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ART

Missing the light at 'Roppongi Crossing'

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SPECIAL TO THE JAPAN TIMES

[ARTICLE HISTORY](#) | OCT 16, 2013

I've always thought that the "Roppongi Crossing" exhibitions try too hard. They take themselves too seriously and usually end up missing the point. Held every three years at the Mori Art Museum, the shows bring together heavily curated selections of contemporary art in an attempt to take the artistic pulse of Japan.

The problem, however, is that the pulse is often deceptive or vague — or possibly the curators have their stethoscopes on the wrong part of Japan's artistic anatomy — with the result that they are tempted to resort to shock tactics.

This year, the artistic equivalent of applying an AED has been the decision to turn the curatorial thrust of the show over to a couple of foreign guest curators, Reuben Keehan from Australia and Gabriel Ritter from America, with a bit of guidance and localization from the Mori's own Mami Kataoka.

This is also the first "Roppongi Crossing" since the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake, and even though we've had our fill of shows that have reflected on that tragic event, you can't really expect an exhibition that takes itself as seriously as "Roppongi Crossing" to let that go by without comment, even if "reheating" these issues creates something of a cold pizza effect.

The combination of these factors is what gives the show its driving animus and character. The results are not pretty, aesthetically or spiritually, although they are interesting; but, alas, for the wrong reasons.

Although "Roppongi Crossing" has had its moments of beauty in the past, its eclectic nature makes aesthetic failure almost a given, something that featuring the earthquake could hardly help. The first thing that greets you is a vast wall of rubbish, rather like the detritus washed out to sea by the tsunami. Elsewhere there are lumps of artificial rock, paintings that jumble things together, and even a film of a mud hut built in the park nearby by tribal people from India.

More troubling than aesthetic shortcomings is the sense of spiritual colonization that derives from the museum's constant attempt to fit in with the global (i.e. Western) standard of "curatorial excellence" — typically a kind of iconoclastic deconstructive inversionism — funded by governments or vast corporations, which sets out to "challenge" the typically conservative sensibilities of the average person.

Given how dominant the bourgeois sensibility for pretty things is in Japan, a case could be made that what the Mori is attempting is vital, but my feeling is it tends to import too much of its artistic radicalism, as that's a safer option than trusting the indigenous variety.

This native radicalism is something the show's curators pick up on to some degree, although because of their distance from Japan and academic respectability it's something they've obviously picked up second or third-hand through academic literature. The result is that there's a bit of a time-lag effect, too, as we encounter the 1950s reportage surrealism of Hiroshi Nakamura and the 1960s cartoon Dadaism of Genpei Akasegawa.

The justification for these inclusions is that the Great East Japan Earthquake and the problems at the Fukushima No.1 nuclear reactor have effectively put Japan into a position where extreme action — cultural and political — is necessary.

Rather than using scientific reports and the existing political process, modulated by popular opinion and the press, Ritter believes that what Japan needs is a return to a kind of Dadaist critique. In the exhibition catalog, he proposes the idea of "nonsense as a critical framework linking Japan's postwar avant-garde with contemporary art practices in Japan," adding, "This narrative aims at foregrounding socially engaged, politically conscious work that openly questions the status-quo and the power structures that shape daily life in Japan."

In short, the message seems to be let's fight the chaos of quakes and bureaucratic incompetence with chaotic art. Such naive radicalism is almost touching. Museums have never been the arsenals of revolution, even in the 1960s heyday that Ritter seems to have in mind.

Akasegawa and Nakamura's art is entertaining and interesting, but looking at it, I couldn't help feeling I was somehow listening to Bob Dylan or the Beatles. Even much of the actual contemporary art has this kind of retro feel.

Yoshinori Niwa's video work was highly amusing. In "Proposing holding up Karl Marx to Japanese Communist Party" (2013), he visits the headquarters of the Japanese Communist Party and gently badgers the JCP about why, as a Marxist Party, they have expunged the name of Marx from their manifesto and much of their literature. Possibly, I found myself replying, because the JCP is more forward looking than the artist or the curators of this exhibition — all of whom seem locked into a Che Guevara T-shirt view of the world.

"Roppongi Crossing: Out of Doubt" at the Mori Art Museum, runs till Jan. 13; open daily 10 a.m.-10 p.m. (Tue. till 5 p.m.) ¥1,500. www.mori.art.museum (<http://www.mori.art.museum>)

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