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*Tadanori Yokoo: Mother Nature's Son* In January 1964, Tadanori Yokoo was invited to the Shelter Plan Conference, organized by the conceptual art group High Red Center in Japan. The invitation was personalized and formal, stating that Yokoo had been specially chosen, and that he was to wear gloves and a necktie, and enter through the main doors of the Old Imperial Hotel. He was allowed to bring a guest. Yokoo was intrigued, but apprehensive, so he took a designer friend, Akira Uno, who had no qualms about underground art. After loitering in the lobby, they were met by a nervous-looking man in a dark suit and sunglasses, and ushered discreetly into a room which had been occupied, it seemed, without the management's permission. At their knock, the door was opened a crack. They were assessed and quickly received. Upon entering the room, Yokoo found himself



face to buttocks with three rear-shot nude photos of the High Red Center members, Jiro Takamatsu, Gempei Akasegawa, and Natsuyuki Nakanishi. This view was new to Yokoo, and he felt a little sick. He was motioned to observe a rule of silence. He was measured; then he was photographed, fully clothed, from six angles. His mouth was filled with water to the bursting point, and the dispelled water measured. He was disrobed and put in a bath. The volume of displaced water was measured. For the construction of his own personal "shelter," or coffin, he was unburdened of what amounts today to about \$300, in thousand yen notes. As he signed the guest list, he noticed some familiar names: Ushio Shinohara, Nam Jun Paik, Taro Okamoto, and Yoko Ono. The following morning, Gempei Akasegawa was front-page news, charged with counterfeiting thousand yen notes. In his autobiography, Yokoo said of the experience: "The borderlines separating art, life, and crime were tenuous."

**Give in, and the world is yours:** For Yokoo, the Shelter Plan Conference was unfamiliar, disturbing, and frightening. When I met with him in his huge, hangar-like Tokyo studio last fall, I asked him how he not only confronted, but accepted all of the fantastic experiences and chances that he had been granted throughout his career, some of which might have stunned a lesser man into inactivity. Yokoo had just entered his seventh decade. Being of my father's generation, he seemed to me a familiar and comforting presence. He wears a ponytail and puts on no airs, and his explanation was free of egoism: "I'm afraid of participating, but just as afraid of running away. In the end, I give in."

Yokoo has been both lucky and open to lucky circumstances throughout his life. When he finds something or someone that speaks to him, he strives to "make them [his] own," he says. For example, in 1963, captivated by Yukio Mishima's novel, *The Temple of the Golden Pavilion*, he writes in his autobiography of wanting "to brush up against the magnetic field of Mishima's genius." He heard that a photo book on Mishima was going to be produced, and while he wasn't able to realize his dream of designing it, through his determination to be involved with the project or its participants, he ended up meeting not only Mishima, but also Shuji Terayama, the director of the wildly successful experimental theater group Tenjo Sajiki.

Yokoo went on to work with these greats regularly, and through his collaboration with them, began considering both the unification of life and art and the healthy separation between design and art. He reveled in his culture shock.

By giving in, Tadanori Yokoo finds the inspiration to give back. His gifts are visual representations of his voyage to an inner world, a successive crumbling of his own set ideas. Eventually, he says, through this inner trip, he hopes to gain an understanding of the cosmos. "I feel best when abandoning the things I was most particular about. In the process, I gain freedom."

It seems appropriate that while he has made temporary goals, Yokoo has never reached a point where he has declared: "I've made it." I asked him how he achieved this sense of inner satisfaction. "I never wanted anything big," he answered, "except maybe to join Nippon Design Center," which he did

in 1960. But finding his own style and exploring the connection between design and art have been his sources of excitement all along the way.

Within a year of joining Nippon Design Center, where much of his first work was for a securities company, he became known for his design and illustration. And while other Japanese illustrators were crazy for the modernism of Saul Bass and Ben Shahn, Yokoo was inspired by Pushpin Studio, Milton Glaser, and Paul Davis. He soon realized that illustration "could slough off the cords of advertising copy, and stand on its own, like painting."

Strengthened by this new understanding, Yokoo formed his own style. He then turned his attention from illustration to photography and typography, and eventually, to the direction he would ultimately take—art. Drawing the thin line between chance and order turned him on; his further collaborations with those in the avant-garde art world led him to explore the boundaries of both. Then, with the narrow world of design losing its luster, he left Nippon Design Center in 1963 and went freelance.

Two years later, Yokoo became obsessed with death. "To confront the fear, I realized I had to become the fear itself," he writes in his autobiography. And so he designed a poster that shocked his friends, and brought him face-to-face with his terror. The poster reads, "Having reached a climax at the age of 29, I was dead." A young man in western clothes, clutching a rose, hangs by a noose against the background of the rising sun's rays. An erupting Mount Fuji and a bullet train decorate the top corners.

Born in 1936, Tadanori Yokoo grew up surrounded by prewar design: labels on boldly colored matchboxes and other daily articles. Because his hometown—Nishiwaki, in Hyogo Prefecture—was in a major textile region, he was also surrounded by Western-lettered textile labels that at first glance were exotic and lovely, but in the end, made him feel queasy. As a young man, he fled the countryside and sought whatever urban thrills Tokyo could provide. Later, he traveled extensively in the U.S. and Europe and witnessed movements like Dada and social trends like psychedelic American hippie culture. Yet he couldn't seem to rid himself of the Japanese-ness he associated with that cloying prewar image.

In a 1966 critique, Yokoo was accused of dragging down modern design to the level of the masses. Far from being affronted, Yokoo had found his goal: to express, rather than to escape, the passion and the earthy and animistic culture of his native Japan. From that point on, Yokoo's work began to take on its distinctive tone and voice of friendly irony.

**Let reality have its way with idealism, and give:** There is a face Tadanori Yokoo loves. It's the angelic face of a youth, maybe around ten years old. "It's the face of innocence," he says, "and purity, and reverence towards something great, like God." He met the face first on the cover of *Shonen*, a magazine he used to read as a kid. The Japanese postal and police services still use it to inspire the Japanese to goodness of heart and purity of action. To my western eyes, it's like a hologram, alternately powerful, as it is meant to be, and totally kitsch. For Yokoo, it is still a compelling image, and one of the many things that moves him to speak of ideals.

**"It's fine for a designer to recognize that design and economy can't be separated, but then he should reject it," Yokoo says about the balance between art and design. "When the designer is working, there shouldn't be any consideration whatsoever of the commercial aspects."**



"That face is the ideal form of a human being," says Yokoo. "because one must have those elements of innocence and purity and reverence. Of course, only young children have that face, because every time ideals collide with reality, they crumble a little. Still, as a symbol, it's perfect."

Yokoo's work, with its thesaurus of symbolic images that he's made his own, pictures this very clash of ideals and reality. In a book entitled *Tadanori Yokoo's Collage Design*, published 20 years ago, he said, "As I lay down the images, I'm testing them against an ideal world I hold in my mind. Because I sense the imbalance in the world around me, I unconsciously tend toward balance and symmetry, two methods of expressing the ideal world. Sometimes I go too far, and wish later that I'd left some images jutting out over the borders."

From the first time he read Yukio Mishima, Yokoo felt a spiritual link with the novelist. In the other, each found an understanding of the concern that life and art be linked. Each was deeply interested in what happens when reality and ideals clash. Writing in an exhibition catalogue, Mishima pinpointed the effect of the collision between Yokoo's inner world and the images of the outer one: "[Yokoo's] work has all the unbearability of the Japanese. His work angers people, and scares them, with its vulgar colors. It's scary how much his [common billboard] colors resemble the Coca-Cola ones. Yet while average people don't want to look at them, it makes them look..."

Mishima continued: "In the darkness of these bright colors, there's something solemn and deep. Like in the circus tightrope walker's spangled panties, there is something pathetic, a solemnity. The womb of our national anthem bares her teeth and frightens people. What makes Yokoo's work not just the art of a madman is his interest in the world around him. For example, the parody he achieves through the brutal treatment of the common. In this ruinous working of his inner world, the vulgar is scorned. It is not just the inner world, however; in exploding outward, it becomes a parody and makes us laugh. It is this that makes it healthy. Even so, even if he becomes international, I hope he doesn't let go of the strange map of our Japan."

**The strange map—animism and rationality:** Yokoo's parents were merchants, and did not study beyond elementary school. Their daily activities educated the young Tadanori in what he now knows is called animism, but at the time, was just what it was. "My parents prayed every day, and they had a certain respect for objects. If a newspaper was laying on the floor, for instance, you weren't to step on it. My parents taught me very early on that I wasn't going to accomplish much through egoism alone. They borrowed strength from the gods they sensed around them, and taught me to do this, too."

This animistic approach to life is based on the beliefs of Japan's only native religion, Shintoism, in which there is no single god, but a sense of the greatness of the natural universe and man's small but essential place in it. Yokoo was introduced to western rationality as a schoolboy, and became much more familiar with it as he traveled the world and experienced it firsthand.

In a memorable competition for a MOMA poster, he beat out

three of his role models—Peter Max, Tommy Angula, and Milton Glaser—by forcing himself to give a rational explanation, in English, for a poster design created for an exhibition entitled "Word and Image." His first try had been rejected, because he couldn't explain it. Tongue in cheek, he produced a second design with a group of mouths and eyes, streaming light: word and image symbolized. Whereas the judges hadn't trusted their sensibilities on his first try, Yokoo says, they trusted his words and their intellects on the second. Yokoo was dismayed. But he does recognize the limits of animism in the modern world. "You have to have a mix of the old Japanese way of thinking and modern, rational thought if you're going to live in the world as it is."

Like many great Japanese designers, Yokoo has been successful internationally because he has been able to give rational explanations of his work. And yet he would prefer that European modernism, with its insistence on the rational and the functional, give in a little to the Asian sense of intuition. "It would be better if designers clarified the themes and problems of their own lives...It's fine for a designer to recognize that design and economy can't be separated, but then he should reject it. When the designer is working, there shouldn't be any consideration whatsoever of the commercial aspects. The designer should, within that small frame in which he or she works, explore his own themes, his own life, his own thoughts."

In Yokoo's view, the triumph of the rational and the functional over the intuitive is aided, technologically, by the computer. But this frigidity of expression, which is provided first by designers, and then desired by consumers, represents a crisis to him. "Something generous and essential in human beings could be lost. If one understands the crisis while using the computer, the danger is past. But there are those who mistake a new technology for a new consciousness."

Tadanori Yokoo once worked by taking a pair of scissors to a pile of books and magazines. A giant piece of white paper was his mirror as he started down the path to his inner self. In 1981 he made a formal exit from the world of design, and turned to the less rationally demanding world of pure art. Today his tools are often a Power Mac 9500 with Adobe Photoshop 4.0, Illustrator 7.0, and Painter. "If I find a medium that allows me to express my imagination, I'll use it," he says. But he's ready to discard that medium the moment it stops serving this single purpose. "As a living being, I don't want to forget the more primitive, physical methods through which to express spiritual things."

Yokoo believes that the computer presents a number of obstacles to creativity and that it takes a professional, attuned to its seductive dangers, to overcome them. Because he can easily change any part of an image he pleases, some of the thrill is dissipated, and gone are many of the chances that once challenged his thinking, and led him to discover new regions of his inner world. He also has a couple of technicians working with him, to whom he communicates his ideas, and to whom he thus commits part of the responsibility of choice. And yet, aware of the crisis, Yokoo has managed to overcome the obstacle of too much choice. His images still startle, and sing. He is still Mother Nature's son.

(Previous spread)

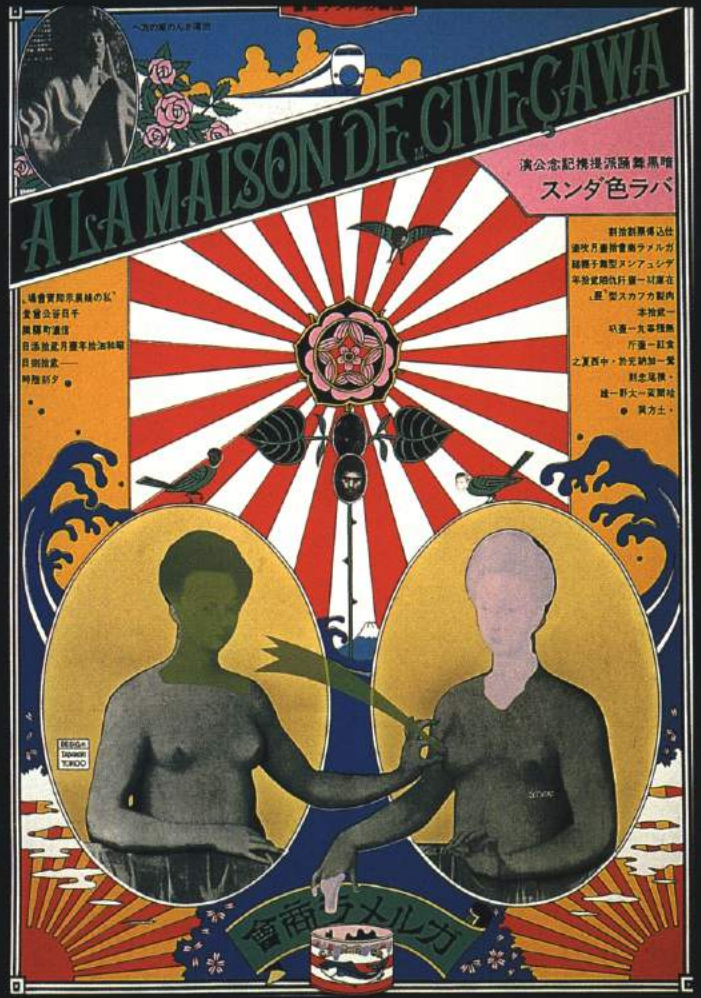
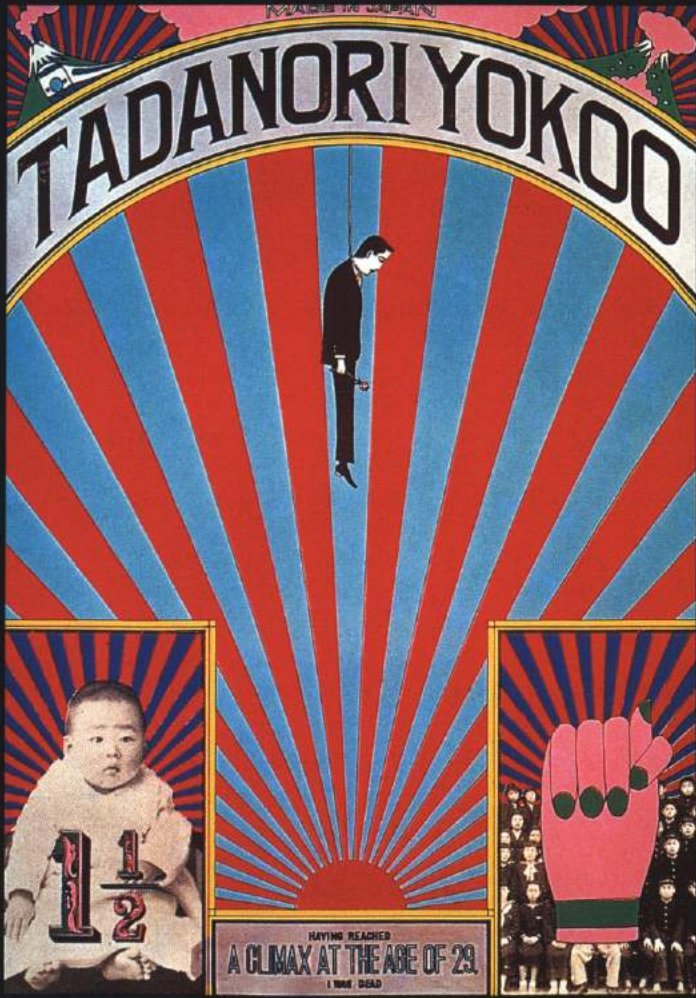
Poster for a Tadanori Yokoo exhibition at the Musée de la Publicité, Paris. Year: 1983.

(Opposite)

Tadanori Yokoo. Photographer: Curtis Knapp.











(Opposite, left)  
 "Tadanori Yokoo," poster for a one-man exhibition. Year: 1965.

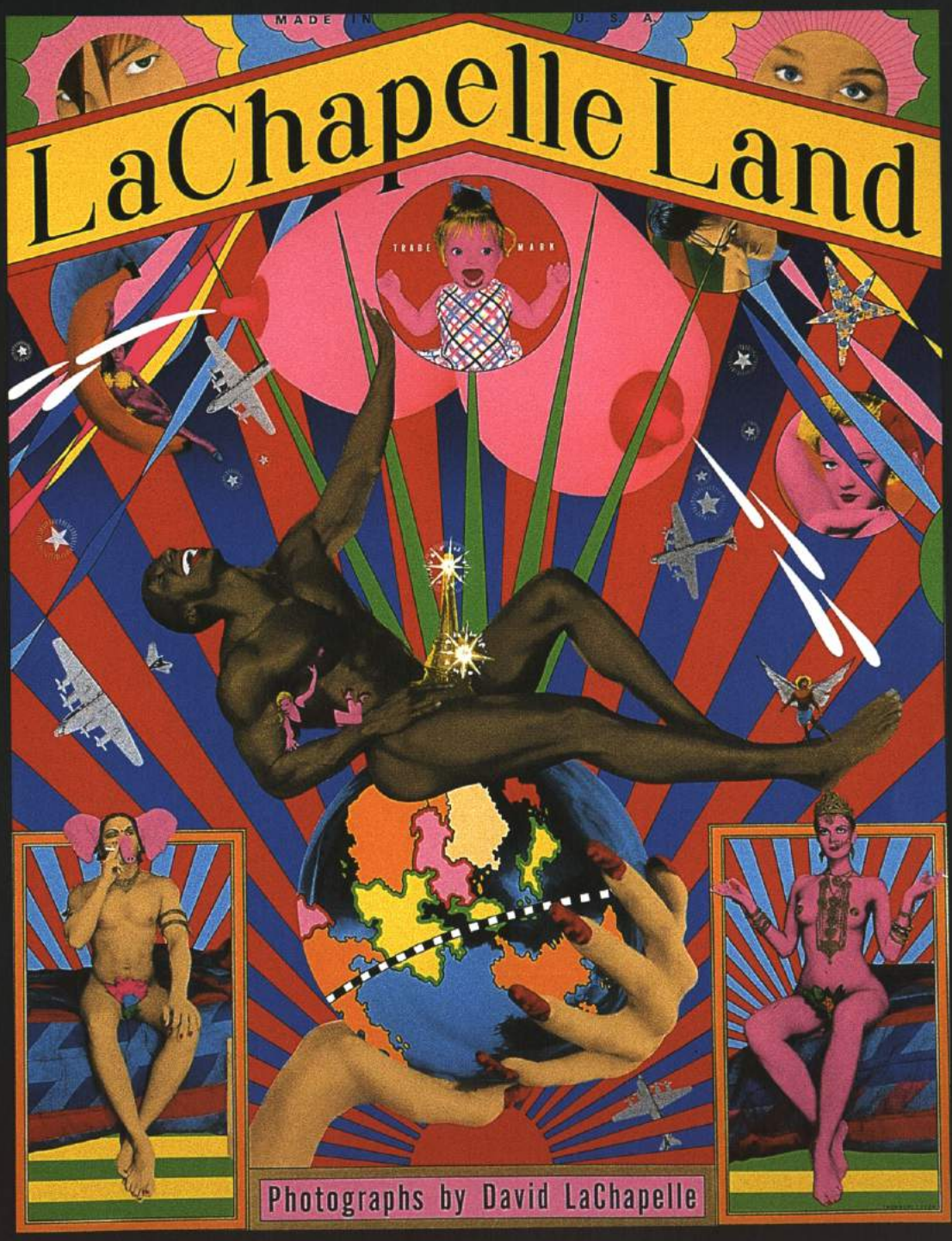
(Opposite, right)  
 "A La Maison de M. Civecawa."  
 Client: Ankoku Dancing School  
 Garumera Corporation. Year: 1965.



(This page, left)  
 "Ballad for a Little Finger Cutting  
 Ceremony." Client: Yakuza Publishing  
 Company. Year: 1966.

(This page, right)  
 "203-Kochi."  
 Client: Toei Co., Ltd. Year: 1978.

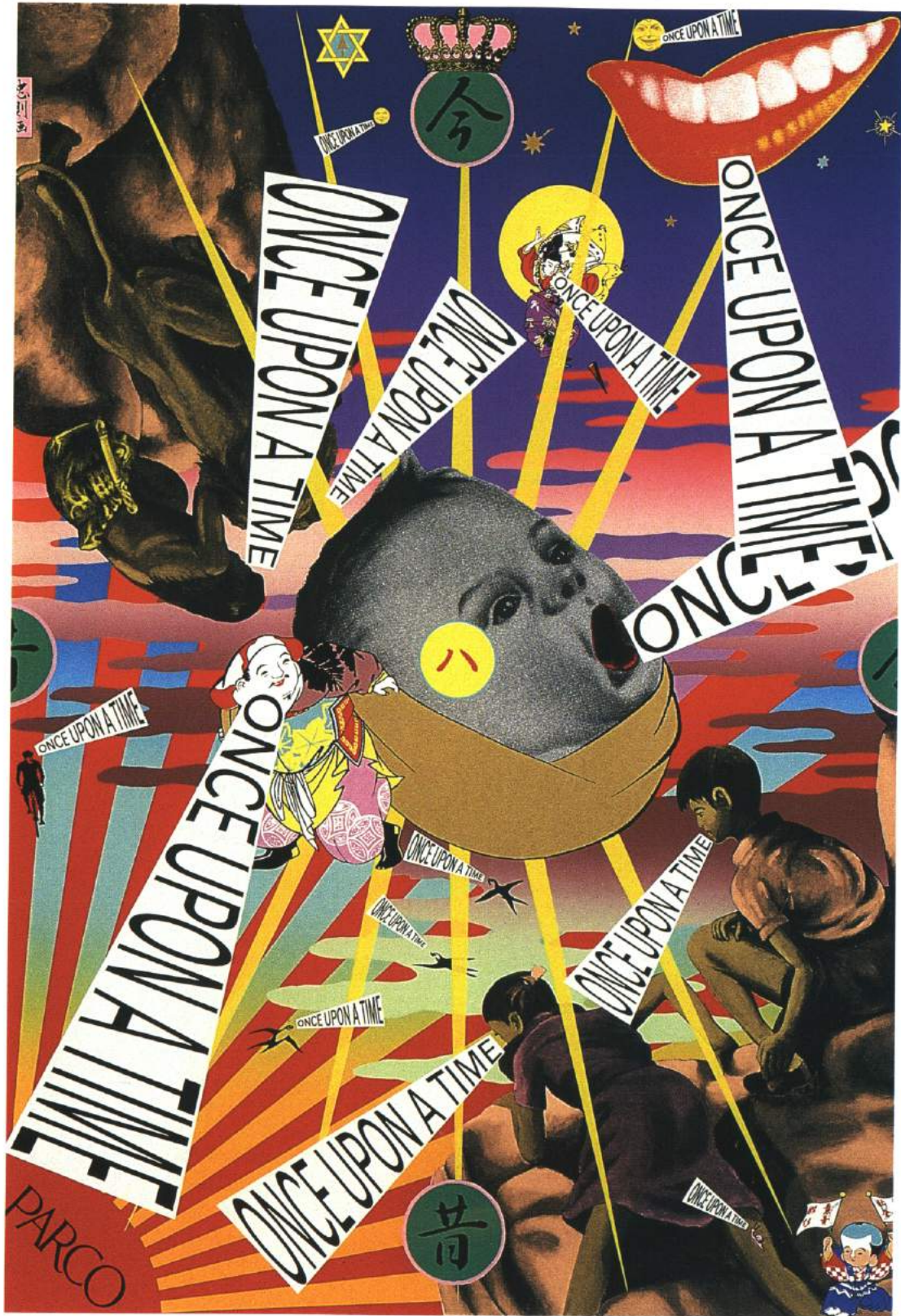




Photographs by David LaChapelle

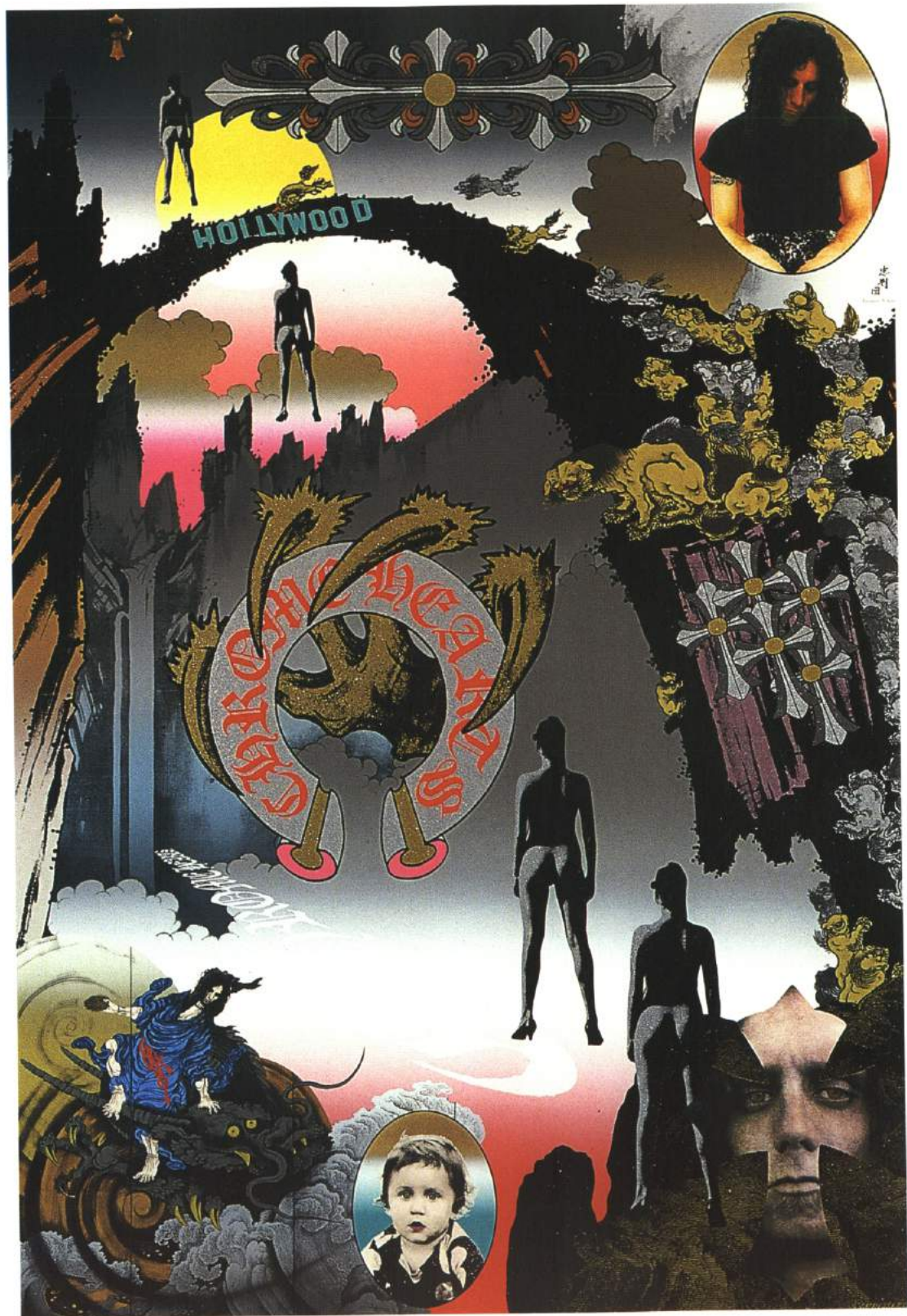
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"LaChapelle Land," Version A.  
Client: Callaway Editions Inc. Year: 1996.





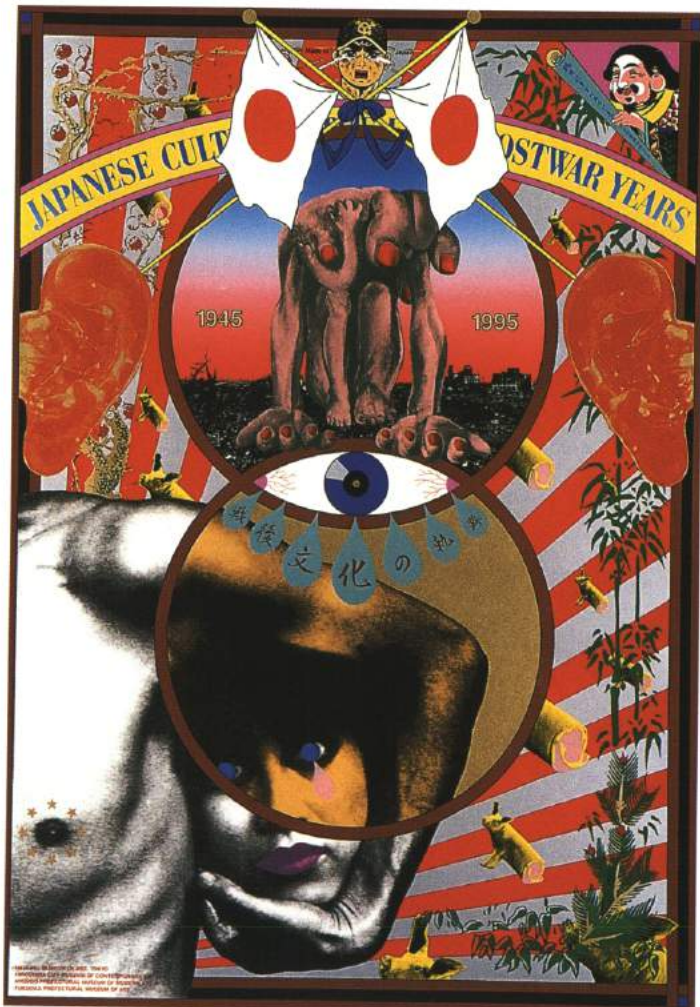
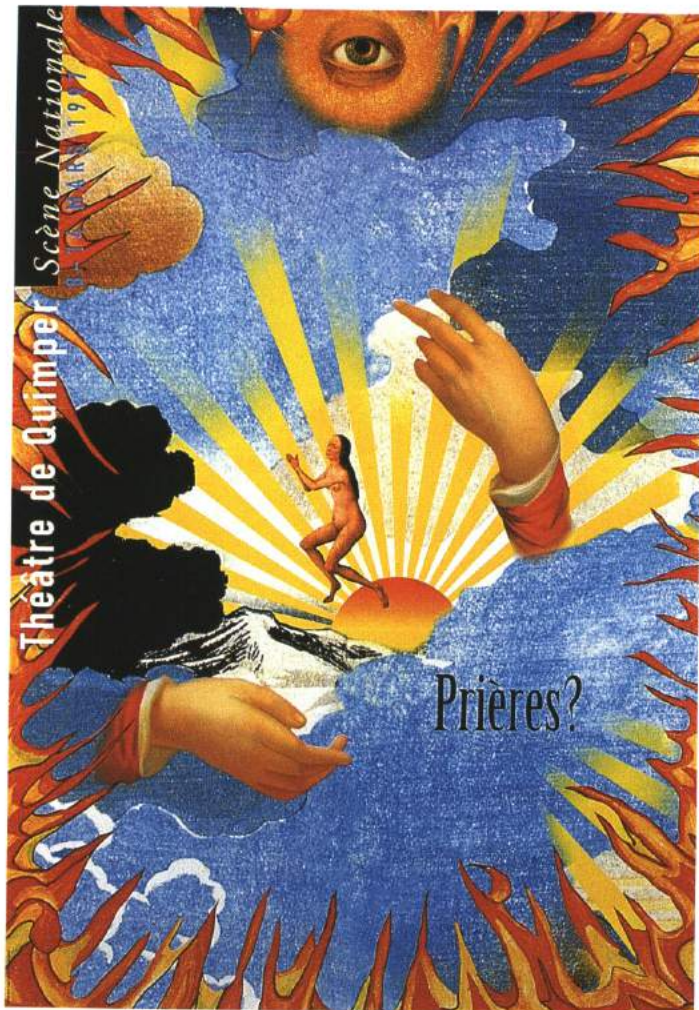
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"Once Upon a Time."  
Client: Parco Co., Ltd. Year: 1996.



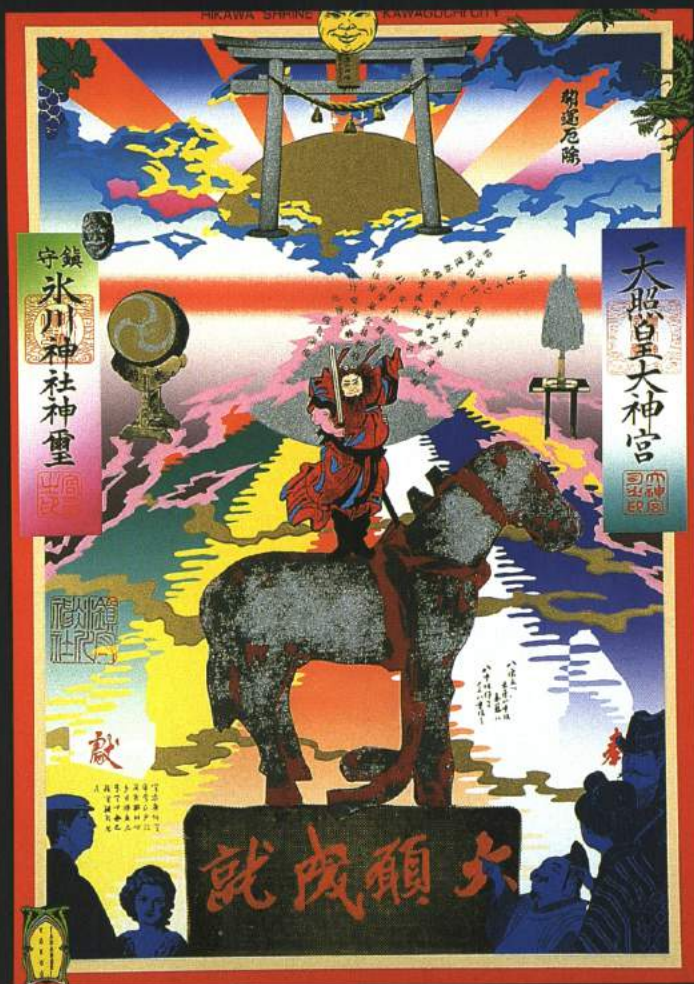


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"Chrome Hearts."  
Client: Chrome Hearts Inc. Year: 1997.









(Opposite, top left)  
 "Prières?" Client: Theatre de Camperie.  
 Year: 1997.

(Top right)  
 "Shiseido Audermine." Client: Shiseido  
 Co., Ltd. Year: 1997.

(Bottom left)  
 "Japanese Culture - The Fifty Years  
 Postwar 1945-1995." Client: Asahi  
 Shinbun/Meguro Museum of Art.  
 Year: 1995.

(Bottom right)  
 "Off Design." Client: Off Design Co., Ltd. Year: 1997.



(This page, left)  
 "Hikawa Shrine." Client: Chinju Hikawa  
 Shrine. Year: 1996.

(Right)  
 "Japan Relief for Cambodia." Client: Japan Relief for Cambodia.  
 Year: 1993.