



## Yuko Yabuki

Phoenix-based visual artist Yuko Yabuki is an Arizona cultural treasure. While she grew up in rural Japan and attended graphic design college in Tokyo, Yuko decided to leave her country to pursue her professional art practice. She arrived in the United States and Phoenix in 1995 where she established herself as a fixture in a fast-growing art scene which continues to flourish today.

And Yuko's artist trajectory is flourishing, as evidenced by the museum and gallery exhibitions planned for her this year in the Phoenix area. Viewing this virtual exhibition, which retraces her quantum growth in style, in creative skills, research-fueled ideas, and affording a look back at the transformations in her work, validates the enthusiastic fascination with Yuko Yabuki and her art these days.

An examination of two works in the exhibition, painted almost two decades apart, *8th Sin* (2002) and *XV Beast* (2019), reveals her fortified prowess in the use of materials, the evolution of her ideas, the sophistication in content, and her impressive use of line and details. In the earlier work, the image appears somewhat flattened atop an oil

barrel lid, has a limited palette of rust colors echoing the rusting support, and is direct in its image of a human skull with an eight-pointed star and the numeral 8 placed in the center near the eyes. This symbol is used in different cultures with different meanings. Some of these cultures are Buddhism, Hinduism, Gnostics, Wiccans, Judeo-Christian, Egyptian, and Babylonian. According to one source, this symbol allows us to open our eyes to see beyond the material world in exploring spiritual beliefs. This syncs with Yuko's interests and ideas, and the energy and inspiration she personally derives from examining the beliefs of others beyond her own.

In *XV Beast*, a more recent painting, viewers are wonderfully confronted by a creature with seven gold-crowned heads sprouting from a coiling monster adorned with leopard markings. In the center of the coiled creature, we see a bear figure which seems to be supporting the totemic grouping of heads. The work emanates from Yuko's interest in the traditions of various cultures, in this case, the Bible account of St. John's description of the beast from the sea. In Revelations 13.1, the monster "rise(s) up out of the sea, having seven heads and ten horns, and upon his horns ten crowns, and upon his heads the name of blasphemy." The level of sophistication in this work is remarkable, especially comparing it to the earlier work. The palette has rich jewel tones: dazzling gold leaf, blue associated with Spanish and New Spain Baroque paintings of the Virgin Mary, and lavish reds and pinks. Dripping paint is evident as well which for me shows Yuko's passion for the joyful act of painting itself.

While Yuko often navigates between Eastern-Western cultures, it is more accurate to note that she has a world view in her approach in thinking about spirituality, fantasy, mythology, and her material world. When viewing her work, especially the art in this exhibit, we see a plethora of symbols, motifs, and language found in various cultures. Viewers encounter fantastical new lands inhabited by fascinating, sometimes startling, creatures while exploring polarities of right and wrong, good and bad, light and darkness, heaven and hell, and materiality and spirituality.

Yuko reveals her interests in cats, the punk rock subculture, fashion, wildlife, and the tattoo culture. The latter – tattoos – is an especially intriguing aspect of Yuko's artwork – paintings, drawings, prints, sculptures. There is a growing acceptance of this 1,000-year-old art form in today's art world with the example of a recent exhibition now traveling to other venues from the Virginia Museum of Art, Richmond. The Museum extended

the exhibition because of the popularity of this art form, which was once considered subversive, counterculture, prison art, art of the insane, and low brow.

Yet in the Japanese culture, tattoos were strongly influenced by Japanese woodblock prints, especially those made during the Edo period (1603-1868). We see this influence in Yuko's work with layering, movement, line work, and color blending and washes, such as in the monumental 6 feet x 16 feet work *Transition* (2009). Yuko is also influenced by other Japanese styles, as well as by American and Western European contemporary art. It is interesting to note that when living in Japan, Yuko rarely looked at Asian art, but instead was fascinated by art produced in the West.

Phoenix Institute of Contemporary Art is pleased to present this exhibition of selections chosen from Yuko's works from the past two decades. In the good news category, during 2022 and beyond, Yuko will continue a series of twelve monumental paintings with themes of the elements of fire, water, air, and earth. Be sure to keep open eyes on Yuko Yabuki and her art moving forward.

Ted G. Decker  
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