BUNKA-CHO ART PLATFORM JAPAN TRANSLATION SERIES

DEAR FOUJITA . . . AN EXAMINATION OF THE PACIFIC WAR RECORD PAINTINGS

(1972)

Kikuhata Mokuma

A TINKLING BELL (ART) MAY be able to get a grip on its contingent future by attaching itself to the belts of the powerful, like the bell fastened around the neck of a cat. But it is not up to the bell (art) to decide whether or not to shoot the cat!

"When garrison guard Takahashi Jirōhei passed in front of the gate he discovered a bandit fixing the aim of his gun upon him and, prevented from escape by the narrow space restricting his bodily movement and having nothing with which to shield himself, he at once stuck his spear into the ground for support and yelled with all his might, 'Shoot me here!' slapping his left flank with his right hand. The bandit shot right at the spot indicated but the bullet struck the shaft of the spear and unfortunately rebounded to strike petty foot soldier Ishii Kyōhei, who was standing nearby, in the head. Sacrificing himself in this manner, Kyōhei's head burst open and he breathed his last breath amid a profusion of blood." (As in original)

This depiction of a chapter in the life of the soldiers of the Akizuki Domain during the Shimabara Rebellion comes from Miura Sueo's *Narrative History of Akizuki* and, to come clean, the foot soldier Kyōhei was a bona fide ancestor of my wife. Thanks to the valiant commander standing defiantly before the mouth of a gun beating his belly and screaming, "Shoot me here!" poor private Kyōhei, shrinking and trembling, was dispatched by the gods with a lousy stray bullet to the head of all things.

Something I must set out as a warning to myself when thinking about war paintings is how, when the *survivors* talk about war, the ungraceful sudden deaths and eternal shame of people like Kyōhei become vain and cheerful banter compared to the unmentionable accursed days suffered by the innumerable people who crouched beneath their valiant shouts.

The Greater East Asian War—specifically Pacific War record paintings—was something that had been knocking around in one corner of my mind for some time when I first mentioned it to Imaizumi Yoshihiko and Kawani Hiroshi in the excitement of a drinking session. It then became a

problem I could not back away from. All of my problems began with the idea that the war record paintings were like an unexploded shell fished up out of the flood of endless questioning that affects all contemporary artistic expression, “so, what does it mean?”

The vicissitudes of the war paintings over the twenty-five years since the end of the war symbolize perfectly how, since the arrival of defeat/renunciation of war/democracy/independence/equality/peace until today, the war paintings and our current hellish peace still exist within us like two deformed twins that curse and despise each other’s appearance while nevertheless forming a dependent relationship.

On the one hand, ever since official acceptance of 1945-made democracy, war paintings and the social situation that spawned them have been treated as a colossal embarrassment and source of anguish for art as it completely succumbed to state authority. They have been dismissed with a haughty glance as ideology forced into painting, as an act of plastering war all over paintings and asserting it as their motif, without ever according them a perspective as paintings. Put another way, war paintings have been dragged out to the scaffold for denunciation because they are paintings, but they have never been treated as paintings at all. For five years after the war they were locked up in the Tokyo Metropolitan Art Museum, and then served for twenty years as comfort women to the victors in the private offices of the secretary of defense in the Pentagon. Now they are somewhere deep in storage in the National Museum of Modern Art in Tokyo, just as if the corporeal literalism of medieval witch trials had survived unchanged into the present day.

Yet on the other hand, in the current situation, where the Ministry of Defense drools at the mouth as it waits to get hold of the fifty-eight war paintings returned by the US State and Defense Departments, the idea of tarting up the war paintings as ethnic heritage and making them a cheap pitch for national awareness is running rampant—an authoritarian impulse that seeks to besiege its scabrous “let’s bring it again”-peace with the extreme conditions of war, as if all accounts had now been settled.

Hariu Ichirō has said, “I call for the return of the war paintings that are held in the US and I have urged several times that they should be on permanent display somewhere as a symbol of modern Japan’s underbelly and as a negative monument to our history.” As we can see, this way of thinking clings to historical conscience at a critical moment but is actually nothing more than a reflection of the shrewdness of national sentiment jumping from glorification to condemnation of war paintings. Now that Hariu’s hopes are partially being answered, the work of the critic must start by cutting the string of that pendulum that swings back and forth just stroking the surface of the war paintings. Needless to say this is not just an issue for Hariu.

Compared to the time when postwar art made its start by reflecting upon and criticizing them, war paintings appear before us today in a much more complicated situation, and after twenty-five years of absorbing our enmity they have taken on an unimaginably tougher form.

We have entered the forest of war paintings with the boldness of the ignorant, with questions continuing to surface and with countless problems still all tangled together. Even if the war paintings are currently locked up in what we can only call a bizarrely restricted environment, we also cannot accept flipping through them recklessly in the pages of a catalogue. Even if the investigation ends up being somewhat rough, however, what I must interrogate here is what it meant for an individual youth who loved painting to tremble with emotion as they looked up at the gigantic canvases.

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Imaizumi described the mood at the gathering where I first let my ideas slip in a lecture he gave at Bigakkō, so let’s listen to what he said. He also raised a question.

“So when Kikuhata Mokuma and I were talking, the topic of seeing the Greater East Asian Holy War Commemorative Exhibition as a child came up. . . . Kikuhata was obsessed with the idea that there was something in those paintings as a problem of artistic expression. But he

unfortunately could not articulate it well. . . . So then this is what I said. I replied that the period during the war was like a kind of renaissance for painters in Japan. The state's demand to promote war policy and raise people's fighting spirit was an external necessity, while cooperating with the war was an internal necessity. Artists pushing their skills to the limit brought a momentary renaissance for them then, a momentary honeymoon with authority. . . . Among them are rare works where the external necessity and corresponding internal necessity join hands in a way that is missing from the grammar of contemporary art."

Truly, the canvases of innumerable war paintings display for us a miraculous ray of light that also recklessly warped reality, in an almost aching rapture of debauchery to the point of enthralling themselves to authority.

Given that, it matters to me not at all whether they were jesters playing to state authorities or amanuenses of paeans to the slaughter. Who was it that cut off the blood-stained hands of these artists who crawled through their own hellish canvases, risking the existence of their paintings in such extremes of devastation?

No matter how you dissect it, the growth of art over the twenty-five years since the war—from artists of all backgrounds finding a way through life in the immediate aftermath, to the investigation of responsibility for war painting, and overlapping with that the formation of the Japan Art Society as the first postwar avant-garde art movement, to the art of today—has taken a path that has saved the reputation of the system's jesters from even the least disrepute. But why is it then that the gods only visited their hands in that moment during the war?

Did the debased concept of autonomy that modernity lavished upon art make people forget about blindly striving to reach the limits of one's potential? Did anti-establishment ideas unintentionally steal the joy from painting? Did they conceal how the *exultation of the hand dancing* allowed painting to become the regime's undiscovered paradise?

It was for the most part after the end of World War II that painting began

to collapse under *freedom* and that an aesthetic awareness based in a fictitious autonomy began to proliferate.

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Given the frankly obscene set of circumstances surrounding the Pacific War record paintings today, there are many factors beyond art that we must consider. One thing in particular we must never forget when we think about Japan's Pacific War paintings, though, is the clear fact that from the beginning of the Second Sino-Japanese War, Japanese commoners overwhelmingly supported military authority and the Imperial Rule Assistance Association (from 1940). We must also pay attention to the context in which war paintings were criticized after the defeat, when the appearance of a cunning, calculating, real nationalism saw those who had served under the slaughterers suddenly turn on their former heroes and leaders and strangle them without a second thought. These two faces show the duplicity of everyday thought, but in the art world it is war paintings that shouldered the extreme storm of this nationalism most directly.

The critical context of that moment is curiously intertwined with the skittishness of postwar art in a newly reborn Japan. They were unable to approach war paintings from anything other than a situational outlook and at the extreme they descended deep into the folds of a nationalism with a different face. This has made it challenging from the outset to pursue war painting as a problem of painting or to advance a theory strictly of artistic expression. What I am getting at is not another farce where the eye crust laughs at the snot. It is not another clod-footed somersault performed by a postwar art that claims to have no skeletons in its closet.

The biggest problem of war paintings lies in the breadth of the field they inhabit, between a logic of pleasure (expression) that remained unflagging even when enslaved by authority, and an ethics of justice that comfortably accommodated mass killers. Painting itself existed across this area between the gutters on each side, and the theory of artistic expression hinged on how well it made them its object. The real

reason for investigating war paintings lies here, not with the assignment of responsibility and much less with establishing a negative monument. Those issues hold no interest and have squandered a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to theorize artistic expression.

Faced with a new beginning after the war, the *survivors* declared their own lives to be "survival filled with disgrace" as a way to mentally come to terms with the deaths of so many of their brethren. And while it is true that they submitted their bodies to the humiliating reality of the immediate postwar period, they did not progress far toward excavating the "depraved spirit" that had violated their brethren even unto death. This was a mission that theories adjacent to prewar surrealism were perfectly positioned to take on, but in the storm whipped up by socialist realism as it secured hegemony in the aftermath of defeat, such "degenerate ideas" were unable to take shape in the critical landscape.

It is unfortunate that nothing was more important to interpreting war paintings than "degenerate ideas." Everyone got tripped up by the Japanese idea of repentance, articulated by Hariu Ichirō as his "shock that there were people during the war who believed Japan would lose and continued to resist secretly," making it more difficult to freely assess the war paintings. As of today, the idea of following one's master to the grave has been spectacularly turned on its head, as in "I was shocked that there were so many fellow countrymen *who believed Japan would win* and went to their deaths without the least bit of hesitation." Both of these claims are entirely familiar.

Certain strands of painting that appeared postwar in this context—indictment paintings, a.k.a. "peace paintings" or resistance paintings, a.k.a. "despair paintings"—were given the role of beating war paintings to a pulp on the occasion of the birth of the New Japanese People, in a ring controlled by the same people. At the time, the appearance of indictment paintings (The Hiroshima Panels, for example) must have seemed like a great hero of justice tall enough to reach the clouds.

It is not only that it was garbage tossing out garbage. It is that when the search for networks of wartime resistance was nearly brought to a

teetering standstill by the twin burden of "respect for humanity" and "artistic autonomy," then large numbers of "unequaled champions" started to appear "whose human agency had withstood the extreme conditions of repression under the wartime state." The way the critical landscape was bulldozed by this kind of *fetishism* made it even more difficult to advance criticism in broad daylight, and provided a way to seclude the war painters, sealing them away as part of those accursed days, together with the precious light of insight they gained from their congress with the devil, and despite the fact that they held a major key to the meaning of issues like "respect for humanity" and "artistic autonomy."

It is here that some of the largest "intentionally lost articles" ever in the history of art fell out of the critical landscape with a thump, where they remain to this day. What "respect for humanity" cut away reached even to the internal view of authority that the hands of these jesters had managed momentarily to light up so brightly.

Dogs and loyalty to the emperor are both deaf and mute regarding their internal structure. They must always remain ethically tone deaf. With art as a smoke screen for their internal structure, they both make art a hanger-on only when within range to stab, and when out of range, they deem art totally unnecessary. Art is just one type of "surprise," where the representative players gawk with ridiculous gazes, staring at the curiosities they have distilled from the strange outside world that festoon the platters they hold aloft with trembling hands. Whether one is an aggressor or a victim, a dog, loyalty, or a sponge gourd, all of these things get boiled together into a stew (the canvas), and are eventually all thrown out.

For the person who paints, there can be no mistaking that the things they paint (the stew) are actual things. Being for or against authority can confuse the flavor. Although I do not know what happens in the case of writing where concrete reference is missing, paintings engage with some facet of real things, which destine the thing that is painted and the real thing to become persistently entwined because of their relatedness. That is what is so difficult about war paintings. But high-quality war paintings remain in an *unrelated confrontation*, where

the painter never got close to the real thing being painted—the war in which so many died. We could also think in terms of a gawker's relation to the tragic. They freeze the real thing so that it hangs in space. In the case of poor-quality war paintings, it is only the painter and the war confronting each other, making them hideous and miserable, and banal in their extreme obviousness.

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Now then, let us intrude among the people who have been labeled war painters (a strange title!).

First at the top, the very best group. This group was not open to any old painter. Selection was the job of the communications departments of the army and navy, but in fact it was the large newspaper companies like the *Asahi Shimbun* that held the initiative. "Prosperity in unity" was part of the propaganda directed toward Japanese citizens, and if these artists had not been supported in major exhibitions sponsored by the newspaper companies, the military would not have revered them either. There are about thirty names, including those active from the Second Sino-Japanese War. You can imagine how much of a target of envy they were among other artists. Fujita Tsuguharu was at the rank of major general (not just a major, mind you). Under Fujita were Nakamura Ken'ichi, Miyamoto Saburō, Ihara Usaburō, Koiso Ryōhei, Tamura Kōnosuke, Terauchi Manjirō, Tsuruta Gorō, Kawabata Ryūshi, Yamaguchi Hōshun, Shimizu Toshi, Kita Renzō, Nakayama Takashi, Yasuda Yukihiko, etc.

Next come the second-tier group. These are people who were students of the artists in the very best group and because their teachers were painting war paintings they too painted them with confidence (names omitted). To the right of them is a group called the aspiring group, a.k.a. the best and the brightest. Appropriate to prosperity in unity. People who hoped to serve the nation by applying their artistic talent (in the communications departments of the army and navy, and in the army's enlisted artist organization) (names omitted). Well below the second-tier group is the third-tier group. As the name indicates, they are third

tier. Makers of kamishibai who took all kinds of work as illustrators for film companies and magazines.

Next come the common soldier group. These were people who were never recognized as artists no matter how much they claimed otherwise. The stop-with-the-terrible-paintings-and-grab-a-gun group, a.k.a. the conscripted-by-draft group. There are probably many among them who produced excellent sketches on the front lines and the home front. There were a great number who failed the physical exam or were a liability in the army and came and went. It is better to interpret the majority of this group as providing a picture of *artists during the war*. They had no relationship whatsoever with the war painters, but what appears from within this group is a picture of what it was like for commoners led by the nose and tossed to the tyranny of military authority, and people who turned their suffering as artists to their advantage to become the lens makers scrutinizing reality in the "postwar." "They used the thoughts and visions they had accumulated during the isolation of wartime life as leverage to push open the heavy door," and, "express frankly and unsparingly the despair that eddied darkly beneath the feelings of liberation and the ferocious life force that squirmed among the ruins" (Hariu). Looking at it a different way, they drew the worst lot, but on the other hand, the windfall of not being recognized as artists was that they were able to keep their inner activity free.

The discussion has taken a detour, but next, to the left of the second-tier group, is the grumbling group, a.k.a. the doing-one's-duty group. People in the orbit of the Bijutsu Bunka Association. People who painted lackluster war paintings when, between their own conscience and their duty to the military, their fingers finally froze up. Finally, the Japanese flag and red flag group. From proletarian art to war paintings then yet again to democracy then again into even more fabulous people. People made very busy by modern times. Thinking about this crowd makes my head hurt, however, so I stop (names omitted).

In addition there was an Art Materials Control Council to regulate the art supplies available to these artists. I had thought the military regulated

these directly but that appears not to have been the case. During the war, almost all artists without exception came into various forms and types of conflict, both public and private, with the Cabinet Intelligence Bureau, the Special Higher Police, the Army and Navy Communication Departments, the Art Materials Control Council, the Patriotic Arts Association, and more. The number was undoubtedly significant.

After the end of the war the artworks collected by members of the US military number 10,677. Of course we do not know what percentage of these were war paintings, but just looking at the number of works treated to the "shame of being a prisoner of war," there must also have been a huge number of works that were burned or looted by individuals. A fair number of paintings from Germany, Italy, Australia, and elsewhere were among them. A huge number of canvases were burned in Japan too, or lost in the confusion in the aftermath of the war, when we think about the approximately five hundred sketches Fujita burned or Sakamoto Hanjirō's large 300-size canvas *Three Human Bullet Heroes* that remains missing though there is no evidence of it being burned. Then there are the war paintings created by unknown artists for submission to exhibitions of various sizes and types that probably ended up being thrown away when they returned to the artists' studios. We can assume then, that the war paintings we are now talking about are just the tip of the iceberg. The fact that the only works we have today are the ones that were seized by the US military stirs up a sense of desolation for some reason. In the end we have no choice but to base our thinking on the approximately two hundred works that are currently extant.

Even if we generalize about the Pacific War record paintings, it is not surprising that the aspect of the paintings changes markedly along with the progress of the war. In the early stages of the war, the paintings reflect the same national mood as during the First Sino-Japanese War, the Russo-Japanese War, and the Second Sino-Japanese War. Standing on the shoulders of an optimistic frontier spirit, many of them are amateurish kamishibai. It is also interesting that many of the people who painted steadily during the victorious first half of the war suddenly stop painting entirely during the second half.

But toward the end of the war, as the honorable deaths mounted and people feared that Japan would be wiped out and the dust of war began to dance even in artists' studios, a ghastly sensibility appeared that finally broke away from the subject-matter-first approach.

One can see this characteristic well by dividing the most representative war paintings into two periods: the period when the army's campaigns to the south were actually victorious, from the start of the war on December 8, 1941, to around May of 1942, and the period of defeat from about the Battle of Midway (June 5, 1942) to the end of the war.

Victory Period
Pearl Harbor on December 8, 1941 (Fujita Tsuguharu), *Naval Battle Off Malaya* (Nakamura Ken'ichi), *Naval Battle Off Malaya* (Fukuzawa Ichirō), *The Fall of Singapore* (Fujita Tsuguharu), *Meeting of Generals Yamashita and Percival* (Miyamoto Saburō), *Constructing a Bridge in Malaya* (Shimizu Toshi), *Paratroops Descending on Palembang* (Tsuruta Gorō), *Landing in the Face of the Enemy Under the Southern Cross* (Kawabata Ryūshi), *Battle to Capture Singapore* (Terada Takeo), *Attack on the Borneo Oil Fields* (Kawabata Minoru), *Bukit Timah Highlands* (Fujita Tsuguharu), *Soldiers to the Rescue* (Fujita Tsuguharu), etc.[1]

Defeat Period
Intercepting B-29s (Nakamura Ken'ichi), *Special Attack Corps Setting Out From Tachikawa Base* (Iwata Sentarō), *Naval Battle Off Midway* and *The Fall of Admiral Yamaguchi Tamon* (Kita Renzō), *The Americans' Fate in the Battle of the Solomon Sea* (Fujita Tsuguharu), *Honorable Death of the Garrison on Peleliu Island* (Nakayama Takashi), *Commander Sano Bidding Farewell to the Ōno Volunteer Corps* (Tamura Kōnosuke), *Desperate Fighting on Saipan* (Hashimoto Yaoji), *Nagumo's Troop in the Caves of Saipan* (Koiso Ryōhei), *Honorable Death on Saipan* (Fujita Tsuguharu), *Final Fighting on Attu* (Fujita Tsuguharu), *Deadly Battle in the Jungle in New Guinea* (Satō Kei), *Mortal Combat of the Yasuda Unit on the New Guinea Front* (Fujita Tsuguharu), *Special Attack Plane Plunges into American Warship* (Kurata Fumindo), *Bloody Battle* (Tamura Kōnosuke), *Decisive Battle on Guadalcanal* (Fujita

1 [Readers should not rely on this translation for an accurate representation of these paintings' titles. The translation has followed Kikuhata's original text, and in the original text, Kikuhata's references to painting titles do not always match up with the titles designated by holding institutions. For example, Kikuhata references a painting titled シンガポール最後の日. That is likely a reference to the painting held by the Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo, which the museum titles as シンガポール最後の日(ブキ・テマ高地). The English translation follows Kikuhata's version of the title: *The Fall of Singapore*, whereas the Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo lists it as *The Fall of Singapore (Bukit Timah)*.

In the appendix at the end of the text, we have included a list of paintings for which we could not find prior reference; in these cases also, Kikuhata's reference may not be entirely accurate.]

Tsuguharu), *Attack on American Base on Leyte* (Fujita Tsuguharu), *View of the Ōno Volunteer Corps Fighting* (Tamura Kōnosuke), *Human Torpedoes Set Out From Base* (Ihara Usaburō), etc.

Looking at war paintings this way, the victory period's idealized illustrations of authority, like winning hearts and minds, raising the fighting spirit, fraternizing with the native people, and the like, begin to transform into blood-soaked banquets of flesh slaughtering flesh.

It testifies to how, in their relationship with authority, artists had moved from lying coquettishly in the same bed with military oppression and the Special Higher Police to being emotionally aloof. Where before they had been lurching along in their painting they now began to run by themselves.

The reasons for ignoring or disdaining or resisting authority, in some way still succumb to another *authority* (the great sun god). But when the war transmogrified from distant thunder to the viscid hell of primitive hand-to-hand combat, when "we kill them because they kill us" escalated to "we kill because we kill" escalated to "Kill! Kill!" it is unsurprising that authority, the sun god, and even the sponge gourd disappear.

On the day of the final total massacre when even the gawkers' eyes are removed, the thing that was painted will remain as the only route to their blood where it seeped deep into the bowels of the earth.

Before dawn July 8, 1942, on the island of Saipan, ten thousand Japanese civilians and 30,629 officers and men under the command of lieutenant general Saitō went to an honorable death by suicide! Without a specific object to substantiate these accursed days, wouldn't time have torn everything up into scraps by now? What does it mean to cry and moan in a pub in your allotted zone for compassion about memories of the country at war? In the painting of the honorable deaths of Saipan, no matter what anyone says, there is the clear fact of necrophilia toward those left in the moment after the massacre. Among those who made war paintings, Fujita Tsuguharu is about the

fig. 1

Fujita Tsuguharu, *Final Fighting on Attu*, 1943

Collection of National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo

only one who personally absorbed criticism for being the ringleader in painting's debasement, and yet nevertheless steadfastly repudiated the charges. Part of the context to this is surely that Fujita was always a top-class jester, a giant among gawkers, a craftsman of visual depiction, a person with an intense appetite for fame who would refuse things unless he was made leader in both name and reality, even when it came to *painting war paintings*. But isn't it also because, more than any other artist (including artists who never painted war paintings), he had plunged his body fully into the singular, fateful shock of being on the brink of the nation's destruction as a desperate craftsman ready to sacrifice his own life? One of the strange things when you look at the paintings from the defeat period as a whole is that, although it has been pointed out that war paintings had a large part to play in supporting the masquerade that the news media feigned as the defeats piled up, there are surprisingly almost no canvases that achieve the "total masquerade" you can see in the (facsimile editions of) newspapers from the time. I feel this shows how words and paintings operate in entirely different registers. I think I can understand how good-quality war paintings were created in the period of defeat—it is teeming with tense canvases with real power. Supporting Fujita's paintings on the flanks are Tamura Kōnosuke's *Commander Sano Bidding Farewell to the Ōno Volunteer Corps*, *View of the Ōno Volunteer Corps Fighting*, and *Bloody Battle*; Hashimoto Yaoji's *Desperate Fighting on Saipan*; and Satō Kei's *Deadly Battle in the Jungle in New Guinea*.

Miyamoto Saburō exhibits a craftsman-like skill on par with Fujita's. He looked like he was on a roll with *Paratroops Deploying in Manado*, *Attack on an American Mechanized Unit*, *Meeting of Generals Yamashita and Percival*, and *Fierce Fighting Near Mount Nicholson, Hong Kong*. *Meeting of Generals Yamashita and Percival* won the 1943 Art Academy Award and has become like a poster child of war paintings. He seems to have had a natural affinity for the military, however, so he doesn't fit well into the image of the cowardly lapping jester that is the main reason for my interest in war paintings. Even so, the space in *Fierce Fighting Near Mount Nicholson, Hong Kong* is beautifully taut. There is a studio faction, humanitarian faction, and southern landscape faction in war paintings too, but these in themselves are neither good

nor bad and mean nothing to me.

My purpose, though, is not to give an overview with one example after another. While so many other people experienced frustration and indecision, Fujita's canvases are unique in how they bite into their subject sadistically throughout, dancing around crazily as if this was his big moment.

Let us look at Fujita's "wartime career." He begins painting real war paintings the year after the start of the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937), when he was sent to central China at the behest of the Department of the Navy. Around this time, after coming back to Japan in 1929 after seventeen years abroad, he was traveling around excessively—going to Beijing, Shanghai, and Okinawa, with women coming and going as well. He was very busy and his mind was not yet in his war paintings. Many have a leisurely mood. About 200 artists participated in the Second Sino-Japanese War, either dispatched or as part of their military service. But considering the mood of the nation at the time there were probably a fair number who willingly volunteered to go (like Kurihara Shin and Mukai Junkichi). In *View of the Attack on Nanchang Airfield*, he carefully included the names of the soldiers in the airplanes on the canvas, and the picture is light and airy as if they were dragonflies. With *View of Storming Hankou* as well, he paints the sea and sky as if pouring oil over the canvas. Fujita was actually serving at the time of the capture of Hankou but the military probably pampered him and let him stay on a battleship somewhere keeping him in good spirits. *Occupation by Tanks of the Khalkha River, Nomonhan* is a large canvas and is the best among Fujita's paintings on the subject of the Second Sino-Japanese War.

This campaign involved an international border dispute between Japan and the Soviet Union and in fact saw hard fighting against stubborn resistance from the Chinese army that resulted in terrible casualties, but Fujita seems to have been quite excited to go and see (and serve) the still invincible Japanese army at war. Seeing how he visited Paris again in 1939 when there were clear signs of another world war about to ignite, we can imagine that he had participated with the sense of it

fig. 2

Fujita Tsuguharu, *Fierce Fighting of Kaoru Paratroops After Landing on the Enemy's Position*, 1945

Collection of National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo

being straightforward public service and that his head was still filled with thoughts of his career.

It is fateful that the *View of the Attack on Nanchang Airfield* was but a prelude to the climax of *Honorable Death on Saipan* six years later. By the time he was sidling up to the subject of war paintings in his studio, he had already seen 50 years come and go, so we can see that it was neither whim nor the impetuousness of youth but the gloomy destiny of incipient old age. Fujita had experienced the outbreak of World War I in Paris, staying there somehow despite the order for Japanese nationals to evacuate. He volunteered to serve as a foreign soldier but was rejected, worked as a volunteer nurse with the Red Cross, and sung songs about the flower among cities—Montparnasse, Paris—even as the threat of the German armies bore down steadily on Paris. It was inevitable that this nostalgic "war" swooped back down upon Fujita in his early old age. From this point "Ah, the great Montparnassian l'art pour l'art," gently began to cast a heavy shadow. The optimism, self-indulgence, flightiness, and the carnal quality to the logic of his work before war paintings became vital predispositions that only demonstrated their true value when it came to creating war paintings. The Montparnasse school would be made a plaything of an ironic fate. Apart from that, though, I have little desire to go any deeper into the cats, women, and Montparnasse that everyone knows.

Fujita saw the outbreak of World War II in Paris as well. He returned to Japan within a year and there can be little doubt that he did so with a fair understanding of what it meant. Without wasting a moment the army approached the renowned Fujita and sent him to Hsinking in 1940. *Decisive Battle on the Banks of the Khalkha*, *All Out Attack on Gubeikou*, *Heavy Bombing*, and *Transoceanic Bombing Formation* coexisted with the cats, young girls, and old men's faces, and thus he blundered into the Pacific War. When the war began he was still serving complacently as a cultural ambassador, visiting Indochina for a planned exhibition to win hearts and minds in the colonies. But it is from his deployment to Singapore (1942) to paint battle record paintings for the army that his famous bowl cut became a buzz cut and his divine powers emerged clearly.

With Fujita as the leader, accompanied by twenty-one preeminent jesters—yōga artists, nihonga artists, members of the press corps—the journey south must have been quite an impressive spectacle.

In the same year he was also retained by the navy to travel south, he was nominated to membership in the Imperial Academy of Arts (1942), received the Danang Prize (1942), and submitted work to the Holy War Art Exhibition (1942) and Great East Asian War Art Exhibition (1942)—verily, the sight of a geisha among swirls of falling cherry blossoms. *Pearl Harbor on December 8, 1941, View of the Sinking of the Arizona* (presented to the Department of the Navy), *Night Attack on Tengah Airbase* (presented to the headquarters of the Army Air Corps), *The Fall of Singapore, Bukit Timah Highlands February 10th, Soldiers of the South*. It is a moment when the authorities, the geisha, unfolding events, and the audience were playing in splendid harmony with Fujita at the center. He also painted *Twin Refugee Children*, *Old Town of An Nam People*, *Old Tree inside the Palace Grounds, French Indochina*, but these were just a tingle from his Montparnasse days.

In *Bukit Timah Highlands February 10th*, he did not fail to catch the figure of the soldier lying down on his back; it is interesting being able to see Fujita's sense of humor revealed in this act of flipping the precious soldier upside down. In Fujita's works, everyone can share in seeing the extravagant exertions of one of the preeminent war artists of the day, recognized widely for the strength of his compositions. The most elevated among these works of the middle stage is *The Fall of Singapore* (surrendered on February 15, 1942), on par with Miyamoto Saburō's *Fierce Fighting Near Mount Nicholson, Hong Kong* (occupied on December 25, 1941). The subject of both are battles that cost enormous sacrifice, but they have been fashioned into uncanny war paintings by bringing the massacres themselves out before something even grander in the majestic space of the paintings.

With the Battle of Midway in June 1942 and the honorable deaths on Attu in May 1943, the tide of war gradually succumbed to a mood of defeat, yet Fujita's hand summoned an unearthly atmosphere, dancing and rushing forward as if starved for the odor of blood. Around the time

of *The Americans' Fate in the Battle of the Solomon Sea, His Majesty the Emperor Visiting Ise Shrine, The New Guinea Front, Fierce Advance of the Ogaki Unit,* and *Soldiers to the Rescue*, enormous, thunderous works begin to appear.

They are *Final Fighting on Attu, Decisive Battle on Guadalcanal, View of the Honorable Death of Our Countrymen on Saipan*, and *Attack on American Base on Leyte*. These works, along with Tamura Kōnosuke's *Bloody Battle* and *View of the Ōno Volunteer Corps Fighting*, and Satō Kei's *Deadly Battle in the Jungle in New Guinea* advance an enormous, gruesome carnal lust more terrifying than any other in the history of modern art. It is also in these works that I see full existential fear in Fujita.

The personal history of Fujita, born to a military doctor in 1886, receiving the Order of the Sacred Treasure, First Class in 1968 *while on foreign soil*, and departing this world at the age of eighty-one, is not of interest to me. Nor are his works in those years, nor the Léonard Foujita feted around the world. It is only two or three of the years from his long life of eighty-one that truly astonish me. We have abused works like Hamada Chimei's *Elegy for New Recruits* by treating them like pieces of war you can hold in your hand, and fitting people out for peace with them. It bugs me the way that, during peacetime, war is talked about as *evil*. In Fujita's *Fall of Our Countrymen on Saipan* there are no new recruits soaked in elegies, but on the bottom right there is a scrap of a middle-aged man putting a rifle barrel in his mouth where he has been cast aside. Hamada's elegy is no more than a single drop in Fujita's huge bath of blood. One cannot paint war in a time of peace. By doing so we may be pouring artistic expression into the mold of our sensibilities but it never exceeds our sensibilities.

In the case of *The Americans' Fate in the Battle of Solomon Sea*, it is impossible to escape the subject in the title, but we can look at it as a perfect example of a work that has become autonomous from the subject-centrism [that characterizes many war paintings]. In the final analysis, power and ideology are utterly stupid regarding the ingenuity that lurks within the density of artistic expression. This is proven by the way Fujita could parade around without reprimand even from

the hysterical Special Higher Police, in negotiations with the army, or displaying works for groups of fanatics. This work is filled with mythic character, like Noah's ark. There are people who act like the artists who were forced to remove their works from exhibition by the army during the war had slain Goliath, but I am not interested at all in such incidents.

With a frozen mountain of ice in the background, *View of the Honorable Deaths on Attu* is a work that would send chills through a ghost from hell. The living and the dead sway back and forth like rags in undulating waves. *Decisive Battle on Guadalcanal* has some similarities, but in that work, Fujita apparently first painted the central figure and then painted all the surrounding figures in one go. But in *Attu*, commanding officer Yamazaki (the soldier) who wields the sword is already gone from the center, and the composition is organized around a figure to the left who looks like an insane monkey. Commanding officer Yamazaki (the soldier) has become the kindest figure in the picture. This is the greatest thing Fujita was able to grasp, through his own *insanity*. This issue is something that standard critiques of war paintings miss. Brandishing the logic that war is human folly is a twisted modification of the implicit desire to justify a war that was difficult to avoid for a nation-state with a particular culture that had gotten involved with having particular desires. It is all-too-easy to let things rest with war being human folly. It is all well and good for the individual so long as the nation-state is an illusion, but when that illusion bears its fangs the individual is usually powerless. Fujita's canvases include no convenient formalities like war being human folly. He was painting joyfully, painting unable to stop. *The Fall of Singapore* took twenty-six days, *Bukit Timah Highlands* took sixteen days. He apparently stayed in his studio painting for an average of fourteen hours a day, mumbling to himself, too absorbed to eat. He pounced on the 300-size gigantic canvas of slaughter with a cry of joy.

Decisive Battle on Guadalcanal may show Fujita at his most confident, but the fighting depicted was in fact the beginning of Japan's defeat in the south. While on the one hand it had the aspect of a withdrawal operation for the Japanese army, the authority of the "divine army" still clung on, so the evenly matched Japanese and American forces made good as they starved. Fujita apparently posed triumphantly for a friend

who was visiting his studio as the central figure in the canvas. The soldier stabs someone with a saber held in his right hand, kicks another person away with his right foot, and has grabbed someone else by the collar with his left hand to throw them down—a veritable superman. But strangely the depiction does not look forced. Alone in his studio, Fujita banged around as if he had gone mad to attain the most extreme form of slaughter. But what was he dancing to? It is horrifying. Our studios are workshops for splashing paint over our feckless, apathetic everyday experiences, or grottos to hide away with our conceptual illustrations of amateurish debates. His studio was a place that slaughterers visited day and night to raise ecstatic cries as they were touched by the highly crafted portrayals from his brush. The head of the decapitated American soldier in *Attack on American Base on Leyte* still hangs in midair even today, twenty-five years later.

Twenty-five years later, people still attack American air bases this way, be it people in the Liberation Front of South Vietnam or whoever. The slaughter still continues, the heads cut off have still not fallen. It is easy to switch out this monkey-like soldier for a Vietnamese soldier. But we cannot evaluate the painting like that, by handing it around like a hot potato among militarists, peace activists, avant-gardists, and revolutionaries. It is obvious that this is a picture of the go-for-broke "Yamato Spirit" in October 1944, a period when Japan was being dispossessed of its final colony in the Philippines and the dream of the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere was crumbling without resistance. It is a painting he was able to paint when he, as jester-in-chief, had plummeted into hell together with the authorities, and precisely because any ordinary painter would have been quaking with abject fear at painting the murder of an American soldier. Who else among war painters painted anything like this! This is where the usual critique of war paintings must be brushed aside. Why after all, does this painting trouble us and make us look away? We should know that all the countless statements Fujita made in clear support of the war under the militarist government have no relation at all to these paintings.

Fujita's experience of World War I abroad was basically Montparnasse vs. Germany. Even in the face of the war paintings that Léger and Segonzac

and many other artists painted, he was still absorbed in putting out the fires of war in Montparnasse. Many people say his cosmopolitanism conspired to transform into militarism almost immediately after returning to Japan. But actually Fujita was one of a small number of true elites at the time, who looked cosmopolitan from a Japanese perspective; it might be better to see it as an explosion of a complicated sense of inferiority as a Japanese elite abroad. Given that his father also succeeded Mori Ōgai to the post of surgeon general of the Japanese army, we can imagine that his sense of inferiority while living abroad was even more intensely warped. He was neither cosmopolitan nor a nihilist. The childhood image of his father sitting cross-legged atop his military authority was projected as a double image over his identity as an artist. The complex he had toward his father ran through his whole life. The reason this shocks me, and makes me jealous, is that I have never experienced real power—the kind that would eat its own kin.

And yet, the travails of his life oddly correspond to the Renaissance master Michelangelo's. Despite being much more timid than most, he barked orders while working to fortify the defenses of Florence, when things got bad he crawled beneath a bell and cried, seeing his comrades killed one after another and while wagging his tail for the Medici, he grandly reigned as a master artist, and thus behaved transcendentally, implying the motion of a star that rarely comes close to the orbits of average people. History put it right before our eyes 400 years later in the figure of Fujita.

As Savonarola said, "For that reason, things that only encourage worldly pleasure-seeking emotions are not simply vain but harmful. They become tools of the devil!" Today all that we await is the devil itself. After 400 years we are still Savonarola. Did we not commit another "bonfire of the vanities" in the postwar?

Who is among this unmasking youth brigade dispatched to artists' studios as hangers-on of justice. Savonarola was burned at the stake but we are still here, smiling away.

We are so far removed from artistic expression today that even the

words of Michelangelo would cause us to quiver and quake. “As it was in ancient times, art is best advanced among the aristocracy and is not something known by those of the lower classes.”

APPENDIX

ARTIST	WORK TITLE	ROMANIZED JAPANESE	TRANSLATION
Kawabata Ryūshi	「南十字星下の敵前上陸」	Minami jūjiseika no tekizen jōriku	Landing in the Face of the Enemy Under the Southern Cross
Terada Takeo	シンガポール攻略戦	Shingapōru kōryakusen	Battle to Capture Singapore
Kawabata Minoru	ボルネオ油田地帯攻撃	Boruneo yudenchitai kōgeki	Attack on the Borneo Oil Fields
Koiso Ryōhei	サイパン島洞窟内の南雲部隊	Saipantō dōkutsunai no Nagumo butai	Nagumo’s Troop in the Caves of Saipan
Kurada Fumindo	特攻機米艦突入	Tokkōki beikan totsunyū	Special Attack Plane Plunges into American Warship
Tamura Kōnosuke	血闘	Kettō	Bloody Battle
Tamura Kōnosuke	大野挺身隊闘戦の図	Ōno teishin taitōsen no zu	View of the Ōno Volunteer Corps Fighting
Fujita Tsuguharu	漢口突入の図	Kankō totsunyū no zu	View of Storming Hankou
Fujita Tsuguharu	古北口総攻撃	Kohokukō sōkōgeki	All Out Attack on Gubeikou
Fujita Tsuguharu	重爆	Jūgeki	Heavy Bombing
Fujita Tsuguharu	渡洋爆撃編隊	Toyō bakugeki hentai	Transoceanic Bombing Formation
Fujita Tsuguharu	アリゾナ型撃沈の図	Arizona-gata gekichin no zu	View of the Sinking of the Arizona
Fujita Tsuguharu	二月十日プキテマ高地	Ni-gatsu tō-ka Bukitema Kōchi	Bukit Timah Highlands February 10th
Fujita Tsuguharu	南方の兵隊さん	Nanpou no heitai-san	Soldiers of the South
Fujita Tsuguharu	避難民の双児	Hinanmin no sōji	Twin Refugee Children
Fujita Tsuguharu	古き安南人の町	Furuki An-nan’jin no machi	Old Town of An Nam People
Fujita Tsuguharu	仏印ユエの宮城内の老樹	Futsu-In Yue no kyūjōnai no rōbai	Old Tree inside the Palace Grounds, French Indochina
Fujita Tsuguharu	天皇陛下伊勢神宮に御親拝	Tennō heika Ise jingu ni goshinpai	His Majesty the Emperor Visiting Ise Shrine

This text was originally published as “Fujita yo anata wa…: Taiheiyō Sensō kirokuga kara no kōsatsu” in *Bijutsu techō*, (March 1972): 174–187. Translated by Justin Jesty.

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