

# *Nihonga* Beside Itself: Contemporary Japanese Art's Engagement with the Position and Meaning of a Modern Painting Tradition

**Matthew Larking**

## **Introduction**

The term *nihonga* (Japanese painting) is usually posited in opposition to that of *yōga* (Western-style painting). While *yōga* was characterized by the use of oil paints and also watercolors, incorporating the various movements of predominantly European modernism from nineteenth century Realism, Impressionism, Fauvism, Cubism and so on, *nihonga* was the umbrella term grouping together a host of pre-modern schools of painting such as the Kanō, Tosa and Maruyama and Shijō schools, ostensibly fusing them into a modernized form of traditional Japanese painting that retained the use of conventional mineral pigments and their binding agent *nikawa*, in addition to painting formats such as the hanging scroll and folding screen, and subject matters such as paintings of famous localities, history, myth, religion and the 'beauties of nature' (*kachō fūgetsu*). The terms *nihonga* and *yōga* were institutionalized in educational institutions from the late nineteenth century and exhibiting institutions such as the national juried exhibition, the *Bunten* (renamed the *Nitten* in the postwar period) from 1907. The distinction between *nihonga* and *yōga* remains a critical one in such institutions today as well as in the registration of works in a museum's collection and their subsequent display and contextualization.

The revival of *nihonga* in contemporary art in the 1980s was contemporaneous with the 'new painting' movements of the same decade in Germany, Italy, England and America under a variety of terms such as 'new image painting' and 'neo-expressionism'.<sup>1</sup> Many of the early artists came out of the *nihonga* course at the Tokyo University of the Arts and included Saitō

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<sup>1</sup> Takashima Naoyuki, 'Nyū peintingu wo megutte', in *Nihon kin-gendai bijutsushi jiten*, ed. Taki Kōji et al. (Tokyo: Shoseki, 2007), p. 343.

Norihiko (b. 1957), Kawashima Junji (b. 1957), and Okamura Keizaburō (b. 1958) and others who often painted works with a planar decorative quality in a matte finish in mineral pigments. Work was often graphical and took subjects of the figure and animals in addition to having a folk art feel and a penchant for the aesthetics of Tawaraya Sōtatsu (early seventeenth century) and so it came to be designated as a new trend in *nihonga*.<sup>2</sup> Part of this revival in contemporary *nihonga* had also concerned the writings of the critic and art historian Kitazawa Noriaki from the end of the 1980s and then Satō Dōshin, both of whom wrote nuanced scholarship on the origins and formation of *nihonga* and how it was without clear definition and conceptual certitude as a painting idiom in its formation and successive developments. This subsequently seemed to offer artists a kind of freedom in relation to *nihonga*, a freedom to create their own thematic concerns and use what painting materials they liked and so create individualist aesthetics rather than perpetuating received ones – *kachō fūgetsu* (flowers, birds, wind, moon, or more generically, an aesthetic and thematic corpus of references concerned with the ‘beauties of nature’), for example. Subsequent museum exhibitions tied the terms ‘*nihonga*’ and ‘contemporary art’ when exhibiting artists such as Yamamoto Naoaki (b. 1950), Majima Hidenori (b. 1960) and Takeuchi Satoru (b. 1960) and many others.<sup>3</sup> While their work was seen as accelerating and contemporizing *nihonga*, the supposed curatorial liberties in announcing a subsequent phase of *nihonga* aroused suspicion, and continue to do so.<sup>4</sup>

For many, recent work seems disingenuous, too malleable, akin to the way Rosalind Krauss wrote of sculpture in the late twentieth century, as “a display of the way a cultural term can be extended to include just about anything.”<sup>5</sup> By connecting the term *nihonga* to much recent painting it makes the recent work appear to have “gradually evolved from the forms of the past ... evoking the model of evolution” which appears to ‘authenticate’ recent work when in many ways a conservative conception of *nihonga* yearns for the specialization of the painter within a particular medium rather than the ironic or parodic uptake of particular themes in various media and formats.<sup>6</sup> The new

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<sup>2</sup> Noji Kōichirō, ‘Gendai bijutsu no naka no nihonga’, in *Nihon kin-gendai bijutsushi jiten*, p. 176.

<sup>3</sup> Noji, ‘Gendai bijutsu no naka no nihonga’, p. 176.

<sup>4</sup> Mitsui Tomoyuki, ‘[Nippon vs bijutsu] to ha ikanaru tenrankai ka’, in *Nippon vs bijutsu – kindai nihonga to gendai bijutsu: Taikan, Seihō kara Murakami Takashi made* (Osaka: Osaka Shiritsu Kindai Bijutsukan, 2006), p. 4.

<sup>5</sup> Rosalind E. Krauss, ‘Sculpture in the Expanded Field’, in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1986), p. 277.

<sup>6</sup> Krauss, ‘Sculpture in the Expanded Field’, p. 277. Krauss’s context here is of course

work, then, for its departures from the tradition, appeared to be a break with it, all the while engaging enough of the tradition for it to be seen, by some, as belonging to it.

Death and rebirth, destruction and reconciliation, are also part of the dialog recent *nihonga* artists have engaged. This is also part of the shift not concerning simply the renunciation of particular painterly values and subjects, materials and formats, but part of an institutional change from the submission of works to juried exhibitions to private dealer galleries. This revival of *nihonga* as a contemporary art form was contemporaneous with the demise of the authority of the conservative exhibiting institution, the *Nitten*, the largest art exhibition held in Japan, long on the decline in the decades following WWII. As art journalist and editor Shinkawa Takashi pointed out in a critique of the *Nitten* masquerading as the “vigorous development of contemporary art in Japan,”<sup>7</sup> “when I was a student, that is up until the end of the 1980s, the papers carried reviews of the *Nitten*, but it’s rare to see that now. Even journalists ignore it these days.”<sup>8</sup> It was not the case of course that the *Nitten* ceased to exist, but that it ceased to be important in representing contemporary art. While *nihonga* languished and atrophied in the public juried exhibitions, *nihonga* as a critical and relational term, in respect of recent work exhibited in private dealer galleries, has become evermore significant.

In what follows, I discuss four artists who were exhibited together as part of the *Zipangu* touring exhibition in 2011/2012, organized by the Imura art gallery, Kyoto, and the Mizuma Gallery, Tokyo. I do so to show the ways in which contemporary artists have been engaging *nihonga* and how they distinguish themselves in relation to it in ways that are often deeply historical, yet fundamentally superficial to the history of *nihonga* itself. The four, Aida Makoto, Yamamoto Tarō, Tenmyouya Hisashi, and Mise Natsunosuke, are offered as a spectrum of engagement, by no means exhaustive of the possibilities open to contemporary *nihonga*. The examples discussed here range in approach and tone from antagonism to parody to optimism.

### **Aida Makoto**

Aida is not generally understood to be a *nihonga* painter. He considers himself an outsider. As he explains:

People often misunderstand it, but what I majored in at my art university

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very different from my own, though I find her articulations amenable to the situations encountered in discussions concerning recent *nihonga*.

<sup>7</sup> Matsukage Hiroyuki et al., ‘Going to Nitten – A Journey to the Dark Continent of Japanese Art’, *Art It* (Winter/Spring 2004), p. 77.

<sup>8</sup> Matsukage, ‘Going to Nitten’, pp. 81-82.

was oil painting, not *nihonga* or Japanese painting. Rather, it was one of the themes I adopted intentionally when I started working in the field of ‘contemporary art’ ... I didn’t simply aim to criticize Japanese painting, but was rather interested, in various senses, in the Japanese national mentality of preserving a domestic sense of beauty or values in this era of globalization. What I intended in the series of ‘DOG’ was to condense and extract the delicate, tender but somewhat perverted taste of *Bijinga*, ‘painting of beautiful women’, a genre of painting around the beginning of the twentieth century.<sup>9</sup>

Aida is a provocateur and the type of Japanese aesthetic engagement he wants is as follows: “Sacredness and vulgarity, purity and impurity often coexist nonchalantly in modern – more precisely postwar – Japanese aesthetics. I believe I am not an exception in being influenced by such ‘broken aesthetics’.”<sup>10</sup>

Aida has a complex and often critical relation to *nihonga*, particularly in his *oeuvre* in the 1990s. He has, for example, taken part in discussion on *nihonga* with other painters in the journal *Bijutsu Techo* in their special issue given over to developments in contemporary *nihonga*<sup>11</sup> and he has often spoken aggressively of the idiom, noting that if *nihonga* is simply mineral pigments on Japanese paper then its already boring, or “sandpaper.”<sup>12</sup> He has also claimed that using mineral pigments in the present is like using Muromachi period (1392-1573) medicine to cure first-stage cancer.<sup>13</sup> Critical as he is, and mineral pigments he does indeed occasionally use, part of his denunciation is to clear the way for Aida’s own brand of *nihonga* (when he wants to pursue that kind of activity rather than in other work such as a revitalized war painting, sculpture or performance) in works he claims are not spurious. *Calcite and Cinnabar* (1993), for example, is created from mineral pigments and the traditional *nikawa* binding agent and even has its own inscribed *tomobako* – the accompanying box conventionally used to store hanging scrolls, though Aida’s is of a variant form. It is, the artist says, a piece of “genuine *nihonga*” because it is genuinely Japanese, aping the *Hinomaru* national flag and also the composition of the *bentō* box of rice with *ume*

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<sup>9</sup> Aida Makoto, *Monument for Nothing* (Tokyo: Graphic-sha Publishing Co. Ltd, 2007), p. 206.

<sup>10</sup> Aida, *Monument for Nothing*, p. 206.

<sup>11</sup> Aida Makoto et al., ‘Motto nihonga wo shiritai’, *Bijutsu Techo*, vol. 57 (2005), pp. 72-80.

<sup>12</sup> Aida Makoto, ‘Motto radikaru de are’, *Gendai nihonga no hassō*, (Tokyo: Musashino Art University Press, 2004), p. 126.

<sup>13</sup> Aida, ‘Motto radikaru de are’, p. 127.

(Japanese apricot) in the middle, and so the “staple food” of the nation.<sup>14</sup>

While the materials and subject matter of *Calcite and Cinnabar* are almost a pastiche of an essentialist definition of *nihonga*, Aida is aware that *nihonga* is not necessarily defined by its literal materials. Of *Untitled (a.k.a. Electric Pole)* (1990), he wrote that, “The stain at the pole’s bottom is dog pee. I made this work almost with water-thinned paint and didn’t use Japanese mineral pigments at all, but I believe it’s a highly genuine work of *nihonga*.”<sup>15</sup> Elsewhere he turns to subjects antithetical to what is taken to be part of the thematic core of *nihonga*, *kachō fūgetsu*, or the ‘beauties of nature’. For his thematic challenge he takes up cockroaches, owing to their jet-black look he thinks suited to traditional *sumi* ink painting, and weeds, natural motifs excluded for the most part from the tradition of *nihonga*.<sup>16</sup>

Aida is also concerned with the theory of the ‘death of *nihonga*’, claiming that the *Metsubō-ron*, when seen in contemporary subjects in art school graduation exhibitions such as themes like ‘Portrait of a Contemporary Family’ and other such attempts at elegant contemporary motifs, is not a thing of the past.<sup>17</sup> The *Metsubō-ron* (death of *nihonga*) emerged in the immediate aftermath of WWII particularly in the years between 1947-49 and concerned, in the onslaught of Western culture that ensued, the relevance of *nihonga* in terms of it being a shackled form of expression and its provinciality in a time of increasing internationalism. The debate resulted in new forms of expression in conservative *nihonga* exhibited in the *Nitten* and other public juried exhibitions, one being *A Path Between the Rice Fields* (1950) by Higashiyama Kaii (1908-1999), the path supposedly offering a way forward, an open blank road, indicating the way ahead for Japan after World War II. For Aida, however, that kind of direction was nothing but a dead end, and so he would parody it, painting his own work in Higashiyama’s style and putting a contemporary school girl in uniform in the foreground with her hairline parted in the middle as the precursor to the path between the rice fields. Whereas Higashiyama’s path became suffused in the middle distance, Aida’s path forward was crystallized in myopic detail with schoolgirl fetishism as the point of departure. Aida did a similar thing in *Do One Good Thing a Day (War Picture Returns)* (1996) where he adopted the theme and style of Hirayama Ikuo (1930-2009), a leading postwar *nihonga* painter and then president of the art school Aida graduated from, though the painting contains a number of complex references and motifs concerning war and peace, China and Japan, Japan’s Emperor and

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<sup>14</sup> Aida, *Monument for Nothing*, p. 209.

<sup>15</sup> Aida, *Monument for Nothing*, p. 207.

<sup>16</sup> Aida, *Monument for Nothing*, pp. 208-210.

<sup>17</sup> Aida, *Gendai nihonga no hassō*, p.128.

the postwar afterlife of a so-called war criminal.<sup>18</sup>

The conservative giants of post-World War II *nihonga* and *nihonga* itself, then, are something for Aida to parody and play upon. The *Metsubō-ron* immediately after WWII was not in a sense the fear of the death of *nihonga*, but the threat of obsolescence directed at the idiom and so a sense of crisis ensued that spurred new creative directions. Aida continues that threat in the present.<sup>19</sup>

### Yamamoto Tarō

Whereas Aida is antagonistic, making parodies of *nihonga* so that he can create his own version that is nonetheless historically engaged in particular ways, Yamamoto Tarō gives *nihonga* a subtly alternative reading. Yamamoto's style uses the same kanji characters but giving it the pronunciation *Nippon-Ga*, which he goes on to distinguish from his personal conception of *nihonga* proper (the kanji characters for 'Japan' may either be enunciated as 'nihon' or 'nippon'). Yamamoto claims that *nihonga* is too political a term for his own work, established as it was in the early 1880s in the Meiji period as a hedge against the onslaught of Western painting, and that 'Japanese painting' never existed before such a time.<sup>20</sup> The idea that 'Japanese painting' never existed is obviously problematic, but in that Yamamoto avoids *nihonga*, he skips over its entire history from the 1880s to the present and casts himself as a modern day *machi-eshi* or 'townsman artist'.<sup>21</sup> Effectively he positions himself as coming straight out of the Edo period (1603-1868) into the present, as the inheritor of the *Rinpa* school. To do so he has organized a *Nippon-Ga Screen Festival* during the *Gion* Festival in Kyoto where the locals show off their prized screens on the night before the main festival. Elsewhere he has made collaborative pottery following after the example of *Rinpa* painters Ogata Kōrin (1658-1716) and his brother Kenzan (1663-1743) in addition to painting stage sets for comic drama (*kyōgen*). One could say that Yamamoto's predominant aesthetic is one of the lavishly colored and decorative *Rimpa* school, though flush with both parody and admiration.

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<sup>18</sup> Aida, *Monument for Nothing*, p. 218.

<sup>19</sup> Thierry De Duve, 'The Mourning After', *Art Forum* (March 2003) at <http://artforum.com/inprint/id=4321>. Accessed 21/82013. The idea of the 'threat' presented to painting in modern and contemporary art, rather than death and rebirth, is taken from this source.

<sup>20</sup> Matthew Larking, 'The Present Representing the Past: *Nihonga* in the Expanded Field', *Orientalisms* vol. 40, no. 1 (2009), pp. 51-52.

<sup>21</sup> Yamamoto Tarō, *Nippon-Ga: New But Classical Japanese Art* (Seigensha Art Publishing inc, 2009), p. 113.

The way that Yamamoto distinguishes himself from *nihonga* is also historical, though idiosyncratic. *Nippon-Ga*, he says is “new but classical Japanese art,” “Art that expresses the present situation of Japan directly,” one that adopts a traditional Japanese style of humor, *kaigyaku*, and uses the traditional techniques, motifs and pictorial styles that *nihonga* itself inherited.<sup>22</sup> *Nippon-Ga* is different from *nihonga*, he says, as it is “restructured... from a modern point of view” and so conceived as an historical repertory from which he can pick and choose following his own pictorial inclinations.<sup>23</sup> For Yamamoto, present life in Japan is multilayered and chaotic. In Japan they build a Japanese-style *tatami* room in a modern condominium, spread blue plastic sheets under cherry blossoms, serve *tonkatsu* (pork cutlets) in both Japanese-style restaurants and in Western ones, have rice balls and sandwiches next to each other in convenience stores, pubs at which you begin with a beer and then move on to a *sake*, women who go to firework displays in summer *kimono* and men who go in t-shirts, and meals of bread for breakfast, pasta for lunch, rice and miso for supper.<sup>24</sup>

Yamamoto’s *Nippon-Ga* actually began, as he put it, about ten years ago as a kind of joke that gradually became his definitive form of painting. The rebranding as *Nippon-Ga* suggests something of the malaise of *nihonga* in contemporary art – that the new ways of painting and unconventional takes on traditional subjects are in fact distinct from more traditional forms of *nihonga*, and so it requires a new name.<sup>25</sup> Under a new name, there is less the perception of fraudulence, that new painting is not in the guise of something it really is not. The uncertainty of how Yamamoto’s painting and in what ways it is connected to *nihonga* is part of the essential experience of his art.<sup>26</sup> It is worth pointing out, however, that Yamamoto’s strategy of attempting to avoid *nihonga* because it is too political and then choosing *Nippon-Ga* instead is either naïve or sardonic: there is inevitably no way to avoid the national politics of Japan with a name like *Nippon-Ga*.

### Tenmyouya Hisashi

The art historian David Scott writes that, “tradition is not a passive, absorptive

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<sup>22</sup> Yamamoto, *Nippon-Ga*, p. 4.

<sup>23</sup> Yamamoto, *Nippon-Ga*, p. 4.

<sup>24</sup> Yamamoto, *Nippon-Ga*, p. 4.

<sup>25</sup> The idea that this kind of work began as a kind of joke was mentioned by the artist during his gallery talk during the *Zipangu* exhibition in Kyoto at the Takashimaya department store, in September and October, 2011.

<sup>26</sup> For a brief discussion of a concept of fraudulence in regard to recent art, see Rosalind Krauss, *Under Blue Cup* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2011), p. 19.

relation between past and present. Rather tradition presupposes an active relation in which the present *calls upon* the past,” and arguably it is most emphatically Tenmyouya Hisashi who has actively pursued this in relation to contemporary *nihonga*.<sup>27</sup> He has done this most recently in two distinct though interrelated ways. The first is through identifying a seemingly oppositional aesthetic long in evidence in Japanese art, though his take on it is highly contemporary and personal. He then uses this to position himself and other of his contemporaries as the current bearer of this aesthetic tradition, inserting himself in opposition to a conservative trend in postwar *nihonga*, all the while ignoring the various manifestations of avant-garde activity in postwar *nihonga*.

The position was first fully conceived in a ninety-page special issue of *Bijutsu Techo* in September 2009 that the artist supervised concerning the “Aesthetics of the outlaw” and followed with an exhibition titled *BASARA* in Tokyo over four days in early August 2010. The thrust of the activity was to create an aesthetic lineage which Tenmyouya could insert himself into in a way which he had earlier set out in terms of usurpation of artistic lineage in relation to Hasegawa Tōhaku (1539-1610) who had declared himself the fifth generation successor to Sesshū Tōyō (1420-1506) in order to compete with the ubiquitous *Kanō* and *Unkoku* school workshops of the Momoyama period (1573-1615).<sup>28</sup> Tenmyouya’s project is defined aggressively as a “Declaration of War”<sup>29</sup> and as a “tradition of ornate beauty” with a “rebellious nature” that “is to now spread subversion to a rigidifying Japan.”<sup>30</sup> Tenmyouya writes more specifically:

I like to use the term ‘BASARA’ to refer to the family of beauty that stands on the opposite end of the spectrum from *wabi sabi* and *zen*, splendor (excessive beauty) that is incompatible with *otaku* culture, and that with unprecedented beauty that flows with rebellious spirit. The term *basara* originally referred to social trends that were popular during the Nanbokucho Period (1336-1392), and people with an aesthetic awareness that wore ornate and innovative wardrobes and favored luxurious lifestyles. The term comes from one of the names of the 12 Heavenly Generals and originally means ‘diamond’ in Sanskrit. Just as diamonds are hard and can break anything, the term was taken to mean people that rebel against authority in attempt to destroy existing concepts and order. At the same time, they were persons with a superior aesthetic

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<sup>27</sup> David Scott cited in David Carrier, *A World Art History and its Objects* (The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2008), p. 27.

<sup>28</sup> Tenmyouya Hisashi, *Basara – Japanese Art Theory Crossing Borders: From Jomon Pottery to Decorated Trucks* (Tokyo: Bijutsu Shuppan-sha, Co., LTD, 2010), pp. 30-32.

<sup>29</sup> Tenmyouya, *Basara*, p. 9.

<sup>30</sup> Tenmyouya, *Basara*, p. 7.



sense that favored chic and flamboyant lifestyles in addition to elegant attire. Furthermore 'BASARA' art has continuously flowed through the channels of Japanese street culture, from the *furyu* of the Heian Period, the *basara* of the Nanbokucho Period, the *kabukimono* of the end of the Warring States Period, and the *kyokaku* of the Edo Period – being delivered on to modern times.<sup>31</sup>

*Basara* is, for Tenmyouya, an aesthetic connection to “the dynamic flow of history.”<sup>32</sup> The aesthetic is also a “struggle between authority and structure,” aspiring to achieve “nonstandard freedom.”<sup>33</sup> The aesthetic he discerns begins with *Jōmon* pottery, *kinpeki*-style paintings on sliding doors and screens, *kawari kabuto* helmets, Oribe *chawan* bowls, *ukiyo-e*, traditional Japanese tattoos, decorated trucks, graffiti, *gekiga* story comics, *agejo* (women working for hostess clubs), deco (decorative) culture,<sup>34</sup> mobile phone decoration, Takeshi Kitano films, street gangs and *pachinko* parlors among the other multiple references and sources of inspiration. The lineage culminates with himself and several other Mizuma Art Gallery artists such as Ikeda Manabu (b. 1973) and Yamaguchi Akira (b. 1969).

Fundamentally this lineage is a rehabilitation and further elaboration on Okamoto Tarō's (1911-1996) ideas and research on traditional Japanese art and his distinction between “‘Yayoi-like’ art characterized by grace and fine features, and ‘Jōmon-like’ art characterized by primitive roughness.”<sup>35</sup> Okamoto himself declared in 1948 that “art today must not be nice, it must not be pretty, it must not make you feel good,” and later in 1963 the artist declared, as in fact Tenmyouya is doing, “each of us must create our own tradition.”<sup>36</sup> Tenmyouya's aesthetic is also a reaction against the characteristic hallmarks of Japanese art and aesthetics offered by the art historian Yukio Yashirō (1890-1974), those of “impression, décor, symbolism and sentiment.” “Favor war in search of flowers – that is the aesthetic of BASARA” Tenmyouya says.<sup>37</sup>

The spirit of rebellion, eccentricity and ostentatiousness, once articulated, can then be set out as Tenmyouya's objection to the supposedly purified world of postwar *nihonga*. He inserts himself as part of the present end

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<sup>31</sup> Tenmyouya, *Basara*, p. 9.

<sup>32</sup> Tenmyouya, *Basara*, p. 9.

<sup>33</sup> Tenmyouya, *Basara*, p. 11.

<sup>34</sup> Tenmyouya, *Basara*, p. 11.

<sup>35</sup> Tenmyouya, *Basara*, p. 14.

<sup>36</sup> Okamoto Tarō cited in Thomas R. H. Havens, *Radicals and Realists in the Japanese Nonverbal Arts: The Avant-Garde Rejection of Modernism* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2006), pp. 75-77.

<sup>37</sup> Tenmyouya, *Basara*, pp. 14-15.

point in the pendulum swing from immediate postwar, de-Japanized *nihonga*, to Japanese fighting spirit in his recent painting. Responding to criticism of *nihonga*'s irrelevance as a contemporary art form in the postwar period, Tenmyouya locates the beginning of postwar *nihonga* attempting to forge a new persona for itself with Higashiyama Kaii's (1908-1999) *Michi* (1950):

a tranquil, innocent world rich with light and free of noise. It recreated the mental scenery of Japanese at the time, whom had just lost a war and were forced to start afresh. At the same time it is a piece composed of a simple layout showing a single path extending over and forward into a vast expanse of country fields. This could be also taken to symbolize the directional change in postwar Japan – from the 'Empire' of Japan to a modern 'de-Japanization'.<sup>38</sup>

The Higashiyama painting here is conceived as a continuation of Yokoyama Taikan's (1868-1958) *mōrōtai*, of thick pigments and a scorn shown for line and contour. In rejecting these, Tenmyouya sees that those "were the overall contours of *Nihonga*" in the postwar period to which he is to react against.<sup>39</sup> For Tenmyouya, the postwar subject matter of *nihonga* was neutral, internationalized and de-Japanized, and this set the course for postwar *nihonga* including works like Sugiyama Yasushi's (1909-1993) *Egypt* series and Hirayama Ikuō's (1930-2009) *Silk Road* series.<sup>40</sup> "Tacit expectations for beautiful images of Japan, the Japanese, and a completely innocent world placed significant limitations on *Nihonga*," Tenmyouya writes. "Excessive spiritual beauty... was established as a taboo."<sup>41</sup> Tenmyouya's work, then, represents the swing from early postwar purity and cultural complacency in *nihonga* to that of contemporary cultural self-absorption in a return to 'things Japanese'.

Tenmyouya's declaration of war has much in common with the way the *Zipangu* exhibitions of 2011/2012 were framed with strong national overtones. The second page, for example, opens to a sheet of *washi* paper with a little red dot in its center and so the *Hinomaru* flag and Japanese identity. Elsewhere in the essay by Mizuma Sueo, director of the Mizuma Art Gallery, discussion picks up on Japan's war engagement in the Russo-Japanese war, the Pacific War and praise for the rise of Japan after WWII where it became an economic power. Then Japan's monetary aid in the First Persian Gulf War is noted and the piece continues on to introduce Japan's societal problems in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries: "We want to restore a Japan that

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<sup>38</sup> Tenmyouya, *Basara*, p. 96.

<sup>39</sup> Tenmyouya, *Basara*, p. 97.

<sup>40</sup> Tenmyouya, *Basara*, p. 97.

<sup>41</sup> Tenmyouya, *Basara*, p. 97.

‘shines’ if not by politics then by economics, and if not by economics then the power of culture.”<sup>42</sup> Mizuma’s essay is far more wide-ranging than the above comments indicate though Tenmyouya’s practice is in many ways the pictorial manifestation of a resurgent and strong ‘national’ painting full over warriors, Japanese mythical beasts and characters, *kamikaze* planes and aggressively structured vehicles.

### Mise Natsunosuke

Aside from his quite radical visual product, Mise is in many ways a more conservative practitioner of *nihonga*. He writes, for example, that “I myself studied *nihonga* at the art university in Kyoto, frequented the shops selling *nihonga* painting supplies, submitted works to organization-sponsored exhibitions, and associated with *nihonga* dealers.”<sup>43</sup> He has also participated in the second Higashiyama Kaii Nikkei Japanese-style Painting Award in 2004, a prize to honor up-and-coming *nihonga* artists.<sup>44</sup> “From this experience I know there are certainly traditional conventions peculiar to Japan and that there is strong peer pressure, or pressure for conformity” he writes.<sup>45</sup>

To define his conception of *nihonga*, Mise appeals to an evolutionary linguistic model, writing that:

These days I sometimes read ‘nihonga’ as ‘nihongo’ (Japanese language). Like the Japanese language, *nihonga* has a different background from Western painting, and its vocabulary and grammar are different as well. The Japanese language is not understood outside Japan, but it has nuances that cannot be expressed in any other language. Likewise, there are techniques, water-based expressions, brush techniques, and the texture of *washi* paper that are distinctive of *nihonga*, as well as nuances that can be expressed only by *nihonga*. There is no meaning at all in slavish obedience to conventional values and techniques represented by the ‘flowers-birds-wind and moon’ (*kacho fugetsu*) type of painting. *Nihonga* is changing under the influence of the times in the same way that the Japanese language is. The Japanese spoken in Edo period (1603-1867) Japan was quite different from that spoken today. Even today the language spoken in the northeastern regions of Japan differs from that spoken in the southern regions. All I want to do is convey the nuances of my own way of painting *nihonga* (just as I would in speaking

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<sup>42</sup> Mizuma Suelo, ‘Thoughts on Zipangu’, in *Zipangu: 31 Spirited Artists Cutting Through New Territories of Japanese Art* (Tokyo: Seigensha Art Publishing Inc., 2011), p. 141.

<sup>43</sup> Mise Natsunosuke, *L’Estate in Inverno* (Tokyo: Hatori Press, Inc, 2010), p. 115.

<sup>44</sup> Mise, *L’Estate in Inverno*, p. 113.

<sup>45</sup> Mise, *L’Estate in Inverno*, p. 115.

Japanese).<sup>46</sup>

Mise's appeal is to an evolving conception of *nihonga*, one that changes with the times, for the time that knows it, and shifts from a generalizing trend of a language/artistic practice representative of the nation-state (Japan) to a more local definition – regional dialects and subsequent regional pictorial motifs. Much in Mise's painting is about memory and biography and he celebrates a certain provincialism in his pictures of Nara, place of his birth, and Tōhoku, his current area of residence, in contrast to the supposed nationalism of *nihonga*. "I am just a country painter with no political or financial power. And yet, I struggle and protest. The giants that appear in my paintings may be evil itself, here to destroy everything in sight, or perhaps saviors who will help build a new future," he writes.<sup>47</sup> Furthermore, and as he pushes his conception ever more narrowly from nation to province, he arrives at the subjective individual: "As far as I am concerned, however, since I am a painter more than a Japanese citizen, the criteria for evaluation of my own works resides within me.... In fact, evaluation criteria are something similar to god: they do not exist for those who doubt them, but exist as absolute for those who believe in them."<sup>48</sup>

Mise has also been deeply concerned with the reception of recent *nihonga*, his own included, saying, "some critics see this as the result of a pernicious movement by those who try to defend, cling to, promote, and take advantage of *nihonga*."<sup>49</sup> "The genre has always been questioned in terms of its durability, artistic expression, and its institutions."<sup>50</sup> Dispensing with the designation *nihonga*, however, is not something Mise conceives as being productive, even though he seemingly wanted to destroy the idiom in 2007 in the painting *Nihonga Destruction Theory* only to revive it in the same year with the work *Nihonga Restoration Theory*. "But, really," he writes, "the issue is not so simple that it would somehow be resolved by the abolition of *nihonga*."<sup>51</sup> "*Nihonga* will go on reviving over and over."<sup>52</sup> To elaborate on the way *nihonga* will revive, Mise has recourse to definitions of *nihonga* given by the critic Chiba Shigeo:

The first definition is 'Japanese painting' or 'painting in Japan', the second is 'traditional painting' prior to introduction of Western art, and the third is 'Japanese traditional-style painting after the Meiji era', or

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<sup>46</sup> Mise, *L'Estate in Inverno*, p. 117.

<sup>47</sup> Mise, *L'Estate in Inverno*, p. 112.

<sup>48</sup> Mise, *L'Estate in Inverno*, p. 116.

<sup>49</sup> Mise, *L'Estate in Inverno*, p. 115.

<sup>50</sup> Mise, *L'Estate in Inverno*, p. 116.

<sup>51</sup> Mise, *L'Estate in Inverno*, p. 115.

<sup>52</sup> Mise, *L'Estate in Inverno*, p. 115.

very modern painting derived from the idea of protecting traditions against westernization since the Meiji era – or rather in my opinion, the idea of creating new traditions.<sup>53</sup>

## Conclusion

The art historian Satō Dōshin has written that in the formation of *nihonga* in the late nineteenth century and thereafter, it had not been important to define the idiom, that it was important to leave *nihonga* free from definition.<sup>54</sup> What I have been attempting to show here, however, is that among contemporary *nihonga* or *nihonga*-related artists, it has indeed been central to define their relation to *nihonga* and so, in a sense, to define conceptions of *nihonga*: Aida, who is not a *nihonga* painter and who is antagonistic to the genre but who makes ‘genuine’ *nihonga* paintings; Yamamoto who skips over the entire history of *nihonga* but who redeploys the forms of *Rimpa* painting in the guise of a subtle re-reading of *nihonga* as *Nippon-Ga*; Tenmyouya who forcibly inserts himself into *nihonga* as the inheritor/creator of a long line of aesthetic transmission that is then set as reactionary to postwar *nihonga* conservatism; and Mise, who sees *nihonga* evolving along the line the way languages change according to the demands of the times. As he states, *nihonga* can develop “new traditions” as *nihonga* itself had been established as a ‘new’ tradition, created as it was in the late nineteenth century through the amalgamation of a variety of diverse and often antagonistic traditions, and then reformulated time and again by painters through to the present. The discourses surrounding these artists and art works taken up in this essay are in part, however, suspect of their achievements as part of the *nihonga* genre. Furthermore, the artists and artworks themselves are in fact disconnected to the broader history of postwar *nihonga* in particular, taking up only those aspects of it that are relevant to their contemporary reactions/departures/engagements, rather than developing affinities with a much more broad and complicated postwar *nihonga* art world and its relation to the various other postwar developments in the arts.

This approach, I suggest, seeks to preserve a certain simplicity, positing *nihonga* as a singular noun and a unified tradition when in fact *nihonga* is deeply plural and often not unified, as the historical record of paintings shows, if not dictionary definitions or essentialist claims based upon media such as mineral pigments and binding agents, formats, techniques and a seemingly circumscribed range of subjects. While it is crucial to enumerate critical distinctions between degrees of connection and disconnection to the genre of

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<sup>53</sup> Mise, *L'Estate in Inverno*, pp. 115-116.

<sup>54</sup> Satō Dōshin, [*Nihon bijutsu*] *tanjō – kindai nihon no [kotoba]to senryaku* (Tokyo: Kodansha Sensho Mechie, 1996), pp. 83-84.

*nihonga*, I would suggest much recent work is less a departure from *nihonga* proper than part of the continuity and ongoing transformation of the genre in the present based upon individualist aesthetics that was one of the hallmarks of early postwar *nihonga* groups and individuals such as those found in the Pan Real Art Association that formed from 1948, the Kera Art Association of the early 1960s and the various other avant-garde focused manifestations that ran their course through the latter half of the twentieth century.

Perhaps Michel Foucault's formulation can be of assistance here in speaking about the relation of some recent art to that of *nihonga* in the present:

To say that one discursive formation is substituted for another is not to say that a whole world of absolutely new objects, enunciations, concepts, and theoretical choices emerges fully armed and fully organized ... it is to say that a general transformation of relations has occurred, but that it does not necessarily alter all the elements.<sup>55</sup>

When one period comes to an end and another appears to have been inaugurated, here set out as the consonance of the demise of the authority of the postwar juried exhibitions such as the *Nitten* and the rise of *nihonga* in contemporary art since the mid-1980s, there will be composites of continuities and discontinuities, and some of these will even appear as 'anti-*nihonga*'. When *nihonga* came forth again in a newly revitalized form in contemporary art, it could not emerge owing to the circumstances and concepts of earlier periods and it could not have the same meanings. The negotiation of these new meanings, critical, contrastive and relational, define the *nihonga* tradition in its present state and suggest not that *nihonga* was initially to go without definition in origin and subsequent development, but that its definition is multiple, varied and under constant revision.

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<sup>55</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith (London: Tavistock Publications, 1972), p. 173.