

PAUL KLEE'S TABLE



OTHER BOOKS

POETRY AND TRANSLATIONS BY ERIC SELLAND

*The Condition of Music* (2000)

*Inventions* (2007)

*Still Lives* (2012)

*Arc Tangent* (2014)

*Beethoven's Dream* (2015)

*Object States* (2018)

*Brushwork* (2023)

TRANSLATIONS

Hiroya Takagai, *Rush Mats* (1999)

Takashi Hiraide, *The Guest Cat* (2014)

Genki Kawamura, *If Cats Disappeared from the World* (2019)

Kiwao Nomura, *The Day Laid Bare* (2020)

Minoru Yoshioka, *Kusudama* (1991/2021)

PAUL KLEE'S TABLE & OTHER BOOKS

POEMS 1955-1980

MINORU YOSHIOKA

*translated by Eric Selland*

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#### COVER IMAGES

*Paul Klee, Hat, Lady and Little Table* (Hut, Dame und Tischen), 1932.

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## INTRODUCTION

Yoshioka Minoru was unique in that he was a poet of the postwar generation who continued writing under the influence of Japan's prewar modernist tradition. It has in fact been claimed that Yoshioka completed the Japanese modernist project, which had been interrupted during the war, and then went on to bring Japan's postwar poetry fully into post-modernism with his method of quotation and collage in the late 1970s and 1980s.<sup>1</sup>

The prewar tradition that Yoshioka aligned himself with had been strongly influenced by European poetic examples. Japanese poets began borrowing from European poetry in the latter part of the nineteenth century as a means of creating a modern form, and continued absorbing everything new that came out of Europe during the early years of the twentieth century, including the more avant-garde tendencies such as Futurism, Dadaism and Surrealism. Free-verse in the colloquial language was first produced by Hagiwara Sakutarō in 1917, then in the 1920s Nishiwaki Junzaburō<sup>2</sup> inaugurated Japan's 'Modanizumu' movement, which included poet Takiguchi Shūzō, who produced important writings both about, and influenced by, Surrealism.<sup>3</sup> Japanese poetry during the 1920s and 1930s was influenced by the work and thought of Ezra Pound, André Breton and many other names familiar to English-speaking readers of poetry. This is the world that Yoshioka Minoru found himself exposed to when he was introduced to poetry in the 1930s.

After WWII, however, many Japanese poets rejected modernism, finding it overly intellectualized and dependent on foreign sources, as well as because of its perceived failures in having too easily given in to Japan's wartime fascist tendencies. The mainstream postwar poets preferred a poetry of direct address – one that spoke directly from the poet's own experience to the reader in a simple language that expressed the individuality of the poet and something fundamental to human experience. This was the aspiration of poets like Tamura Ryūichi and Tanikawa Shuntarō. This concern for speaking directly from the poet's experience as an individual felt especially important after the repressive war years under Japan's authoritarian militarists. Many of Yoshioka's poems, in contrast, seemed to have been brought from deep within the subconscious of the poet by means of his use of an automatic writing method.

<sup>1</sup> Kido Shuri and Nomura Kiwao, *Tougi Sengoshi: Shi no Runesansu e*, 1997.

<sup>2</sup> See *The Poetry and Poetics of Nishiwaki Junzaburo*, by Hosea Hirata, Princeton University Press, 1993.

<sup>3</sup> See *Fault Lines: Cultural Memory and Japanese Surrealism*, by Miryam Sas, Stanford University Press, 2001; and *A Kiss for the Absolute: Selected Poems of Shuzo Takiguchi*, translated by Mary Jo Bang and Yuki Tanaka, Princeton University Press, 2024

The 1950s and 1960s were a time of much political and social turmoil. At the same time that Japan's buttoned-up postwar bourgeois society was becoming well-established, some artists and writers were reacting against this by deeply questioning Japan's and their own identity through difficult avant-garde works. Meanwhile, intense, often violent protests against the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty, as well as against the materialist values upholding Japan's new middle class, were dominating the headlines and television news. Although Yoshioka was not politically active, this same questioning can be seen coming through in his surrealist imagery and in the absurd tales in which he satirizes the popular icons and images held sacred by that same proper middle-class. After his emergence in 1955, Yoshioka went on to become the most influential poet of the avant-garde, while many of the major poets of the generation following him were profoundly influenced by both his work and friendship. This book brings the important and influential work Yoshioka produced during the first twenty years of his career to an English language readership for the first time.

Born in the working-class district of Tokyo known as Shitamachi, Yoshioka attended public school until age 15 and then went to work as an apprentice at a publisher of medical books. He had already been introduced to literature at age 13 by a student who rented a room in the upper floor of the rundown tenement where he lived with his parents and older siblings. Later he would come across poems by Picasso, as well as the experimental poetry of Kitasono Katue<sup>4</sup> (who was likely the translator of the Picasso poems) and Sagawa Chika.<sup>5</sup> Upon receiving his draft notice in 1941 at age 22, he self-published two collections of his poems, *A Season of Stupor* and *Liquid*. When drafted into the Imperial Army, he carried a number of books with him to the recruiting center, including a translation of Rilke's famous writings on Rodin. (The books were promptly confiscated by the military officer in charge, as foreign literature by this time was highly controlled and censored by the militarist government.) Yoshioka spent most of the war years in Manchuria as a buck private assigned to caring for the officers' horses. He avoided the fate of other Japanese soldiers sent to prison camps in Siberia after the Imperial Army's surrender only by chance – he had been transferred to another unit on Jeju Island off the southern coast of Korea as punishment for putting on a humorous play for the other soldiers with some friends, a parody of *Cyrano de Bergerac* with mildly erotic themes, involving word play and cross-dressing.

<sup>4</sup> See John Solt, *Shredding the Tapestry of Meaning: The Poetry and Poetics of Kitasono Katue (1902-1978)*, Harvard University Asia Center, 1999.

<sup>5</sup> See *The Collected Poems of Chika Sagawa*, translated by Sawako Nakayasu, Random House, 2020.

He was repatriated to Japan by the Americans by the end of 1945, and he began putting his life back together in the ruins of Tokyo where he took a job with a publisher. During his long career as an editor and book designer, the manuscripts of many of Japan's major literary figures passed through his hands, most notably the collected works of the major poet Nishiwaki Junzaburō, who became a close friend and mentor. During the early years after the war he returned to writing poetry, reading ravenously and ultimately establishing a personal poetic practice. In 1955 the fruits of these efforts appeared in his first mature book, *Still Life*, which though largely ignored by the poetry establishment, was received by poets of his own generation, such as Iijima Kōichi, with great excitement. With this he became increasingly active in both the poetry and arts communities. The editor of the major poetry journal *Eureka* took him under his wing and in 1957 asked him to write some poems about his war experience. From this came the poem sequence 'The Dead Child,' which appeared in *Eureka* magazine that year; its haunting and often grotesque imagery, which did not 'narrate' his war experience in any conventional sense, seemed to express something essential about the times and affected its readers deeply. The following year *Eureka* published this poem along with other seminal works such as the poem sequence 'Monks' and a number of prose poems in a new collection titled *Monks*. This collection won Yoshioka the Mr. H Prize for younger poets in 1959. He was embraced by the avant-garde, and in the following years would not only influence a broad range of younger poets, but also engage in a dynamic intellectual exchange with major figures in other arts including experimental theater and Butoh dance.

In the prose poems of his breakthrough volume *Monks*, Yoshioka engages in the most originary of modernist forms, one which speaks back to Baudelaire, Rimbaud, and Mallarme, as well as the originators of Japan's own homegrown version of the tradition, including Takiguchi Shūzō. The most striking aspect of these prose poems lies in their narrative discontinuity, how the poem sets up certain narrative expectations in the opening lines and then sets out to undermine those expectations. According to critic Suga Hidemi, Yoshioka's poetry destroys the monologic nature of poetry, putting into question the idea of the poet as a fixed, integrated consciousness with a recognizable voice – the very opposite of the poetry of direct address favored by more mainstream poets. Suga goes on to insist that Yoshioka's poems deliberately avoid arriving at an integrated whole. The lack of any punctuation in the prose poems, as well as the use of spaces or gaps in the text, not necessarily occurring in places where one expects there to be a natural pause in the narrative, contribute to the disjunctions and interruptions in conventional meaning formation.

Most importantly, Yoshioka pushes Japanese syntax, already extremely flexible, to its limit. Quite often there is no clear subject/object relationship at all, due to the ability of Japanese either to dispense with the subject altogether, or to allow it to attach itself to any number of possible referents. Already in his earliest collection of poems, *Liquid*, his images gradually metamorphose as he takes advantage of Japanese syntax's flexibility and capacity for infinitely long sentences, and this technique only becomes more prominent in his postwar work. This way of structuring a poem, where the reader is led through a series of phrases whose meaning is always inherently indeterminate, is almost impossible to imitate in English. The syntax works like a movie – its images always moving and changing. In order to translate a Yoshioka poem, you have to stop the movie and splice the film in just the right places. But where do you stop the film? It is a precarious act, in which the translator, balancing on a tightrope like a circus performer, could easily fall into the void. Perhaps it is this gap, this void at the heart of language which is the true significance of Yoshioka's poetry.

Many of Yoshioka's poems, whether in prose or verse, utilize what I referred to earlier as the absurd tale – a more or less narrative poem that tells a frequently disrupted story in which the iconography of Japan's new middle-class is satirized. Many of the images in such poems are familial ones using common Japanese words that usually have positive connotations – mother, father, grandmother (old woman), grandfather (old man), girl or young virginal woman (the *shoujo*, well-known in popular manga), and the boy (*seinen*, young man or youth) – these last two in particular being idealized figures of youth and innocence often found in Japanese literature and film along with the near sacred image of mother. Many of the images are handled in a way that may be grotesque and shocking to some, but the original language is lyrically beautiful, both in the subtle choice of kanji and in its sound. Hence the effect is a sometimes absurd or grotesque content clothed in a breathtakingly beautiful cloak ... an eerie combination indeed.

This beauty of the language and imagery in Yoshioka is something that attracted the attention and recognition of poets and artists from a broad range of genres – even people in the traditional arts. Another important point, and another thing that is hopelessly lost in translation, is that often the odd or even jarring juxtapositions of surreal images is driven by the choice of kanji characters themselves. In other words, Yoshioka starts with one image making use of a particular kanji character, then the choice of the images that follow is made on the basis of characters sharing the same radical (the left side of the character). Hence it is a poetry very much driven by writing as such, the written symbol determining what happens next in the poem rather than merely representing the ideas the poet has in his head.

In spite of the sophistication of his poetic practice, Yoshioka presents somewhat of an enigma in that he is an avant-gardist without a theory. Unlike his modernist predecessors, Yoshioka never produced any

writings on poetics, and though widely admired, never became the official ‘leader’ of a movement or school of poetry. His single volume of prose writings consists mainly of remembrances of poets and certain poems, and of his own early life and influences. He writes only once, and briefly, of his own poetic process. When he writes of the work of other poets he writes mostly of haiku rather than the type of poetry with which he himself was involved. And the one time he writes more extensively about another artist it is not a poet at all, but Hijikata Tatsumi, the founder of the avant-garde dance form Butoh. In many respects it is outside the genre of poetry where Yoshioka finds his true peers, in the violent psychic disruptions of Terayama Shūji’s theater of spectacle, or in the shamanic madness of Butoh dance. Yoshioka’s poetry shares with these artists a sense of the erotic and the grotesque, the beautiful and the strange, and the carnivalesque exposition of archetypal themes, at once comic and horrible, but which dig deeply into the Japanese psyche.

The books that followed his two books of the 1950s – *Spindle Form* (1962), *Quiet House* (1968), *Poems for a Mysterious Time* (1974), and *Paul Klee’s Table* (1980), complete translations of which are included in this publication – continue in the same vein as the earlier books, obliquely deconstructing the materialist values of Japan’s new postwar middle-class, investigating the possibilities of surreal imagery and the automatic writing method, and exploring recurrent images such as marshes, bones and fish, islands, the sea, ships, horses, dogs and numerous cats, as well as erotic imagery.<sup>6</sup> Critics like Suga point to the discontinuities of Yoshioka and the absence or failure of conventional narrative meaning, but it is precisely in this gap where traditional meaning fails that the truth value of Yoshioka’s poetry resides. Poetic meaning in Yoshioka functions in much the same way as the paintings of Francis Bacon – it is only through the distortion of normative reality that we are capable of reaching its underlying truth.

The absurdities and satire in Yoshioka’s work become more extreme over the years until they reach a fever pitch in the early 1970s – and then they stop. At this point Yoshioka takes a major leap in his poetics. In the collections *Saffron Gathering* (1976) and *Summer’s Banquet* (1979) he begins experimenting with appropriation and collage as a means of stepping outside his own established poetic language by ‘borrowing the voices of others’. The culmination of these experiments is his magnum opus, *Kusudama* (1984).<sup>7</sup>

Yoshioka died suddenly of kidney failure in 1990. Always surrounded by young poets – including this translator – who would gather to meet him regularly at his legendary hangout, the Top Café in Shibuya, Yoshioka remained excited about new ideas, new forms, and experiment to the very end.

<sup>6</sup> Despite the late publication date, the poems in *Paul Klee’s Table* were written in the 1960s. A few of these were included in a selected works in 1968, but the entire collection was not published until 1980.

<sup>7</sup> See Yoshioka Minoru, *Kusudama*, translated by Eric Selland, Isobar Press, 2021.



## PAUL KLEE'S TABLE

Things familiar to the lonely heart  
Unravel once light's solid shape  
And enter a dark house where no one lives  
Creating vibrant images  
In metal's arrogant shadows  
And quietly gather there  
At the far end of the modest interior  
Forks grow like withered grass  
And glasses forever parted from lips hang suspended in air  
Bitter wine flows  
Sausage skins and a fish all of bones sink  
In a town of water lacking a panoramic view  
A sheer cliff made of leftover cloth  
A cat looks up furtively  
And with a weight which carries light's dark rays  
An empty bottle stands  
Having taken up residence alone on the table  
Anyone would feel lonely standing there  
It naturally develops a slender neck  
But no-one is invited, so  
The umbrellas are left closed and dripping  
In a corner of the entryway from morning till night  
And the chairs are drawn up near the table  
Plates and various receptacles are gathered there  
Amongst them some whose contents have been devoured in vain  
But even more sad are the plates which never become dirty  
All piled up on the shelf  
They lie there at night with no echoes beneath the butter  
The soothing feast is nearing its end

And from inside a jar of salt  
Its belly swollen like a mother  
A voice emerges  
There is no response so it returns to where it came from  
A table which no-one ever comes to wipe  
Just now the white walls surrounding it  
On four sides  
Fall silent  
As if they had swallowed the sea

## CIRCUS

In a small town there is a small fire  
And there is a place where they put barrels and wind  
This is where Master Gali shrewdly  
Opens a circus  
The first steel pole is thrust  
Into the middle of a large earthen-colored heart  
Even the cold blood and skin of Master Gali are moved  
Here they raise the brilliantly colored tent  
Where viscera and bladders  
Are suddenly brought to light  
The sad trumpet and the clarinets  
The slender arms and legs of Master Gali  
Are those of a monkey skilled at skipping rope  
While next to him the lower half of a sleeping woman  
On a shining horse  
Passes through a ring of fire  
Only the promoter's daughter  
Gives it her all  
Then the balancing act on flower-shaped rolling ball  
That should make the audience roll its eyes  
It should make the cat's eyes shine also  
The serious and obscene circus of Master Gali and his band  
It is poison to the eyes of the children  
Huddled between their parents they fall asleep  
It is time to raise the curtain  
But no spectators arrive  
Nor do the well-dressed men and women come  
Dried leaves and bones are all that gather  
One after the other they climb up to the dark gallery

Even the trumpeter runs out of breath  
In the gloomy tent of the circus  
The drum is like an appendectomy  
The drummer's hand slips  
The ends of a few hairs stuck to a bone  
Let out a giggle  
Before anything can start it's all over  
Suck me up into the cold stars outside the tent  
Master Gali is blue in the face  
He leans against the heart's steel pole  
The girl in the balancing act with the ball runs off with the ticket-taker  
A woman turns completely into a horse  
And collapses on a bed of straw  
This is the final act!  
The collapsed tent is dragged away  
He's had it now  
Master Gali is left alone  
The only clown in the rain

## LILAC GARDEN

The color purple is the gift of night  
So that all music can easily sink  
The stars as they bubble up  
Extinguished from the garden little by little  
This is the time when lilacs bloom  
The stone statue whispers  
Both jealousy and love  
Model an abstract boredom  
With a torn ear hanging down  
The beautiful wife is lured  
From the shadows  
A wet bird runs through her heart  
Wearing the waistband of adultery  
She hangs on the arm of an orange man  
Pure love abounds  
An angle that is only possible once  
The woman is supported by the weight of an olive branch  
The tear in the undergarment of joyous sin  
When the troublesome silk foot gets involved  
The bearded man who owns this mansion  
Suddenly rushes out bellowing  
The running dogs the cats protecting the lamp  
The bearded man expands the great circle of lust  
In the middle of the ruined flowers  
Lies my beloved the woman in the green kimono  
While listening to the awakening voices of  
The flowers other than the lilacs which have nearly bloomed  
A male servant does the toy monkey dance  
And a maid does the toy snake dance

Don't hold a match  
Amongst the overgrown lilacs  
Don't make the nightingale sing  
The ocean breeze which enchants the light of the mansion's candles  
Is invited to enter in its entirety  
The fullness of the breasts of a woman who feigns love  
Wearing the wife's gown with its many beautiful folds  
Carved in stone  
And the autumn sea's echoes become fainter  
In the sky over the garden now empty of people  
The nightingale sings too much  
Other kinds of flowers reveal their scent  
The yellow moon rising madly  
Is an offering to the approaching dawn