

Asuka Ohsawa: The Art of Disaster
by Santa Nastro

*The smell of that burning aeroplane slowly faded away,
but it remained in our nostrils for the rest of the night. Then morning came.
The eastern sky lightened slightly.
One could see that sooner or later a great, circular, extraordinary sun would rise.
To me it was a terrible morning. The sun was unbearable. A glaring sun.*

Yukio Mishima, *Trastulli d'animali*

This year has been a year of disasters. A year marked by natural cataclysms, social revolutions, cultural and economic crises which continue to progress, and enormous costs – not only financial, but also human.

As one of the countries to have suffered most, Japan knows this well. When one speaks of disasters, their significance lies not only in the circumstances, but also in the manner in which these events are confronted and the way in which we prepare ourselves for their coming. The ethical code of the Samurai – as described in the Hagakure code, which has been translated into a modern context by Yukio Mishima in his book *The Way of the Samurai* – explains this concept perfectly, stating: “if asked to choose between life and death, one must choose to die”.

However, this is not the only consideration. In fact, the universe of Manga – which constitutes a considerable chunk of Japanese literature – is littered with “invasions”. Japan is portrayed as a land of conquest for dark forces, extra-terrestrial beings, monsters, and warriors from outer space or the ancient kingdom of Yamatai, and demons, who – like those in *Urusei Yatsura* (known as Lamù in Italy – are sometimes even charming. Thus, a disaster – as it is conceived from a point of view that comes closer to European ideals than to the American perspective, where borderline cases merely represent an obstacle to life as normal and the quest for happiness – simply represents a reality that humanity must confront. Disasters form a part of quotidian life or are caused by the discontent of an offended god.

This universe of imaginary beings or dark sense of foreboding – which is deeply rooted in the constant fear provoked by the imminence of frequent earthquakes, nuclear catastrophes, and war time atrocities – is the background from which Asuka Oshawa (born of Japanese parents in Torrence, California) drew her inspiration as she composed the narrative to *Space Invaders: the Next Generation*, clearly citing her reference to a famous videogame from the 80's in the work's title. It is not the first time that Asuka has used this motif in her painting: already in *Extraterrestrial Diplomacy* of 2010, aliens acted as protagonists whose warring intentions had little to recommend for them.

In *Space Invaders: the Next Generation*, the narrative – which develops over twenty panels – is simple, but highly effective. An extraterrestrial race, which cannot be defined any better, lands on earth accompanied by a flock of rubber ducks. The alien hoards are greeted by a confused group of humans, who seem intent on completing their daily chores and do not realize that they have offended their new, powerful guests by catching, selling and eating their idol: the octopus.

To their great detriment, the humans' unknowing actions unleash a decidedly unfriendly reaction from the alien hordes, who burn down their houses and carry out an invasion to full effect.

However, while the humans – despite their surreal, stylized features – are depicted as humble men of normal stature who conduct a serene, if banal, existence, their invaders are quite the opposite. These tall, majestic beings wear tunics embellished with intricate patterns and carry disconcerting ceremonial maces. Their facial features are identical, their smiles impenetrable.

They advance as a compact group that resembles a solemn procession or soldiers marching in an army parade, blowing the petals of cherry flowers – the symbol of beauty and the transience of life – through their trumpet-like noses.

They are the new generation, the race that will raze existing realities to the ground, and inhabit the future of the Earth, imposing ideals that previously did not exist by eliminating the traditions of the past in favour of their own.

Despite the apparently playful suggestions of the fantastical aesthetic used by the artist, and thanks to her laudable ability to marry carefully researched details with the highest technical finish, this narrative confronts a complex theme that has hardly been touched on in the history of art. One is distracted by the brilliant panels, by the apparently carefree animals portrayed, by the meticulous care with which Asuka Ohsawa – who blends the culture of her country of origin with the mutated fantasies of her adoptive nation, the United States – embellishes her protagonists' robes, describing and synthesizing the motifs' connotations. Even the rubber ducks trick us with their sweet, playful appearance. What can be said of Asuka's painting technique? Her still, clear cut colour fields could almost convince one that the world of the Ukiyo-e has met with the mechanisms of digital printing.

However, we are not far from the tradition of conflicts that history has passed down to us or that are still happening. In fact, where invasions occur, cultural domination, annihilation and the authoritarian substitution of existing cultural identity with new ideals that reflect those of the conquering forces always occurs. This is an old story and one could cite numerous examples.

Thus, the octopus is transformed from a banal, quotidian foodstuff into an object of devotion. The octopus now warrants celebratory ceremonies, and banners are embroidered in its honour. There is no room for compromise between the two traditions, nor for a dialogue that might lead to a middle ground. Only a battle will establish who will reap the benefits. Naturally, the stronger opponent always wins, and he – together with those of his own kind – will form the new generation.