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So what then was 1968 all about?

American couple Bradley McCallum and Jacqueline Tarry probe historical events with art

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For over a decade, artist-in-residence programs have been held by myriad organizations throughout Japan, all with roughly the same objective: to provide a unique and mutually enlightening experience for the both visiting artist and host. One of the latest residencies held at Tokyo Wonder Site might go the closest yet to attaining that goal.

News photo

Artists Bradley McCallum and Jacqueline Tarry EDAN CORKILL PHOTO

Since 2006, American artists Bradley McCallum and Jacqueline Tarry — partners in work and life — have been creating a series of works called "Whitewash." The pieces consist of black and white paintings based on iconic news photographs from the American civil rights movement of the 1950s and '60s. Over the paintings, the artists hang a layer of silk fabric on which they have printed the original photograph.

"The photographic layer forms a factual layer, and the painting forms an interpretative layer," explains Tarry. Importantly, the two never match perfectly, because the photograph is slightly larger than the painting.

As well as providing a neat metaphor for the gap between interpretation and reality — particularly when famous events are involved — the works also show how interpretations change with time. As McCallum points out, "the work itself doesn't move — only the viewer does, as they attempt to examine it."

"Whitewash" has been received well in the United States, where it arrived in time for both the 40th anniversary of Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination and Barack Obama's election. The really interesting thing, however, occurred when McCallum and Tarry came to Japan — as part of a six-week residency at the metropolitan government's Tokyo Wonder Site facility at the end of last year. The works they made in Japan are now on display at TWS's Shibuya gallery.

Applying the same methodology as their Whitewash pieces, McCallum and Tarry set about sorting through photo archives at Japan's biggest newspapers, looking for pictures from 1968, a key year for the artists as it was when King was killed. The Japan Times archive was one of those they searched.

"It was amazing to go through these boxes of old photos," McCallum says. "You can turn over the photos and see the notes by the photographers and printers."

News photo

A civic wash: Bradley McCallum and Jacqueline Tarry's work "Japan Waterspray," based on a 1968 image from The Japan Times photo archive TOKYO WONDER SITE

Even more surprising was the content of the pictures: student protests, hoards of baton-wielding and helmet-wearing police, demonstrators being doused with high-powered hoses.

The project really became fascinating, says McCallum, with the "discovery that there was this parallel youth activism, this vision, that was taking place in Japan as it was the world over."

A quick qualification: Japan Times readers are hardly likely to share McCallum's surprise in learning that this country experienced a wave of activism in the late 1960s and early '70s. Far from it. Some of our readers lived through, even participated in, the demonstrations calling for such things as reform of university administrations and the revision of the Japan-U.S. Security Treaty.

Nevertheless, there are two reasons why McCallum and Tarry's Japan works are enlightening — even for a domestic audience. One is that they work. As with the civil rights pieces, McCallum and Tarry's use of a photo printed on silk fabric over a painted photo creates an eerily compelling metaphor of memory itself. Only single details come into focus at a time — a protester's grimaced face, waving banners, not to mention the pattern on the kimono of the woman getting a haircut in one of the less violent shots. If readers do have memories of the events of the late 1960s, then they will find the works all the more moving.

The other reason is that these two artists — one of whom is black, the other white — are seasoned practitioners when it comes to addressing political issues in art. Not a lot of Japanese artists can be described in the same way.

Yes, there are exceptions — Nobuyuki Oura and Yukinori Yanagi spring to mind — but by the same token, the fact that even today no consensus exists on the achievements of Japan's fiery years of student activism suggests there is a role for art-facilitated ruminations to play.

Earlier this week, Japan Times columnist Hiroaki Sato contrasted American attitudes to its antiwar and civil rights movements with those of contemporary Japanese to their years of protest. Sato reports U.S. veterans of '60s activism state unequivocally that their efforts made President Barack Obama's election possible. In Japan, former activists are unsure of what they achieved. Was it they who kept Japanese soldiers out of Vietnam? Sato states — without hiding his disappointment — that some of those involved in the struggle ended up "dislocated psychologically (and) professionally."

Perhaps they — and their former adversaries — could benefit from the kind of perspective-changing filter that McCallum and Tarry's artwork throws up against those years. Or better still, perhaps more Japanese artists — from that generation or below — could take a hint from the two Americans and revisit these open wounds themselves.

Still, a successful artist-in-residence program must be a two-way street. The artists themselves must gain an insight they could not have acquired anywhere else. McCallum and Tarry seem to have learned as much as they have taught.

Pointing out one of the works that depicts a nondescript island photographed from a boat, McCallum explains: "the picture shows the island (in the Ogasawara chain) at the moment the U.S. is giving it back to Japan." The deceptive image, it turns out, hides a secret. "You begin to understand the horse-trading that was going on at the time," McCallum says. The U.S., of course, needed to use Japan as a staging point for the Vietnam War, and the Ogasawaras were a bargaining chip. They were returned to Japan in 1968.

"Images like these point to ourselves and our own nation's accountability," McCallum says. "Art has the potential to make us critically aware of our own place in history, our own responsibility."