

A Letter to Gen Hikage as a critical reflection on the artist

text by **Shinich Segi** (art critic, AICA JP)

Glancing through the various materials you sent to me for your solo exhibition, I was struck immediately by how well documented you are as an artist: your life, your work and the significant critical reaction you have received from the media over the years has all been recorded in meticulous detail. All artists ought to keep such good records but those who do are rarer than you might expect.

This time I had a chance to look back into your personal history and made quite a few discoveries. I will start this letter by discussing them.

I see you had your first solo exhibition in 1983 and then, a little later, in 1989, you made your first trip to America, which led to all of your current artistic activities as well as to your emigrating there in 1994.

What does all of this mean in regard to your artistic development? To answer this question it is useful first to make note of the year you were born, 1936. Considering the fact that most so-called postwar artists were born in the 1930's, I cannot help but notice that you started your artistic activity more than a full generation after them. From the end of the 1950's to the beginning of the 1960's that entire generation of artists fell victim to the "Informal whirlwind" and, almost simultaneously, the "Pop Art hurricane," which raided their collective ranks. Some of them left for the United States during this period or very soon afterwards.

You also discovered America and moved there – except a full thirty years after this cohort of post-war artists. This time-gap is interesting and I would like to make note of how you spent those intervening years, a period of your life that has been somewhat obscure to me up to this point.

Setting aside minor events, your first important achievement in these years was the fact that, in 1960, you were selected for Nissenbi (Japan Advertising Artists Club Exhibition). Looking back at the details of this popular exhibition, titled "The Dawn of Design," I find your inclusion at the young age of 24 to be great accomplishment. The numbers tell the story. The club, founded in 1950, started inviting entries for open competition with their 3rd exhibition, for which 121 works were selected from 677 entries. After that, the number of entries soared higher each year. The data is as follows: 1040 entries for the 4th exhibition, 1566 for the 5th, 1573 for the 6th, and 2128 for the 7th. All of these figures, however, pale in comparison to those for the 1960 exhibition, which attracted 4623 entries. Despite such odds, you, a novice designer, were selected to participate in an exhibition so competitive that even many professional designers failed to enter a work. Your entry was displayed beside those by star designers at the peak of their popularity.

The second important achievement is that in 1963 you entered Hosei University, graduating in 1967 with a specialization in philosophy, for which you wrote a senior thesis on verbalized contemporary culture observed from a critical viewpoint.

After graduating, not having found a job specifically in philosophy, you devoted yourself to working on erotic, comic-like illustrations of the kind usually considered of inferior rank in popular society. Yet, although on the surface you appeared to be this sort of illustrator, in fact you always retained the higher-level abilities of art direction and graphic design you demonstrated in the Nissenbi exhibition, following the generation of Ikko Tanaka or Tadanori Yokoo. Your interest in erotic illustration, meanwhile, shows that you were ahead of your time. You also attempted to make "independent picture" a form of painting and began, as I remember, to use the artist name "Gen Hikage" in 1971. Your trademark frog's eye angle, looking up at women from below, would be something that you carried into the future.

After these innovations, you gradually approached the world of fine art and, in 1983, had your first solo exhibition of paintings. An entry in your life's chronology, which you provided to me, states for the year 1981 (two years before this show) that "a new painting movement begins in New York and London." Clearly you seem to have known a lot about the world's leading artistic movements. You might say that your marathon race, in which you fell one and half cycles behind your contemporary artists, was run at a relaxed pace.

This brings us to the point where a painter was born. The path leading up to this point was, I think, quite outstanding. Particularly impressive was a comment on your graduation thesis by philosophy professor Yukiari Segawa (also a social critic under the pen name of Teiryō Fukuda), who called your thesis "the most enjoyable thesis I have ever read during my teaching career because it depends on sense yet uses logic to explain that sense." Given the fact that you made the professor say "enjoyable" instead of "excellent," I know right away that you are not a run-of-the-mill person.

Bringing this extended prolong to a close, let me talk briefly about the broad horizon you have developed in America, based in Brooklyn now for almost twenty years. Since your years in America have been so abundantly documented, it will suffice for me to make a few brief comments about your work.

First of all, one notices the almost total employment of the "fro's-eye" point of view, combined with very fine weather extending above, or an indoor room reflecting it, and clean, lucid air regardless of whether it is day or night. There is nothing impure, however acute the angle of the viewpoint might be, and yet anything intended to expose malignancies cannot be found. I think these qualities are completely exceptional.

It is already well known that your images are produced with the use of the most advanced photographic techniques. Yet this technique is integrated seamlessly into a similarly sophisticated technique of painting. Through this marriage of techniques your work arrives at true accomplishment.

At first your work appears simply to be something added to photographic-like images. This mistake is easy to make but the truth is far different. Though it is difficult to articulate precisely, if I may speak without fear of being misunderstood then I would describe what makes your work into paintings as "matière" in the true sense of the word. In this usage, the word "matière" need not remind us of Gogh or Fauvism.

In view of this point, I can clearly understand how your having applied yourself to various kinds of artisanal work before undertaking the high art of painting was, in fact, a significant benefit to your artistic development. Adding the "enjoyable philosophy" of your university days into this formative mix, we can begin to see the diverse influences that have created the Gen Hikage we know today.

I wish you success in the first ever-solo exhibition at the Ikeda Museum of 20th Century Art, the smallest but richest museum in Japan.