

Above and beyond the hyphenated identity: the Tomokazu Matsuyama mash-up
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Bicultural vision. Duality. An artistic practice at the intersection of American and Japanese cultures and histories. These are the phrases that are often used to describe the highly stylized, colorful aesthetic world of Japanese artist Tomokazu Matsuyama. While these phrases aptly describe Matsuyama and his singular vision as an artist, it is necessary to probe deeper to understand Matsuyama's true goal in positioning himself as a cultural filter to his intended audience.

While Matsuyama is best known for his painting, he has a varied artistic practice. In putting forth his own vision of the world, he effectively selects his medium; at times, it's fiber re-inforced plastic, created in highly desirable sculpture editions, and at other times, it's *objets* of contemporary material culture, including limited edition snow globes created in collaboration with the Standard Hotel (2012), Be@rbrick toys (2010), and Le Sport Sac bags (2009). The intended location of his work also varies—from large-scale triptychs in museum collections to smaller-scale murals on the walls of Brooklyn bars. In making his work available in various situations and to different audiences, Matsuyama makes his work accessible to the public, some more so than others. The imagery within his work appears to aid in such user-friendliness; figures seemingly identifiable as riders on horseback, ladies clad in robes, and mythical beasts co-exist in an explosive burst of color and patterns. Added to this mix are icons of American popular culture such as the globally recognized trademarks of commercial products.

While Matsuyama's work seems accessible—an artful mix of signifiers that include a *bricolage* of elements stereotypically considered “Japanese” or “American”—Matsuyama attempts a slightly more layered process of deconstruction and reconstruction

for a sophisticated cosmopolitan audience. After all, having a hyphenated identity—such as “Japanese-American”—is a constant struggle between acknowledging one’s heritage, or self-awareness thereof, and understanding how elements of such identity are interpreted (or misinterpreted) by those around you. Okakura Kakuzo, arbiter of Japanese arts and crafts to Boston society at the turn of the 20th century, and one-time Curator of Oriental Art at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, took the approach of performing a certain breed of exoticism. Entertaining but not threatening, enlightening but not challenging, Okakura extolled the historical lineage of Japanese Tea-ism and the unique characteristics of the culture that engendered this art. In contrast, Matsuyama selects certain elements from Japanese and American cultures, and by artfully translating such images, identifies the liminality between these cultures to his audience.

Matsuyama’s work is a necessary product of its time, and the unique environment in which Matsuyama lives and creates in New York; in today’s globalized world, where some have the possibility to migrate and live in areas with a convergence of cultures, Matsuyama and his work exemplify the difficulty in seeking a “pure” and “authentic” understanding and portrayal of a particular culture.

Matsuyama has mentioned that one of the common misconceptions about his work and his artistic practice is that he is merely reinterpreting Japanese culture. In fact, his goals are not to prove that he explores “Japanese” themes based upon his “Japanese” identity; instead, his artistic practice focuses on a variety of visual dialects—both stereotypically Japanese and non-Japanese—to provide a uniquely Matsuyama-n lens through which to portray the contemporary culture found in such melting pots as New York City. Doing so is specific to the *zeitgeist* for an audience that is ready to receive

and re-transmit such visual and cultural mash-ups. As an aesthete, tastemaker and impresario of cool, therefore, Matsuyama has a strategically directed artistic practice.

With a sculpture such as *Bon Voyage* (2012, p____), Matsuyama sends us off on an exploration of an object with certain identifiable Japanese and American cultural elements. This sculpture takes as its source material a wooden sculpture of unknown hand, most likely created during the Meiji period (Fig. 1). Standing about 24 inches tall, the older sculpture likely depicts *Tamonten*, one of the Four Celestial Guardians from the Buddhist pantheon. *Tamonten*, whose name literally means “one who hears many things,” is an all-knowing and powerful deity who protects the righteous and is a patron to warriors – commonly shown holding a *stupa*, symbolizing a small house of treasures to be shared with the worthy, and a halberd, a long axe used as a weapon. Matsuyama’s “collaboration” with the sculptor of the wooden version was actualized through an ingenious mix of current technology and artisanal craftsmanship. The wooden version was first scanned with a 3-D scanner, and then converted into a CAD file. Engineers constructed a solid polyurethane Ren Shape, double the size of the wooden version, and Matsuyama sculpted the details by hand. The exterior of the entire work is coated in polyurethane auto paint, customarily used on luxury automobiles, and the inner core of the sculpture and its halberd boasts gold leafing.

Prominently, Matsuyama’s sculpture features the “I ♥ NY” icon penetrating his chest area, proudly (or ironically) displaying allegiance to a graphic identity that has become so universal that its brand has become diluted. Purist pre-modern Japanese art enthusiasts may initially be insulted by Matsuyama’s borrowing of Buddhist iconography. Moreover, the simplest analysis of this work may lend itself to a discussion of a mere merging of a

stereotypical Japanese image with an iconic American brand identity. However, Matsuyama's sculpture results in a surprising confluence of elements that gives the work multiple ambiguous meanings. In traveling multiple decades and geographical regions, Matsuyama's sculpture is neither a mere comment on American banality and commercialism, nor a response to Japan's debatably survivalist history of adopting and adapting Western elements. It serves as a catalyst for the viewers' interpretation of the global context in which they find themselves; in a true *bon voyage* moment, the work allows those who live in cosmopolitan spaces to reflect on their own roots as filtered by their own surroundings.

The triptych *Toys and Candy* (2010-2011, p____) is representative of one vein in Matsuyama's current painting practice. Painted in acrylic and mixed media on canvas, the triptych features a dark sky background filled with powdery snow. In the foreground, people engage in various forms of play—males on horseback chasing each other with giant plastic squeaky hammers, a person waving his team's flag emblazoned with a teddy bear logo, one person running away from laser beams and another falling down, and two people in the background perhaps playing tag—with ephemeral items indicative of youth culture, including baseball caps, toy guns, a turned over piggy bank, a *Game Boy*, a toy car and candies. As discussed in past analyses of his work, Matsuyama's painting style is a multi-step process, beginning with an abstract and painterly underlayer, upon which he paints over certain areas in solid color or patterns. The patterns visible on the garments in *Toys and Candy* range from a Nike logo proverbially proclaiming "Just Do It" (although the "it," like the best of aspirational branding, remains ambiguous), to a funky all-over pink flower print as likely to appear in fast fashion retail clothing as well as in

couture collections, and a green plaid print on one person's trousers. Matsuyama has mentioned that he employs plaid, not just because it is used in contemporary fashions, but because the textile was actually in use in Meiji-period Japan.

The source material for Matsuyama's triptych is a *ukiyo-e* print created in Meiji 24 (1894), by Utagawa Nobukazu (1872-1944), and is titled *Great Victory at Pyongyang* (Fig. 2). Utagawa's original, also in triptych form, features a gory battle scene from the Battle of Pyongyang, a seminal land battle in the First Sino-Japanese War (between Japanese forces and Qing China). While the *ukiyo-e* piece may have been created for nationalist war propaganda purposes, Meiji *ukiyo-e* had started to incorporate Western artistic techniques, including perspective. Representing a dark and often silenced imperialist moment in Japan's history, the *ukiyo-e* source would seem to pose problems for Matsuyama to bridge into his own work. However, while Matsuyama manages to stay faithful to the composition of Utagawa's work, he contemporizes its subject matter, setting and tone. By using signifiers of contemporary youth culture, Matsuyama creates entry points of accessibility for his audience. By removing the menacing overtones of imperialist history, Matsuyama has created his own version of not-so-distant, yet slightly surreal history painting. Yet, even if the viewer does not realize that *Toys and Candy* has a direct compositional reference, she cannot help but subtly sense a nostalgic specter, whether in the form of a throwback to actual moments in military history or an internal reflection of one's own childhood memories.

Matsuyama most certainly bridges dichotomies, but that is neither his most complex challenge nor his greatest feat. Remaining in a certain uncomfortable place that is between and among cultures, Matsuyama effectively positions himself as an interpretive

filter of cultural elements and visual themes. Ripe to create a uniquely mediated version of hybrid culture as a contemporary artist who just happens to be Japanese, Matsuyama no longer needs to perform difference, but actualizes difference. However, the brilliance of his work perhaps lies in the fact that the complex theoretical undercurrents remain layered and hidden, like the layers of paint on his canvases; the seeming simplicity of Matsuyama's cultural mash-ups prove his instinctively personal yet thoughtfully strategic response to the contemporary times he inhabits and hopes to share with his audience.