueled kiln. His distinctive, disc-shaped or bulbous faces and heads, crawling monsters and totem-like figures are covered in spiky crusts.

“Signs of Life” also featured such inventive creations as Kazumi Kamae’s *Mr. Masato* (2012), an unglazed, dark-clay figure with

stubby arms, which is covered in fur-like protrusions and represents an employee at the art-therapy workshop she attends, on whom she has a crush; Seizō Tashima’s wiry ink drawing, *Man Who Raises Cranes* (1990); and Itsuo Ozasa’s acrylic-on-canvas *Cats at Play* (1982) and *Cats and I* (1984). Like Sawada’s ceramics, Takashi Shūji’s dramatic pastel-on-paper drawings, which were also on view in the Shiga show, were featured in an important exhibition at the Collection de l’Art Brut in Lausanne, Switzerland, in 2008. That survey introduced this kind of art from Japan to European viewers. To make his atmospheric still lifes and views of trees or patches of cityscapes, Shūji rubs his pastels vigorously into the surface of his paper, creating rich concentrations of color. His compositions are as sophisticated in their interpretations of their subjects as any schooled modernist’s “reductivist” abstracting of perceptible forms.

Recently, too, just north of Tokyo, the Saitama Prefectural Museum of Modern Art in Saitama, the capital of the prefecture of the same name, presented “This is Amazing!”, another exhibi-



Clockwise from top left: Seizo Tashima, *Man Who Raises Cranes*, 1990, lithograph on *washi* (Japanese handmade paper), 25.9 x 21.73 inches; Masaharu Honda, *Lotus Root*, 2008, ink and acrylic on paper, 15.75 x 12.8 inches; Masakatsu Tagami, *No. 09251*, 2013, paint and oil pastel on paper; Terumasa Ito, *Dekotora (Oozoramaru)*, 2008, paper, paint, ink and mixed media; Issei Nishimura, *Untitled*, felt-tip marker, ink, and paint on paper.

PHOTO COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND SHIGA PREFECTURAL MUSEUM OF MODERN ART; PHOTO BY EDWARD M. GÓMEZ; PHOTO COURTESY OF SAITAMA PREFECTURAL MUSEUM OF MODERN ART; PHOTO BY EDWARD M. GÓMEZ

tion of works by Japanese autodidacts. While this show did not heavily emphasize either the “*art brut*” or the more specific “Japanese *art brut*” label per se in identifying the works on view, all of them were produced by self-taught art-makers who had been or still are associated with art-therapy programs linked to social-welfare organizations. In many of the drawings, paintings, and mixed-media creations on display, fine craftsmanship and an inventive use of materials was evident, as in Terumasa Ito’s scale-model replicas of trucks and heavy-work vehicles in cut-and-painted cardboard or Yuki Fujioka’s abstract forms made from finely shredded scraps of paper, painstakingly cut with a plain pair of scissors. Other highlights included Keiko Abe’s vibrant agglomerations of colored circles, random patterns, or groups of little girls; Chie Kariya’s murky-translucent visions of flowers in pencil and acrylic on large sheets of paper; and Masaharu Honda’s hyper-real portrayals of a yam, lotus roots, and other vegetables in ink, acrylic, and other media on paper.

In Tokyo, Koide shows (among other works) Kamae’s ceramics; Eiichi Shibata’s abstract paintings on canvas and paper, with their thickets of fine lines dotted with splotches and drips of rich color; and Momoka Imura’s sculptural objects made of fabric and covered with buttons. Koide, who in the past lived in Chicago, is known for her work as an independent curator and researcher; in Japan, her book about the legendary Chicago outsider Henry Darger (1892–1973) was published in 2013. Recently, at her gallery, Koide told me, “Even at the best of times, it’s hard to sell contemporary art in Japan. For a start, there are relatively few serious collectors, and dealers have to do a lot to promote their artists and educate the public about their work. As for self-taught artists, this task can be more challenging still.”

In Kyoto, Miyawaki, who now runs the gallery his late father founded—in the past it presented shows of European modernism—is interested in artworks by both contemporary, trained artists and self-taught artists that are characterized by strong ideas and fine craftsmanship. He rejects the heavy emphasis that the “Japanese *art brut*” field, such as it is, has placed on this kind of art as being that of disabled and mentally ill persons, to the point that, insofar as general audiences are aware of this genre at all, they have come to think of it as just that.

“As for the attitude of a discoverer and introducer [of art], to stipulate the importance of quality in this pursuit is essential,” Miyawaki observed. His gallery has mounted exhibitions by such European and American *art brut* and outsider artists as Anna Zemánková and Dwight Mackintosh, as well as by such trained artists as Gene Mann, from Switzerland, and Dean Bowen, from Australia, whose aesthetic sensibilities share something of the spirit of certain *art brut* creations. Some of Miyawaki’s self-taught Japanese discoveries have included Naoki Nishiwaki, whose works on paper, with their ropey, circular forms, were featured in the Saitama exhibition, and Issei Nishimura, who makes abstract paintings and drawings that bring to mind Surrealist automatic writing. Miyawaki’s gallery also publishes books about the work of self-taught artists.

Much more exploring must be done in Japan, both in big cit-



From top: Artist Masakatsu Tagami in a storeroom at his home, examining one of his abstract prints on paper; Yuichi Saito, *Doraemon*, 2007, pen ink on paper, 15 x 21.25 inches.





Clockwise from top left: Toshiaki Yoshikawa, *Gourds*, 1981, charcoal on charcoal drawing paper, 19.48 x 25.29 inches; Takashi Shûji, *Flowers in Clay-Wooden Bowl*, 1997, conté crayon on watercolor paper, 42.5 x 29.92 inches; Artist Hiroyuki Doi at work in his studio in Tokyo.

ies and in rural areas, to find talented self-taught artists who are not associated with art-therapy programs. A few whose work has emerged and come to market include Tokyo-based Hiroyuki Doi, who creates ink drawings on *washi* (Japanese handmade paper). These abstractions, which resemble billowing clouds or vast constellations, are made up of multitudes of tiny circles. Also in Tokyo, the artist Monma makes richly colored images in which filigrees of fine lines create multiple layers of overlapping, random patterns. In them appear the faces of clowns and phantom-like deities; half-human, half-animal figures; and stylized Japanese written characters. And in Yamaguchi Prefecture, in southern of Japan, Masakatsu Tagami, who lives reclusively with his wife in an old wooden house, is a prolific producer of works in different media, some representational and some abstract. His countless postcard-size images on cardboard offer a cornucopia of subjects, painting and drawing techniques, and experiments with simple forms.

In New York, Doi is represented by Ricco/Maresca, and Monma by Cavin-Morris Gallery. In Tokyo, the independent dealer Atsuko Barouh handles Tagami's art. Although these artists have achieved different measures of commercial success, the bulk of the work that has emerged to date in the "Japanese *art brut*" category has not yet come to market. One reason is that in Japan, very few galleries actively handle such art. Another is that, among the social-welfare organizations with which most of the producers of this



kind of art are associated, no common template exists for the kind of contract a Japanese self-taught artist would need to set up representation-and-sales relationships with dealers.

Currently, in the U.S., Cavin-Morris offers the most extensive selection of works by Japanese self-taught artists. In a recent interview, dealer Randall Morris observed, "All of the work of this kind that we've brought into the gallery can hold its own against the best-known *art brut* or outsider art from the West. However, some longtime collectors in the field have moved slowly to embrace it. The only reason seems to be that they don't even realize how attached they are to what's already familiar to them from Europe and the U.S." Morris pointed out that, by contrast, certain contemporary-art collectors have been quicker to grasp Japanese self-taught artists' sophisticated understanding of color and form, and to appreciate the refined handling of their materials that typifies much of their work. Cavin-Morris will feature several Japanese self-taught artists' works at the Outsider Art Fair in New York in late January.

Koide will take part in that event, too.


Even though, as of now in Japan, some forces in the marketplace of ideas already have effectively branded "Japanese *art brut*" as primarily the work of disabled art-makers, in broader art-historical terms this is still a very young field. Time will tell how much more rich and diverse—and, as Dubuffet would have had it, just how revelatory, radical, and rewarding—its still-to-come new discoveries may turn out to be. 

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