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Review

‘Reinventing Tokyo’ at Mead Art Museum

By Mark Feeney

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AMHERST — All cities are themselves works of art, a collision of design, chance, and finance (in culture, no less than in politics, follow the money). All cities are also works in progress. Perhaps no world capital bestrides the intersection of art and change as astonishingly as Tokyo has. The city wasn't even Tokyo until 1868. Prior to that it was Edo. "Reinventing Tokyo: Japan's Largest City in the Artistic Imagination" begins a dozen years before Edo renamed itself and reaches to the present. In between comes a procession of renderings of a city in incessant flux - those renderings themselves seen to evolve in style, approach, or simply medium. The show runs through Dec. 30 at Amherst College's Mead Art Museum.

In the century and a half since opening to the West, Japan has maintained a unique balancing act: a culture dedicated to tradition in a society predicated on change. Think of how Tokyo is home both to the Imperial Palace and the Ginza shopping and entertainment district. Hamaya Hiroshi's photograph "Near Colombin, Ginza, Tokyo," from 1935, suggests just how exciting, and aggressively modern, the place must have felt - and no less exciting then than it does now.

Kageyama Koyo's 1928 photograph "A Young Woman of the Low City - The Remnants of the Emotions of Edo" is notable not only for having so poetic a title. It's also emblematic of this inherent contradictoriness - or is it radical inclusiveness? - within modern Japan. A woman wearing traditional attire, her face concealed beneath a parasol, looks as though she's stepped out of another century. It could as easily be the 15th as the 19th. Behind her is a suspension bridge and in front of her a metal-and-concrete structural support. It's very much the 20th century that surrounds her. The emotions of Edo may endure, but the innovations of Tokyo accelerate.

Tokyo's reinventions were not altogether by choice. The city survived large fires in 1872 and 1881. The death toll of the 1923 earthquake was 140,000 people. Anywhere from 75,000 to 200,000 residents died during US firebombings in World War II, and half the city was destroyed. "Reinventing Tokyo" acknowledges the role of necessity in the capital's change; three of the 10 sections the show comprises relate to fire, earthquake, or war. But so much of the fascination of both city and exhibition have to do with happenstance. Tokyo never had a master plan, despite the opportunities provided by disaster. Something about the spirit of the city embraced change - as the spirit of New York or Berlin has, and that of Washington, D.C., or London has not.

The role of the West in that change is a running theme. Kawakami Sumio's "Casino Folies, Asakusa Park," from 1930, is a case in point. It's a woodblock print, clearly influenced by German Expressionist prints, which had been profoundly influenced by Japanese woodblock prints of the 19th century. Note, too, how the neon sign in Hamaya's Ginza photograph is in the

shape of the Eiffel Tower. Related to the role of the West is that of technology, whether industrial or consumerist. First it was a Western import, then very much a Japanese export. The single most startling thing in the show may be Ushioda Tokuko's series of refrigerator portraits. That's right, refrigerator portraits. The photographs are diptychs: one showing the fridge with the door open, the other with the door closed. They manage to be both banal and wondrous.

"Reinventing Tokyo" covers a very large amount of ground - temporally even more than spatially. It does so through multiple media: prints, photographs, paintings, maps, postcards. The one obvious omission, at least to a layman's eyes, would be film. The exhibition finds room for fashion, and rightly so. There's a kimono jacket from around 1930 - speaking of Western influence with a baseball-themed lining. From six decades later there's a dress each from Issey Miyake and Rei Kawakubo. Yet great as has been the impact of Tokyo on couture, its impact has been vastly greater on film (and vice versa). Besides being Japan's film capital, the city has provided the setting and/or inspiration for countless motion pictures. Think of Ozu's "Tokyo Story," Kurosawa's "Stray Dog," Mizoguchi's "Street of Shame." A photograph like Koyo's "A Champion of Western Fashion" could be a still from one of Mizoguchi's contemporary films of the '30s.

Presumably, film was left out for logistical reasons. There are nearly 150 works in the show. Yet it feels surprisingly intimate. In part, that's owing to the nature of much of the art. So many of the woodblock prints communicate a transfixing sense of serenity. That's true even if the subject is a steel-girdered structure (Kobayashi Kiyochika's "Takahashi Bridge at Teppozu and a Distant View of Tsukudajima") or an aerodrome (Fujimori Shizuo's "Eleventh Month: Autumn at Haneda, Tokyo Airport").

This sense of viewing intimacy is no less owing to how thoughtfully the show has been put together by art historian Samuel C. Morse and his Amherst colleagues. It's in a series of small galleries, several of them equipped with comfortable oversize chairs and side tables for the convenience of viewers (other museums, take note!). There are numerous subtle flourishes in how the show has been hung. A 2001 series of 11 photographs by Miyoshi Kozo shows a low-rise apartment complex soon to be torn down (destruction as reinvention). Each image is hung slightly higher than the preceding one so as to mimic the slight grade of the hill on which the buildings were erected. A small, but inspired touch, it's representative of the subtlety and care with which "Reinventing Tokyo" has itself been invented.