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In Japan, Issei Nishimura Paints the Blues

Nishimura paints, plays music, and enjoys the companionship of his cats, but rarely ventures out.

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NAGOYA, Japan — There is a way to experience the bold, exuberant, psychologically intense work of the Japanese artist Issei Nishimura, not as a formalist trying to make sense of its unflappably expressionistic compositions, but rather from the standpoint of a music lover, tuning into, and surrendering to, their oddball rhythms.

For Nishimura, who was a guitar player before turning to drawing and painting, makes art inspired by and steeped in the blues. If ever that music — so redolent of yearning, loss, soulfulness, and psychic pain — were to find visual expression, here in Nishimura’s art, perhaps most unexpectedly, it has.

Now, in this city that is the center of Japan’s automotive industry, two solo exhibitions of his work are on view, both under the title *Shunrai ni utareta gotoku*, a Japanese phrase meaning “as if struck by spring thunder.” One can be found at the small Heart Field Gallery in the city’s commercial district, and the other at Galerie Deux Scène, farther out from the city center. Both shows feature

paintings the artist has produced in recent years. They were assembled by Yutaka Miyawaki, whose Galerie Miyawaki, in Kyoto, began presenting Nishimura's work in 2011.



Image1

That gallery, which was founded by Miyawaki's late father in 1958, was one of the first in the south of Japan to show Surrealist art and European *art informel*. Under Yutaka's direction, the gallery has developed an exhibition program featuring contemporary art, *art brut*, and outsider art from Japan and overseas. It has published books about the *art brut* artist Ferdinand Cheval and the French self-taught artist Gérard Sendrey; recently it played a key role in arranging for the Swiss art historian Michel Thévoz's classic book *Art Brut* (Skira, 1975) to be issued in a first-ever, Japanese-language edition by Jinbun Shoin, a Kyoto-based publisher.

Last week, I met Miyawaki at his gallery in Kyoto to look at a selection of Nishimura's sketchbooks. A few days later, we met in Nagoya to visit the artist's two new exhibitions. As in Europe and North America, the regions to which their deepest historical roots can be traced, in Japan the pioneering research in the overlapping fields of *art brut*, outsider art, and so-called self-taught art has been undertaken by a handful of well-informed dealers who are also collectors or promoters of such art forms. Miyawaki is one of them.

"It can be difficult to sell this kind of art in Japan," he told me, "because the public is still learning about the work of the most original, visionary self-taught artists — what makes it unique, how to look at it." Although Nishimura is an autodidact, Miyawaki presents his work in the context of contemporary art, without emphasizing his background. He has mounted regular exhibitions of Nishimura's unusual oeuvre, documenting them with substantive publications. (Even such documentation is rare among many

galleries in Japan.) Miyawaki could have added another observation — that it can be hard to sell certain forms of abstract art here, too.

Nishimura was born in 1978. In Nagoya, I also met the artist's father, Usao, who recalled that, as a child, Issei enjoyed making drawings. Years later, after moving to Tokyo to study music, he began having a hard time fitting into society and started to withdraw. Soon his art-making assumed a central, urgent place in his life, and, before long, he committed his energy full-time to producing drawings and paintings. He moved back home to Nagoya, where he resides today, reclusively, in a close-knit family setting. Issei loves and still plays his music, and he enjoys the companionship of his cats, but he rarely ventures out. To date, he has not seen any of the group or solo exhibitions in which his works have been publicly displayed.

In Japan, reviews of Nishimura's exhibitions have described his art as “uninhibited” or as conveying the artist's “own desire.” Such subtly coded language suggests that his creative impulse follows no established style, that he is not guided by any theory, and that his drive to express himself is irrepressible.

In some of the spiral-bound sketchbooks, large and small, that Miyawaki showed me at his Kyoto gallery, every page contained a strange drawing — of heads with numerous, oddly placed eyes and mouths, from which pointy tongues dangled; fragmented human figures and stingrays caught in tangles of thick, linguine-like lines; guitar players; a woman (the artist's mother) positioned near or seated on a toilet; and lounging cats.

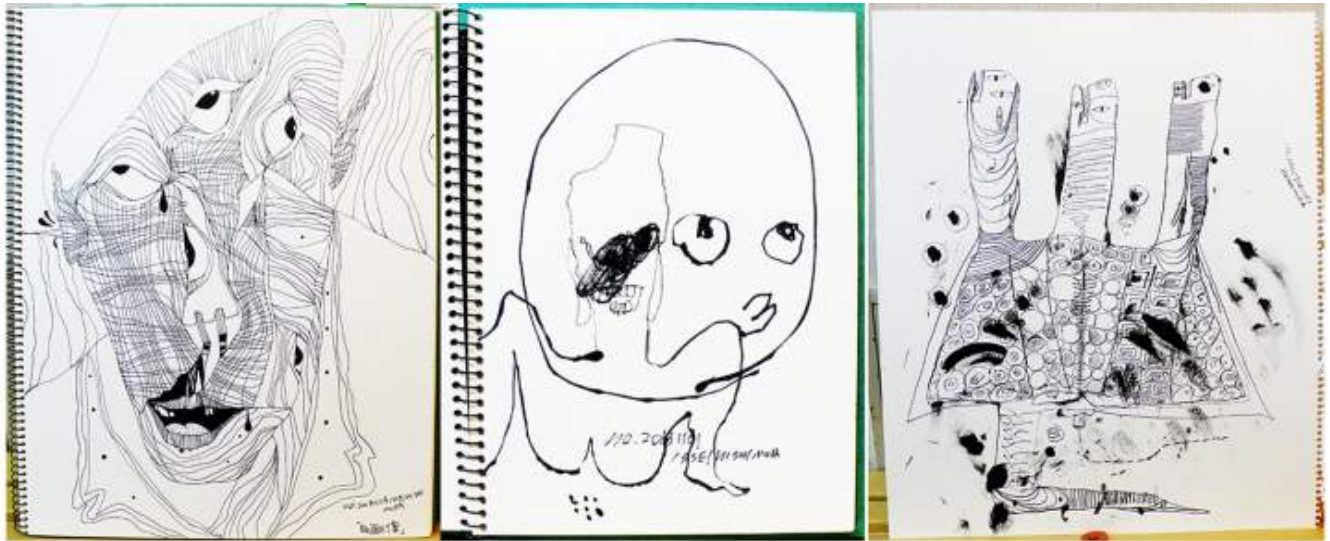


Image2.

One striking sketchbook contained drawings of mushrooms, each page cleverly composed in images that would have made the Surrealists swoon and that, despite their thicker lines, brought to mind Ellsworth Kelly's precise and delicate contour drawings of plants. The difference is that just about everything Nishimura produces is on steroids, but the gentle appearance of his mushroom drawings belies the ferocious impulse from which they emerge.

Also at the Kyoto gallery, I examined a pile of letters the artist had sent Miyawaki over the years. He explained, "In them, Nishimura describes his everyday observations and activities. He also talks about making art and the character of his art." Written in a wiry scrawl, these diaristic artist's statements are nearly impossible to read — but they are intriguing and keenly self-aware, without any sense of bombast or bloated ego.

In fact, for some time now, the artist's mother has been deciphering these texts and typing them into a computer so that Miyawaki may have readable versions from which to find out about

Nishimura's interests and motivations. It was partly through such writings that he learned about the artist's fascination with the blues, especially with the music of the Mississippi-born guitarist-composer Robert Johnson (1911-1938), whose songs and recordings are revered by aficionados as some of the genre's most essential roots material.

In one of Nishimura's texts, he writes, "Everyday, devotedly, I continue painting and drawing. It's the same whenever I'm breathing, eating, defecating, sleeping. Line is a meandering, physical extension of myself, and color fiercely reflects the flickering of my spirit. Through such an intuitive way of interacting with the world, I instantaneously work things out. When an artwork is completed, I get tired and collapse. At such times, the picture and I become, indivisibly, a single, raw human form." (Such from-the-gut testimonials bring to mind the mood of the work of the Japanese writer Osamu Dazai (1909-1948), which is unflinchingly self-reflective and searing in its observations of human nature and society in modern Japan.)

In works on display in the two Nagoya exhibitions, viewers can sense the intensity of the creative energy that fuels their making and culminates in the end-of-work-session wipeouts the artist describes in his notes. In Nishimura's psychedelic "Epigraph I, Dash Toward Life" (2017), the crumpled frame of a bicycle floats over an active background of splattered light-blue, lavender, and muted cantaloupe orange, and in "Death Flowers" (2015), a cluster of thickly painted, golden-yellow spirals creates a richly textured batch of mystery plants poking out of a large, squat vase. Its surface is

etched with lines suggesting a cracked ceramic glaze. (Nishimura's materials include acrylic paint, gesso, *gofun* (a Japanese calcium carbonate pigment made from oyster, clam and other shells), Holbein's pumice modeling paste, pastel, and oil stick.)



Image3.

“Issei’s Self-portrait” and “A Portrait of the Devil, Who Told Me to Paint” (both from 2015) offer the artist’s curious depictions of himself, first as a silhouetted head covered with a chain-like, decorative motif, and then in a vibrantly hellish image with big bug eyes and a monstrously toothy mouth emerging out of the blue-green murk of a crusty, paint-slathered surface.



Image4.

Then there is his *Love in Vain* series of five medium-small paintings from 2015, whose collective title comes from one of Johnson's most famous songs. Nishimura captures its plaintive expression of hot desire and soul-crushing disappointment in molten masses of red, orange, and yellow forms laced with shiny, drippy skeins of red paint in "Love in Vain V," and in the mostly blue-green "Love in Vain I" and the red, black, blue, and yellow "Love in Vain III," in swirling compositions of haunting beauty. In "Love in Vain I," the face of one of his demonic figures rises like a phantom from the picture's bottom edge — an allusion, perhaps, to the legend claiming that Johnson sold his soul to the Devil in exchange for his guitar-playing prowess. That's one of the myths surrounding Johnson's life and legacy of which Nishimura is keenly aware.



Image5.



Image6.



Image7.

Elsewhere in the current exhibitions, the artist offers portraits of his parents, in which bright, white eyeballs pop out of yellow, purple, and brown patches of energetic brushwork that distort their heads and faces. There is also a painting whose one-word title employs the *kanji* (Sino-Japanese character) that is used to write words meaning “delight” or “joy.” It features a field of dark turquoise above a patch of brown, upon which Nishimura has superimposed a line drawing of a head in profile, with a triangle for a nose and what appears to be a tear falling from a yellow-oval eye. In fact, Miyawaki explained, that detail is a remnant of an earlier picture buried beneath the canvas’s currently visible image. He noted, “Nishimura is so energetic or, maybe, sometimes so impatient, that occasionally he paints over an already finished painting.”

In another of his statements, the artist once wrote, “Clinging to creating, as if praying, as if screaming, spreading red all over, intently. Before long, the red materials are worn out, but there, something that resembles a head digs itself out.”



Family snapshot of the artist Issei Nishimura in his studio in Nagoya, Japan

The more one examines such writings and Nishimura's intense pictures, the clearer it becomes that he is someone who cannot *not* paint; like Johnson in his mythical encounter with the Devil at a rural Mississippi crossroads, the Japanese artist long ago gave in to the seductive power of his favorite material's endlessly expressive, plastic-elastic goo.

In his hideaway in Nagoya, with his cats and his guitar for company, Nishimura has no choice. In his own way, captivated by his medium, he has to paint the blues.

Image1. Issei Nishimura, "A Portrait of the Devil, Who Told Me to Paint" (2015), acrylic on linen, 63.78 x 38.19 inches (photo courtesy of Galerie Miyawaki)

Image2. Issei Nishimura, "Death Flowers" (2015), acrylic on canvas, 35.83 x 28.62 inches (photo courtesy of Galerie Miyawaki)

Image3. Assorted drawings from recent years made by Issei Nishimura in his sketchbooks (photos by the author for Hyperallergic)

Image4. Issei Nishimura, "Issei's Self-portrait" (2015), acrylic, colored gesso and Dermatograph grease pencil on linen, 35.83 x 23.88 inches (photo courtesy of Galerie Miyawaki)

Image5. Issei Nishimura, "Love in Vain V" (2015), acrylic and gofun gesso on synthetic linen, 20.87 x 28.74 inches (photo courtesy of Galerie Miyawaki)

Image6. Issei Nishimura, "Love in Vain I" (2015), acrylic and gofun gesso on synthetic linen, 20.87 x 28.74 inches (photo courtesy of Galerie Miyawaki)

Image7. Issei Nishimura, "Love in Vain III" (2015), acrylic and gofun gesso on synthetic linen, 19.66 x 28.74 inches (photo courtesy of Galerie Miyawaki)

Issei Nishimura's exhibition at Heart Field Gallery in Nagoya, Japan (Eiwa Building, Sakae 5-4-33, Naka-ku), remains on view through December 17; his show at Galerie Deux Scène (Miyukiyama 201, Tenpaku-ku) runs through December 24.