

Letter from Tinseltown: The Noble Lie

“The illusion of freedom will continue as long as it’s profitable to continue the illusion. At the point where the illusion becomes too expensive to maintain, they will just take down the scenery, they will pull back the curtains, they will move the tables and chairs out of the way and you will see the brick wall at the back of the theater.”

— Frank Zappa

Whether to live in Tokyo or live in Los Angeles – it didn’t make much difference. Either way, leaving a small island and going to an unfamiliar land meant taking a plane. The extra ten plus hours of flight-time would pass anyhow while dreaming in the cabin. Having grown up in a town that had a U.S. military base, maybe it was only natural that I would choose America as the place to explore my past and my future. It was 1986. Fifteen years since the U.S. returned Okinawa to Japan, ending twenty-seven years of occupation. In the town where I arrived, it was the year the band, Black Flag, broke up.

Eventually, I started studying at a small college in the suburbs, majoring in architecture without any clear plan. Little by little, I started falling behind and drifted into art solely from a desire to slack off from my studies. I might have been a slacker, but I was still realistic enough to think it would be impossible to make a living from art.

From the late 1980s to the early 1990s, when I began to study art, New York was still the center of the contemporary art world. The academism of New York was shaping the history and context of modern art and in terms of the market, the price of contemporary artworks was being kept under control. The first wave of ‘political correctness’ was drawing closer to educational institutions even in Los Angeles, out in the farthest reaches of the West Coast. I felt suffocated by the superficial ‘correctness’ behind which a hypocritical message lay hidden. Besides this, I was confronted by the horrific scenes of the First Gulf War that were broadcast day in day out. These were my companions as I continued to spend my days in uneasy contemplation, searching for my aim in life under the unreal, perfectly transparent blue skies of Los Angeles. I remember being asked the same question many times around then. Why are you studying art in Los Angeles, where there’s nothing, and not New York, the center of the art world? Of course, I didn’t have any counterarguments or answers. I was drifting, not even understanding why I was there.

1992. The year widespread riots took place, and state military tanks overran the city. A large-scale exhibition, Helter-Skelter: L.A. Art in the 1990s, took place at the annex of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles. It took place when most of the participating artists were still local – Mike Kelley, Paul McCarthy, Jim Shaw and Raymond Pettibon. Chris Burden was probably the only internationally recognized

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artist back then. While art brimming with political correctness was being sent out into the world from New York, I saw firsthand the attitude of artists who said what they were really thinking using quick-witted slang, whose twisted jokes were a form of resistance. Not that I understood their work at the time. In their untamed, rough-hewn works, there was an all-embracing interest in everything under the sun, God and Satan commingled, which intersected seamlessly with the boredom of the everyday – I’d been grabbed roughly by the collar and had my legs kicked out from under me. I had continued to stay in this land. The idea that had been drifting somewhere out of reach for so long gradually became a part of my consciousness. And after a few years, I was able to think of it as a necessity.

In 1993, Frank Zappa passed away. In 1994, Kurt Cobain committed suicide. In 1995, Jerry Garcia died. One after another in close succession. Sun Ra died the same year as Zappa – 1993. In 1997, it was Allen Ginsberg and William Burroughs, who had continued to be highly influential forces in American art, and Timothy Leary the previous year. Considering their excessive lifestyles, it’s somewhat surprising that these writers lived so long.

With the rise of Apple computers and the internet that followed, the music industry was swallowed up by significant capital. What little of the underground scene had survived was gradually subsumed and vanished.

In 2002, when the global economy began to be promoted in order to overcome the downturn of the ‘90s, my path as a professional artist began to open up at last. I was invited to join the gallery in Santa Monica that represented many of the artists who had shown at the Helter Skelter show. The dream that I had chased for ten years finally came true. However, most of the artists I admired had moved to the gallery next door. Even so, there was friendliness and camaraderie amongst these artists, who ranged from John Baldessari and Ed Ruscha, all the way to artists of the younger generation. Although I had always felt like an outsider, I found a sense of belonging amongst them that was a world away from alienation. When I think of how the community is now being broken up by the massive influx of capital, I see how precious that period was.

A mildly glitchy democracy gradually replaced the American national religion, Protestantism. Churches and ministers had disappeared. As if to take their place, the public began to seek salvation from those agents called “experts,” who were involved with the media. The gears of the capitalist machine started to accelerate, spinning out of control. As a result of the Federal Reserve’s program of quantitative easing on a phenomenal scale – an act of destruction undertaken in the name of salvation – imaginary wealth has inflated to bursting point.

It has already been eight years since the passing of Mike Kelley, who laid the foundations of the Los Angeles art scene for the last three decades, and twenty-seven years since the passing of Frank Zappa in the field of music. Those everyday conversations

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interspersed with humorous and intellectual slang are increasingly being eroded by a vortex of superficially articulate-sounding General American English. Now the second wave of political correctness, this time global in its scope, has washed over society at large. It has callously swallowed up even those artists who had been determined to cast a critical eye on and turn away from the entire situation. The scenario that Plato had feared, in which art would be used as a weapon in the name of social justice, is taking place. All while we remain unaware. It has probably spread to many cities around the world already. History spirals as if continuing the old rhymes, repeating itself again and again.

As an artist with an awareness of threat akin to that of an animal in the wild, it's impossible to believe unquestioningly in expressions such as "freedom of speech." For such phrases are premised on a "healthy" democracy. If the premise is faulty, there is a risk that this innocent aspiration will paradoxically remain dependent on the state. Or if not, it should at least be prepared to get caught up in someone else's immediate agenda, used up and thrown away. Since human beings are imperfect, isn't it always obvious that the state they have created, and even its laws are bound to be flawed?

This is the city of Tinseltown, Hollywood. Behind the façade, a town where artificial dreams are ceaselessly churned out. To tread on the fragments of those coarse-grained, noble lies, scattered amongst the giant props abandoned in some back alley. Having no choice but to observe reality dispassionately without illusions. This must have been the fate of the artists of this place. Turning toward the clear-cut shadows cast by the sunbeams that blaze down from the blue sky, searching for the particles of light that move unceasingly, and looking straight at the sunspots of the burning sun. There, a forge existed — a place where image and afterimage were made to cross and recross, where truth was a plaything.

Thirty-four years have passed since I moved to this town on the opposite shore of the Pacific from Japan – neither rural nor urban, an endless flat sprawl. Looking back, if I hadn't had the opportunity to encounter the artists of various kinds who share their lives with this town, the ground-rules and approach, the manner in which I engage with art would probably have been completely different.

I would like to express my gratitude for the opportunity to present my work in Tokyo, with a focus on my past series.

Kaz Oshiro
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