

## Report by Short Term Visitor 2004-5

*Andrea Tarsia, Head of Exhibitions & Projects at London's Whitechapel Art Gallery, visited Japan in February 2005, as a guest of the Japan Foundation. The following is his observation report.*

### Japan's Visual Arts continue to stimulate

Underground, over ground, in old Imperial palaces or domestic dwellings, by the sea or overlooking the whole of Tokyo from the 57th floor of one of the nation's tallest buildings, Japan's museums offer an extraordinary range of settings for the presentation and experience of art. While compared to the UK there are a relatively high number of private museums, the majority are operated at municipal, prefectural and national level, reflecting a widespread public commitment to the preservation and presentation of visual culture.

Amongst the privately run museums I visited are the Hara Museum of Contemporary Art, split between a converted, Bauhaus-inspired 1930s home in central Tokyo and the Hara Museum Arc in Shibukawa, which houses the museum's collection. The Tokyo building, besides mounting an interesting programme of temporary exhibitions, also houses specially commissioned installations sited in ancillary spaces. These range from Yasumasa Morimura's witty self-portrait in a glam-rock bathroom, a recreation of Yoshimoto Nara's studio as a site of work in progress and Yoshihiro Suda's single, wooden flower, unfolding out of the building's exposed pipe works. One of the most recent arrivals in the private museum sector in Tokyo is the Mori Museum, whose four imposing, interconnected 'white cube' volumes are enveloped by one of the most stunning panoramic views of the capital, in the recently completed Roppongi complex. An architectural survey from the 1950s to today, drawn from the collection of the FRAC Centre, Orléans and the Centre Pompidou speaks of an exciting multi-disciplinary programme that focuses on the broader spectrum of visual culture. Also in the private sector is the extraordinary Benesse Art Site, on the island of Naoshima, which comprises a number of different projects.

These include the Art House Project, a series of specially commissioned installations in and around the local town, which feature Tatsuo Miyajima's installation in a former Samurai guest-house; an immersive installation by James Turrell, that explores space and perception and is sited in a building designed by Tadao Ando; and a hill-top temple by Hiroshi Sugimoto, built in wood, stone and glass, that provides a powerful meditation on mortality and eternity.



21st Century Museum of Modern Art in Kanazawa

The Museum complex also includes Benesse House, which houses the collection of works by Hockney, Rauschenberg and Stella amongst others, and the underground Chi-Chu Museum, also built by Ando. An extraordinary work of art in its own right, Chi-Chu houses only three installations: by James Turrell, Walter DeMaria and a room dedicated to three of Monet's 'water lilies'. The overall effect points to the temple as a model in its evocation of the sublime.

The public sector, which saw a burgeoning creation of modern and contemporary art museums from the early 1950s, expanded dramatically in the 1980s, providing a breathtaking range of buildings, collections and programmes. Architecturally, both in the approach to materials and design and in the experiences they propose, they embrace the quintessentially modern and postmodern - from the Deco splendour of the Teien Art Museum, formerly an Imperial palace, to the sublime spaces of Yoshio Taniguchi's Toyota Municipal Art Museum or Kazuyo Sejima and Ryue Nishizawa's exploration of transparency and reflectiveness at Kanazawa's 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art.

These in part reflect the museum's immediate surroundings, while in other places long corridors that cut through the entire museum allow visitors to see straight through it; elements that are intended to convey architecturally a sense of integration with and openness to the museum's community. Inside, the galleries are not arranged as a series of conventional, linear spaces but rather as discrete rooms, organised around a series of inner 'courtyards'. Like a town within a town, visitors are encouraged to wander from space to space, devising their own paths throughout the museum.



Hill-top temple by Hiroshi Sugimoto, Benesse Art Site, Naoshima

The economic downturn that succeeded the 'bubble' economy has meant that many museums now face deregulation, with some uncertainty as to their future roles. For the time being they continue to mount ambitious exhibitions that chart recent developments in contemporary practice and review key artists and movements in 20th century art. Among the most interesting surveys on show during my visit was *Traces*, on tour from Kyoto to Tokyo's National Museum of Modern Art, which explored performative actions and gestures in object-based works made between the late 1940s and 1970s, bringing together artists such as Pollock, Fontana, Morris, Lee U Fan, Hitoshi Nomura, Shimamoto Shozo and Jiro Takamatsu among many others; as well as Yayoi Kusama's comprehensive retrospective at the National Museum of Modern Art in Kyoto. Contemporary exhibitions included Yukiko Nishiyama's first major solo exhibition at the Osaka Contemporary Art Centre. Recently moved from the city's outskirts to a government building that includes the local Passport office, the venue provides an apposite context for Nishiyama's explorations of individual and collective identities as fleeting and mutating. A number of solo and group exhibitions focused on contemporary photographic practice. Among them were Yuki Onodera's symbolic, poetic and visually ambiguous portraits or snapshots of the everyday made strange, which possess a semi abstracted quality derived from digital manipulation, attention to surface and use of different types of paper (on show at the National Museum of Modern Art in Osaka). A large survey of women artists as the Museum of Contemporary Art in Tokyo included Tomoko Sawada's witty self portraits in a variety of guises, from shy school girl to rebellious teenager or wanton geisha, while Kawasaki City Museum's excellent survey *Sitegraphic*, brought together three generations of photographers focusing on urban and rural landscape.

It would be almost impossible to summarise contemporary Japanese practice, especially as most artists share in an international dialogue that looks beyond national boundaries and reflect a wide-ranging set of interests and influences. However, a few elements that struck me included an emphasis on landscape - traditionally a dominant genre - today played out on a personal, psychic level or expanded to include architectural and social environments, often in event-based works. The role of technology is most obviously felt in a strong emphasis on new media, which are born of conceptual and self-reflexive impulses, an adaptation of popular vernaculars or socially engaged forms of activism. More broadly, its influence is reflected in depictions of fragmented, technologised bodies, or of the world marked by fragile links with reality. The influence of contemporary popular culture is, of course, most notably played out in references to Anime and Manga, which at their best combine reflections of contemporary experience with traditional genres. Finally, the distinction between arts and craft are constantly blurred, and take on particular relevance in a culture which, until the Meiji Restoration, did not distinguish between these forms of cultural production, believing instead in the artistic potential in all elements of life.

*Andrea Tarsia, Head of Exhibitions & Projects, Whitechapel Art Gallery, London*