

Shinkichi the Last Samurai.

Judith van Praag

December 7, 2003, on his eightieth birthday, renowned artist Shinkichi Tajiri was honored by the Dutch art world, friends and family, with the opening of a retrospective exhibition at the Valkhof Museum in Nijmegen, the Netherlands. The show encompassed over half a century of diverse works.

At the entrance, visitors were welcomed by the latest addition to the prolific artist's oeuvre; a lineup of 47 Ronin (based on the story of masterless roaming samurai, faithful to their deceased master). The 8-9 feet tall warriors, sculpted out of foam board –part monstrous fighting machines, part hard core sensuality– embody what appears to be Shinkichi's trade mark; his art speaks of duality. Shinkichi doesn't ask for understanding of his work; sensations, followed by reflection, the only suitable response to art, high or low. The American born artist never liked being put in a box. And with his art he strives to stay far away of any kind of preconceived notion, inviting his audience to do the same.

On December 7, 1941, when the Japanese army attacked the U.S. airfield in Hawaii –Pearl Harbor Day– Shinkichi turned eighteen, a foreshadowing perhaps of the important role the war would play his adult life. Along with 120,000 other Japanese residents and their American born children Shinkichi, his mother and siblings (his father died in 1939) were rounded up and incarcerated in concentration camps. Out of a muddle of patriotic sense and an urge to leave the camp, Shinkichi volunteered for the Army. His future unit, the all Japanese American 100th/442nd Regimental Combat Team, became the most decorated in its size in American military history, suffering a casualty rate three times the number of its original size.

On July 9, 1944 Shinkichi got injured during an attack on Castellina, Italy (stone fragments are still lodged in his bones). During his physical rehabilitation in Europe he started drawing fellow soldiers and war scenes.

Shinkichi's work –his central themes are: speed, erotics and force or violence– is the result of a permanent confrontation with insanity of World War II and its aftermath.

"You need obsession to continue, to not give up... Thanks to the war I became an artist. I'm an artist out of necessity. My imagery is the crystallization of my experiences."

After reuniting with his family in Chicago, Shinkichi worked at the studio of Isamu Noguchi in New York. The G.I. Bill enabled him to study for one year at the Art Institute of Chicago before leaving for Paris, France in 1948, to continue his studies with Ossip Zadkine en Fernand Léger.

In those days everybody who was, or would be –somebody– lived in Paris, many Americans in self imposed exile from racism –war veteran Shinkichi was welcomed home as a "Jap"– and the foul political climate in the United States. Shinkichi met members of the COBRA Art Movement. Because of shortages after the war, artists used all kinds of material to work with, Shinkichi created his earliest sculptures out of found scrap metal.

In 1956 Shinkichi left for Amsterdam with Dutch artist Ferdi Jansen, they got married and in 1957 their daughter Giotta Fuyo was born, followed in 1959 by second daughter Ryu Vinci. In 1962 the family moved to Baarlo, a village in Limburg, the most southern province of the Netherlands. The industrious couple renovated their new home –a dilapidated castle– creating living quarters and extensive art studios. Shinkichi interested a fellow artist in starting a bronze foundry in the village. With the arrival of a Japanese American expatriate, Baarlo –far away from Amsterdam– was put on the artistic map of the Netherlands.

Shinkichi works in series, you may unknowingly have seen his "Knots" in public places, such as the Meeting Point at Schiphol Airport, or admired his work at the Stedelijk or the Kröller Möller Museum. Perhaps you've passed through one of his knotted gates near Baarlo and possibly you noticed his Granny's Knot at the Nelson Rockefeller Foundation in New York, or at the Museum of Modern Art at Aarhus, Denmark. In Los Angeles the Friendship Knot in Little Tokyo can't be missed. And those are only a few of the places in the world where Shinkichi's Knots, forged out of steel, or masterly created out of wood, polyester or fiber glass tie meditative meeting points.

Notwithstanding –or perhaps thanks to– the artist's insistence that rationalization or even trying to understand his art is out of place, a sensation of Zen is what the meditatively inclined viewer experiences when confronted with Shinkichi's well-rounded

knots, or Koans.

A Koan is a paradoxical utterance used in Zen as a center of concentration in meditation. The paradoxical nature of Koans is essential to their function: The attempt to break down conceptual thought. Koans are constructed so that they do not succumb to conceptual analysis and thereby require a more direct response from the meditator.

When asked about the source of inspiration for his Knots-series, Shinkichi answered that the exhaust pipe of his 6-cylinder BRM led to the earliest curved tubular creations.

"Everybody has certain connotations and associations about knots. I was looking for instant communication... The knot is basic."

On Jan. 2, 1969, Ferdi died. One of the first of the Knots-series, the 4x2 Knot stands on her grave, a beautiful memorial and symbol of eternal alliance.

In 1969, Shinkichi was invited to teach at the Staatliche Hochschule für Bildende Künste in Berlin. Suzanne van de Capellen came to live at the castle to care for the girls while Shinkichi was in Berlin. Seven years later they tied the knot (hard to resist this cliché).

Nobuho Nagasawa –her "Missing House" was inspired by the Tajiri family's story– writes in "Tribute to My Mentor": "His teaching philosophy had a profound effect on me as a young professor, ... [his] class became a laboratory, a think tank."

For those familiar with Shinkichi's art in public places only, encountering award winning films, videos and specialty photography; stereo and panorama photos, series of nudes and daguerreotypes at the Valkhof exhibition may have come as a surprise. One of the first to use computer imaging, the octogenarian artist stays abreast of the latest technology and continues adding to his wondrous world, never ceasing to astonish his audience.

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