**Japanese Surrealism (Chôgenjitsushugi**, **超現実主義)**

Japanese Surrealism began as a literary movement in the mid 1920s when French Surrealist theories and literary works were first translated into Japanese, and a number of Japanese poets and writers began to claim Surrealism as the primary inspiration for their writing. In 1928, several Japanese artists began to create Surrealist-style works, and in 1929, the works of three Japanese artists, Abe Kongō (1900-1968, 阿部金剛), Tōgō Seiji (1897-1978, 東郷青児), and Koga Harue (1895-1933, 古賀春江), at the *Second Section* art exhibition were labeled ‘Surreal’ by critics, marking the beginning of Surrealism as a visual practice in Japan. By 1930, Surrealism as a visual art movement was being widely discussed and debated in Japanese art circles, including paintings and photography. While French Surrealists works had great influence on Japanese Surrealist art, reflected in the dream-like scenery, fragmented and disordered bodies, and anti-rational depiction of space, many Japanese Surrealist artists also included mechanical objects, scientific diagrams, and objects referring to everyday urban life. In other words, Japanese Surrealism did not merely imitate Western exemplars but broadly reflected local concerns and Japanese artists’ conflicted desires and anxieties regarding modern life, Western culture, and Japanese society.

Surrealist ideas were first introduced to Japan by poet Nishiwaki Junzaburō (1894-1982, 西脇順三郎) in 1925, a year after André Breton published *The Surrealist Manifesto*. However, during this initial phase, works by Breton and other Western theorists were poorly or only partially translated, and the term ‘Surrealism’ lacked a clear definition in Japan. Meanwhile, Japanese Surrealism faced harsh criticism from adherents of the Proletarian Art Movement, who criticised Surrealism as an attempt to “escape” from reality, which reflected bourgeois values and failed to advance the cause of the proletariat. Within this context, various Japanese artists and critics proposed new definitions of Surrealism. Some insisted that Surrealism is firmly grounded in and inspired by reality and can help improve reality. Others, such as Takenaka Kyūshichi (1907-1962, 竹中久七), advocated a ‘Scientific Surrealism,’ grounded in pure rationality, in stark contrast to the emphasis Breton placed on ‘psychic automatism.’ Visual examples include several works by Koga Harue and Fukuzawa Ichirō in which scientific and mechanical objects predominate. For example in Koga’s *The Sea* (1929), the artist deliberately arranges mechanical objects, including an airship, submarine, and forge, emphasising their status as symbols of modern life by placing them under the direction of a Western girl in a swimming suit.

By the mid-1930s, Breton’s writings were more or less completely translated and widely disseminated in Japan. Surrealist ideas such as automatism, unconsciousness, madness, and fantasy, were widely circulated and inspired many artists, such as Migishi Kōtarō, Okamoto Tarō, Kitawaki Noboru, and Aimitsu. In 1937, the ‘Exhibition of Surrealist Works from Overseas,’ organized by Takiguchi Shūzō and Yamanaka Chirū, became a source of inspiration to both painters and photographers. Surrealism was the cornerstone of experimental photography in Japan in the 1930s, as can be seen on the works by the photography group, ‘Nagoya Photo Avant-Garde’ founded by Yamamoto Kansuke in 1937 and the related journal, ‘Yoru no Funsui’ (The Night’s Fountain), published in 1938 and 1939. Publication ceased when the Special Higher Police deemed its contents subversive. This was the time when Japan’s ruling militarists began suppressing Surrealism as antithetical to an idealised vision of the Japanese national character. It was not until postwar period that aspects of Breton’s Surrealist theory, such as automatism, recaptured Japanese artists’ attention and influenced art practices, although without inspiring a full revival of the Japanese Surrealist movement.

**Image**

Koga Harue, *The Sea*, 1929, The Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo

<http://search.artmuseums.go.jp/records.php?sakuhin=4596>

**References and Further Reading**

John Clark (2013), ‘Surrealism in Japan’, *Modernities of Japanese Art,* Leiden-Boston: Brill, 174-182.

John Clark (2013), ‘Dilemmas of Selfhood: Public and Private Discourses of Japanese Surrealism in the 1930s’,*Modernities of Japanese Art* Leiden-Boston: Brill, 183-192.

Nagoyashi Bijutsukan (1990), *Nihon no shūrurearisumu: 1925-1945*. Nagoya: Nagoyashi Bijutsukan.

Sas, Miryam (2002). *Fault Lines: Cultural memory and Japanese Surrealism*, Stanford University Press.

Majella Munro (2012).*Communicating Vessels: The Surrealist Movement in Japan, 1923-1970*, The Enzo Press.

A collection of resources for the study of Surrealism in Japan can be found at: <http://japanesesurrealism.wordpress.com/>