

## **YAMATAKA EYE**

**by Oliver Watson**

For Yamataka EYE I'm glad to say, that rather than shoot their Andy Warhol his most fanatical obsessives chose only to steal the works of an entire exhibition, Ongaloo, while in storage in Tokyo in 2006. A bizarre string of events that ended in the return of all the works, some in person (plus gifts of pornography and suicide note) to the artist's remote dwelling in Nara not long after the news had flashed across television and internet. Be it a local, isolated incident and a catch-penny anecdote I excuse its mention only for the purpose of demonstrating the level of intense fascination this singular artist inspires.

Known most widely as a musician, EYE's musical releases are counted in triple figures and include more than twenty releases with the group Boredoms, acclaimed pioneers of modern *noise*, formed by EYE and ex-Hanatarash members in 1986. Something particular about the long standing and efficient networks for distributing underground music have enabled EYE to maintain a far reaching influence and notoriety whilst never having made obvious appearances on mainstream-radar. Noteworthy is the artist's reluctance to visit Tokyo - Japan's cultural center and capital - preferring the detachment offered by rural Nara where he lives and works. A general disregard for attention has only increased the artist's allure and aroused curiosity. More so than ever EYE's physical creations are being disclosed by publishers and galleries. Initially brought into circulation as cover-art for his musical releases, these works given free reign in 3D space have developed into sprawling installations that combine collage, drawing, fabric, clothing, found object and sound.

Interviews with EYE reveal the extent to which sound and vision are for him inseparable and give insight into his artistic praxis. The invention in his minds eye of cover-art apt to a passing sound is routine and involuntary. Similarly, striking scenes are for him an album-cover for which an imagined sound replaces ambient noise. These personal moments when sound and vision synthesize are a daily occurrence, and at times powerful and moving experiences. Most inspiring for him are naturally occurring perfection of form in nature and the idiosyncrasy of assemblages created out of human nonchalance toward design. Respectively he cites as examples, Yakushima (a world heritage site in Japan), and backwater 100 yen stores (the Japanese equivalent of a pound shop) to which his chaotic installations pay homage. For EYE objects in the natural world have sounds that change when they are interfered with, the act of making artworks becomes a musical experience whereby as he cuts and pastes he is changing the sounds of his materials and being energized in the process, working towards the creation of a scene that one takes in with ones whole being. When looking at intense assemblage of this kind we experience initial moments of cognitive paralysis. Similar to moments during which the human eye is tricked by an object of

undeterminable distance - the time it takes our brain to position what we are seeing. This is when collage does its real work; before we recognize individual elements, depart the world of the sensory and enter the cognitive. If we can sustain the initial state long enough we may get close to receiving EYE's installations as they are intended.

EYE's distinct brand of collage, a fundamental element in his oeuvre, displays a command and advancement of a foreign aesthetic belonging to D.I.Y. cover-art of the American underground. Cover-art of a certain strain being the stimulus for the development of a unique visual universe based primarily on vernacular techniques that according to Shinro Ohtake are rooted in the modern Japanese psyche. The cutting and pasting that is at the core of EYE's process is for Ohtake (the 'cut and paste' master of Zen Kai Retrospective 1955-2006 an exhibition of nearly 2,000 works held at Tokyo MOCA in 2006), "something completely different from the usual understanding of collage... an instinctive sensibility that doesn't exist in the west"(1). He suggests that we might be on the wrong track by defaulting to the word collage to describe the art of Japanese artists working with found imagery, that a vernacular tendency for pasting things on has been overlooked. Something that came to him when "print club automatic photo sticker machines came out in the mid-1990s (and) high school girls put them on everything they owned." (2)

In Yamataka EYE the artist, we find no conscious bondage to art with a capital 'a' of Western cannons nor the Japanese traditional or contemporary schools, neither is there a native self-consciousness. Instead we see a processing of foreign aesthetics by way of a contemporary native vernacular technique in the creation of autonomous material free of inherited art wisdoms. It is difficult art to place and offers a zone of clearance from which to begin a new understanding of contemporary Japanese art practices. On these grounds EYE could be the sort of Japanese artist called for by critic Chiba Shigeo, one who makes "art that differs from both the Japanese traditional mode and the Western canon... an appropriate blend of the Western and vernacular" (3) and what's more he is not alone. Why we have not seen more work like it crossing international borders so far could be to do with its antipathy to the values endorsed by the Super-Flat school, which endures into the present as Japan's popular art export. We can only hope that Ongaloo's first showing in the UK offers foreign audiences a fresh perspective of contemporary art practices in Japan and that more will follow.

(1), (2) Shinro Ohtake, *idea*, 319.

(3) Shigeo Chiba, *Bijutsu as Genus*, *ibid.*, p. 389

Oliver Watson, 2008  
Editor and Creative Director of PAPERBACK  
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