

Why I Posed as Yukio Mishima,
Or, The Relationship of 3 M's: MacArthur, Mishima, Morimura

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Hello, my name is Yasumasa Morimura.

Although I do not speak the English language very well, I have chosen to give my presentation today in English, because it is my hope to speak as directly as possible.

I would like to begin my presentation by talking about some of the personal concerns that inform my work.

I will start with an experience I had as a junior high school student.

I was born in 1951, so the event must have happened sometime in the 1960s.

One year, I was given a painting assignment during the summer holidays.

Among junior high school students, the usual expectation was to do a watercolor painting, so when I submitted my own painting, it was done in that medium.

However, one of my classmates chose not to do a watercolor painting.

Instead, he submitted an oil painting.

I was shocked when I saw his work.

The idea of an oil painting seemed so sumptuous and mature to me.

In particular, I was enchanted by its smell.

Even now, I cannot forget the sumptuous, luxurious smell of that painting.

From that point onward, I was determined to make oil paintings once I became a high school student.

And indeed, I started making oil paintings shortly after I entered high school—this one, for example.



*PHOTO #1 HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT

* 1 高校生の頃の私の油絵

It was my first encounter with fine art.

The other day, when thinking about tonight's event, I ask myself a question.

“Why was my first encounter with art through an oil painting?”

I was born in Japan, raised in Japan, and I still live in Japan.

Japan possesses a long tradition of *nihonga*, “Japanese-style painting.”

So why did I choose to pursue oil painting instead of Japanese painting?

As I mentioned, I was born in 1951, six years after World War Two came to an end, Japan having been defeated as a nation.

After the war, under the influence of the U.S. Occupation, Japan swept away its pre-War culture, customs, and political system.

In their place, the country embraced Western culture, customs, and political ideology.

For example, as a child I was told that bread has more nutritional value than rice.

The Western influence extended even to Japanese eating habits, and it was in that kind of postwar environment that I grew up.

Nor did this influence exclude art education, which had embarked on a Westernizing course during the late nineteenth century, a period of modernization and reform commonly known as the Meiji era.

Following World War Two, however, Japan's art education system became even more entrenched in Western values.

All the art teachers at my junior high school and high school had been trained in Western art, and all of them were oil painters.

At school I had very few opportunities to learn about Japanese art history.

I learnt mainly about such figures as Van Gogh, Monet, and Renoir, and then if there was time remaining, we would move on to Japanese woodblock prints, or Ukiyo-e.

Having been raised in an educational environment that revolved around European and American ideals, it was normal for me to define painting as “oil painting”—in other words, Western painting.

As a teenager, I loved oil paintings and dreamed of becoming a painter.

Japanese traditional painting seemed so removed from me.

To put it in an extreme way, it was like art from some far-off foreign country.

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I would like to show you an image of my work, “Portrait (Van Gogh).”



* PHOTO #2 VAN GOGH

* 2 肖像 (ゴッホ)

I created this work in 1985.

It is a self-portrait in which I took a photo of myself modeled after Van Gogh's own famous self-portrait.

This work marked my debut as an artist.

Since its creation, I have continued to make self-portrait photographs modeled after famous paintings from art history.

Almost all of these works take their subjects from Western art history.

I have made works based on paintings by Manet,



*PHOTO #3 MANET

Van Gogh,



* PHOTO #4 GOGH (SINGING FLOWERS)

Rembrandt,



* PHOTO #5 REMBRANDT

Vermeer,



* PHOTO #6 VERMEER,

Velazquez,



* PHOTO #7 VELASQUEZ,

Goya,



* PHOTO #8 GOYA,

and da Vinci



* PHOTO #9 LEONARDO

—all canonical works of Western art history.

* (3 マネ 4 ゴッホ 5 レンブラント 6 フェルメール 7 ベラスケス
8 ゴヤ 9 レオナルド)

* (Manet, van Gogh, Rembrandt, Vermeer, Velasquez, Goya, da Vinci)

One of the most significant points of these works for me is that they bring two separate or even divided elements together into the same space.



* PHOTO #10 OLYMPIA

* 10 オランピア

My works are self-portraits, therefore my photography features my own face and body, with their particularly Japanese features and proportions.

Yet at the same time, I endeavor to make myself up to look like the figures that appear in the landmark paintings of Western art history.

In so doing, I combine elements of Japanese and Western culture in one image, yet in such a way that they each retain their difference without actually mixing.

You could say that the images I produce have two different surfaces, one that is Japanese and one that is Western.

The self-portraits, characterized by this duality, illustrate my own mentality as a Japanese who has been raised in an intimate relation with Western culture.

The conceptual division between Japan and the West is a part of my mental landscape.

But rather than choosing to embrace one or the other, I try in my work to maintain both in a relation of creative tension.

This dual genealogy is what I intended to express in the title of my series “Daughter of Art History.”

Perhaps the title should have been “Daughter of Western Art History.”



* PHOTO #11 DAUGHTER OF ART HISTORY

* 1 1 美術史の娘

As an artist, I am the “daughter” of Western art history, which is the “father.”

And, just as a daughter and father may have a love-hate relationship, I both love and hate Western art history.

Why do I love my father, Western art history?

I do so because Western art history provided me with my own sensibility as an artist.

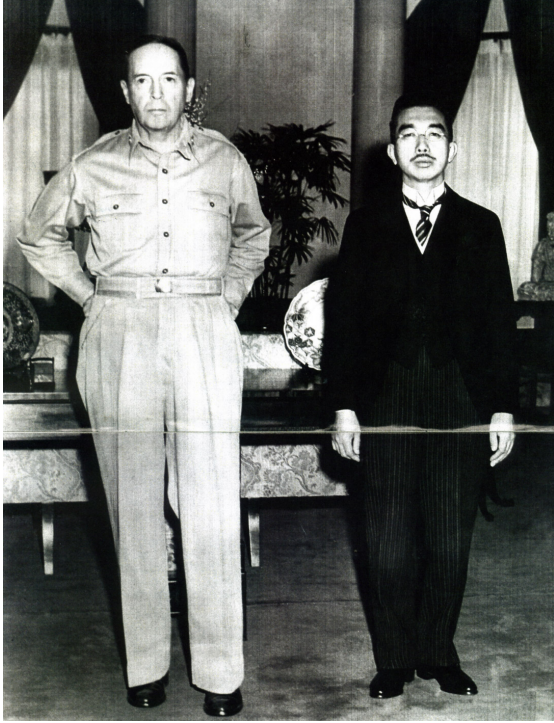
On the other hand, I hate Western art history in the way a daughter might resent an authoritarian father.

As a symbol of Japan’s postwar education system, Western art history forced me to replace Japanese culture with its own ideals and expectations.

But why should Western art history be my “father” and not my “mother”?

And why am I not a “son” but instead a “daughter”?

I would like to show the following image to explore this point.



* PHOTO #12 MACARTHUR/HIROHITO

* 1 2 マッカーサーと昭和天皇

* Portrait of MacArthur and the Emperor Showa

This photograph was taken in 1945 during a meeting at the office of the General Headquarters between Douglas MacArthur, the Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers in Tokyo, and Emperor Hirohito.

As many people have commented when analyzing this photograph, General MacArthur has his hands in his pockets and stands in a relaxed posture.

The Emperor looks stiff and is wearing a formal suit.

At the time this photograph was first published, it seems that many Japanese people were shocked.

The leader of the opposing country's forces, General MacArthur, appears tall and dignified in comparison to the Emperor, who is short and looks very timid.

It is often said that seeing this photograph confirmed for the Japanese people that their country had been defeated and occupied by the United States.

Recently, however, a different thought occurred to me when I gazed at this photograph.

Looking at it, I thought, "Ah, it looks like a traditional wedding portrait."

In terms of the traditional Japanese concept of marital relations, General MacArthur is the "husband."

He is in control of his partner.

The emperor is the “wife.”

He submits to the “husband.”

It does not necessarily follow that, in a relationship of control and submission, the husband and wife hate each other.

It would have been natural for the Japanese people to feel some resentment toward the victor, the United States.

At the same time, the United States provided many reasons for Japan to be grateful: a new political system, affluent living, interesting films and music—in short, a new lifestyle.

Indeed, following the War, many Japanese people idealized the new culture that the United States provided.

Figuratively speaking, even as the “wife” (postwar Japan) resented the control of her “husband” (the victorious United States), she depended upon and loved him.

It is just like the relationship of a married couple.

In that sense, this portrait of MacArthur and the Emperor offers a window onto the postwar Japanese psyche and the country’s position in the international politics of that time.

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This next image is one of my latest works.



*PHOTO #13 UNEXPECTED GUEST

* 1 3 「思わぬ来客」

* A Requiem: Unexpected Visitors/1945 Japan

As you can see, this is a self-portrait inspired by the photograph I just showed you of MacArthur and Emperor Hirohito.

I photographed myself as both MacArthur and the Emperor, and then combined the two images together with digital editing.

For the background, instead of the Occupation Headquarters in Tokyo, I used the house where I was raised.

My father, who died a few years ago, ran a Japanese tea shop, which he established after he returned from the war.

The street level of the house was the shop front.

Through this photograph, I was searching for the roots of my own spiritual history.

As I mentioned before, I was born in 1951, so I am a member of Japan's postwar generation.

The spirit of the postwar generation begins with the end of World War Two, so even though I was born in 1951, I consider the year 1945 as my true point of origin.

In order for me to have been born, it was necessary for my parents to be married.

Similarly, the "marriage" in 1945 between the United States and Japan was what triggered the development of my own mentality and sensibility.

Since I am a member of the postwar generation, my mentality and sensibility were provided by my father, the United States, and my mother, Japan.

Using my latest work as a way to press this point further, my "father" is General MacArthur and my "mother" is the Emperor.

I was strongly influenced by Western culture, which MacArthur symbolizes.

But my mentality and sensibility are deeply rooted in the Japanese language, climate, customs, history, and other Japanese things, which the Emperor symbolizes.

I am divided between my father MacArthur, or Western culture, and my mother the Emperor, or Japanese culture.

However, since Japanese is my native language and I was raised in Japan, with its climate, customs, and history, I must say that I love my mother more than my father.

I am the child of Western culture and Japanese culture.

I love both my parents, but if I have to compare, I love my mother more.

In terms of culture and mentality, I take after my mother.

And the “mother,” naturally, is female.

So although I am actually male, my mental framework is closer to that of a “daughter” and not a “son.”

To be specific, I am the daughter of Western culture and Japanese culture.

That is my cultural position as someone who was born and raised in Japan in the postwar era.

My relationship as a Japanese artist to Western art history, and my decision to name my first major series “Daughter of Art History,” were both based on my awareness that culturally I am a daughter who takes after her mother.

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This idea of cultural gender also applies to my understanding of Yukio Mishima, one of Japan’s most celebrated postwar authors.

Mishima’s life is closely related to my analysis of the portrait of MacArthur and Emperor Hirohito.

In the year 1970, Mishima broke into the headquarters of the Self-Defense Forces in Tokyo in an attempted coup d’etat, at the conclusion of which he killed himself.

I was 19 years old at the time, and was shocked by this unexpected happening.



***PHOTO #14 MISHIMA ICHIGAYA**

* 1 4 市ヶ谷のミシマ

*Photo of Mishima at Ichigaya

It is said that, before this time, Yukio Mishima was a delicate, literary youth.

However, that delicate youth trained and sculpted himself into the muscular man we see here.

Then, at the end of his life, he committed Hara-kiri, or Seppuku, like a Japanese Samurai of old, and even had a selected attendant on hand to chop off his head.

If we can consider the young, literary Mishima as reflecting a sense of “femaleness,” then we can say that Mishima’s life was defined by a spiritual sex change from female to male.

Actually, there is a precedent in Japanese history for this kind of “spiritual sex change.”

Here is an official portrait of the Meiji Emperor.



***PHOTO #15 PORTRAIT MEIJI EMPEROR**

* 1 5 明治天皇御真影 Official Portrait of the Meiji Emperor

In 1868, supporters of the Emperor overthrew the Tokugawa Shogunate in an event called the Meiji Restoration.

Imperial officials issued this portrait of the Meiji Emperor at the start of his regime

In this image, the Meiji Emperor is wearing a military uniform and has an impressive mustache.

During the days of the Tokugawa Shogunate, the emperor did not look quite so imposing.

Emperors had had to wear kimono and spend their days composing tanka poems.

The Shogunate forced the emperors to live a life of leisure, because for the Shogunate, there was nothing scarier than an emperor strong enough to lead a movement to overthrow the Shogunate.

Alternatively, one can look at the situation as follows.

When viewed in terms of traditional gender roles at the time of the Tokugawa Shogunate, the emperor had the role of a “woman” who is expected to occupy herself only with culture, but not that of a “man” who is active on the political stage.

Then, a revolution occurred.

At the time of the 1868 Meiji Restoration, supporters of the Emperor needed a figurehead who could be looked up to as the most powerful man in the nation.

They needed someone who could be a “man” and “father” to the nation.

And so, they dressed the Emperor up in a military uniform, groomed his mustache in this impressive fashion, and took this very dignified portrait, which they then released to the public.

In this way, as the Tokugawa Shogunate transitioned into the Meiji era, the emperor changed his political gender from female to male.

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The exact opposite happened in the portrait of Emperor Hirohito taken in 1945.

In that case, too, the Emperor experienced a political sex change—but this time it was from male to female.



Meiji Emperor



Wartime-era Showa Emperor



post-war Showa Emperor

* PHOTO #16 EMPERORS

* 1 6 明治天皇 昭和天皇／戦時 昭和天皇／戦後

* Photos of the Meiji Emperor, wartime-era Showa Emperor, post-war Showa Emperor

Hirohito used to wear military uniforms in wartime propaganda photos.

But in the portrait with MacArthur, that Hirohito has disappeared.

Standing next to the tall General MacArthur, Hirohito appears small in stature.

At least for Japanese people of the time, it looked as if the Emperor had been profoundly humiliated.

The emperor had been dragged from his position as the highest authority in Japan, and (to put it in extreme terms) was spiritually violated.

And if the emperor was humiliated, the Japanese people shared that humiliation.

Japan, as a nation, survived after the war because the country accepted this perceived “feminization,” and its dependency on the United States.

Most Japanese accepted this process and sometimes even took advantage of it.

However, Mishima was different.

He wanted to reverse Japan’s gender back from being female into male, just as the Meiji Emperor had been turned into a “man” at the start of his regime.

I cannot help thinking that the Meiji emperor’s political sex change from woman into man and Mishima’s own literary sex change from woman into man are strongly connected.

So today, rather than discussing Mishima himself, what I have tried to do in my own way is to consider how Japan’s social and cultural states of mind are reflected in his actions.

In conclusion, I would like to show a video work of mine, from 2006, based on Yukio Mishima’s 1970 speech to the Self-Defense Forces, shortly before he killed himself.



* PHOTO #17 SEASON OF PASSION

* 17 烈火の季節(モリムラのみしま作品)

In my work, I re-interpreted Mishima's speech as a visual artist living in the 21st century, adding my own distinctive content.

Then I performed my version of the speech and filmed it.

There are many things that I should say about this work.

Unfortunately, though, there is not enough time today to address the work in detail.

I would like, therefore, to focus on one point in particular.

This video is an homage to Yukio Mishima, who lived through an era of postwar Japan's spiritual history in which there was a division between things considered Japanese and those considered American or Western.

At the same time, the work seeks a way to bring an element of Mishima, and his struggle to confront that divided history, into the 21st century.

The video is only 8 minutes long, so please have a look.

<An 8-minute video was shown here.>

Thank you for your kind attention.