



THE ARTIST HIDEO

No one survives a holocaust unscathed. Even if the body comes through without a scratch, mind, and spirit are forever changed. Such traumatic witness can cripple some, but it can liberate others, providing them with a sense of community, mission, even vision. The very foundations of human society, of human existence, after all, have been exposed as fragile, fleeting, and much less secure than they are supposed to be. When the disaster one lives through, moreover, is brought on -invented -by humans, life can seem not just small and

absurd, but foolish and contrary. No wonder the Second World War, with its mass and calculated destructions, spawned the existentialist worldview. And no wonder that Japanese art, bearing testimony until today to the terrible miracle of nuclear fission, has reflected so acutely the conundrum voiced by Samuel Beckett, "Can't go on; must go on."

Hideo Sakata couldn't go on, so he went on. At the age of nine, he saw the light -the "thousand suns" of the atomic bomb igniting over his native Nagasaki. Fate spared Sakata's life, and even his health, but put him forever after at the service of some higher purpose. The explosion recurs in his art as a warning and as a celebration; and human frailty and the finality of death - the grave profundities you would expect such a momentous event to aver so indisputably -are at once reaffirmed and subverted by the com positional formats and elements in which Sakata contextualizes that blast.

An orb or sliver of bright (or, on occasion, deep, haunting blue) light does not always appear in the dark, narrow band running vertically through Sakata's recent paintings; but whenever it does, it represents that bomb's bursting in-air. Even where there is no hovering glow, the impact resonates through the surrounding aether, shivering the otherwise placid planes of lightly colored, lightly textured space on either side of the band of darkness. At first glance, those planes had seemed to be compressing the band. At second glance, they had seemed to be parting to reveal a distant space, like doors slowly opening onto the nighttime sky. But when Sakata's real metaphor is understood, these blandly empty areas read as regions of metaphysical portent; the streak they surround, however nocturnal and eruptive, is, in fact, the realm of gross human experience, and that infernal concussion only a single event.

In fact, Sakata is wont to balance that event with other events within the slim pictorial confine. Other shadows flicker. Other, more benign loci of energy, even of hope, dawn beside, around, below, even instead of the bomb blast. That curious curve of light which appears sometimes towards the bottom of the strip, for instance, refers to nothing more, or less, significant than an individual's buttock. This manifestation of a human secondary sexual characteristic, conjuring pleasurable sensations, evoking love, and inferring the continuation of the species, not only contradicts but mocks the dire power of the bomb. At the same time, its orbital form echoes that of the explosion (in Sakata's vocabulary, at least). The two things begin to mirror each other in the dialectic of sex and death, of procreation and annihilation. The ferocity of the blast can even be comprehended as the ferocity of passion on a macrocosmic scale. Indeed, atomic fission can itself be understood as a naturally occurring phenomenon "on a solar scale, that is," as natural as are the urges of mammals.

Natural, perhaps, but barely controllable. The sexual urge (especially as it has manifested itself in the social realm) is a genie let out of the bottle eons ago. The power of the atom is a genie released in our own era. Does Sakata imply that the newer genie ought to be re-bottled -that nuclear power cannot serve humankind? Not really; but he does remind us of its volatility. And we are reminded thereby of sex's own resound, of its enduring impact on our lives (an impact which only increases, as phenomena such as the population explosion, the sexual revolution, and AIDS confirm). Sakata's paintings - and, in a lighter, more circumspect way, his much more painterly (and, with their strong flavor of Sumie, more obviously Japanese) drawings - at once laugh at and cringe before the two universes we know, the natural universe and the human universe. All Sakata's art assures us is that these two universes exist, somehow, each within each other.

Peter Frank - Los Angeles