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The Politics of Feeling: Contemporary Japanese Art & Anti-War Narratives

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Doe eyes, vibrant and soft-hued, followed us ominously around Yoshitomo Nara's 2021-22 exhibition at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA). I recall this being one of my first formal exposures to Japanese art in the Western setting—aside from Hayao Miyazaki's film screenings or Takashi Murakami's work on Kanye's *Graduation* album—and grew nostalgic for my summers in Kamakura, Japan. Several of the paintings were embellished with familiar characters: “世界はどしゃぶり,” meaning “The world is pouring rain,” like the early-June *tsuyu*, or rainy season. I could faintly hear the ringing noise of cicadas, taste the cool Pocari, and feel the molten tip of a handheld firework, *senkō hanabi*, on the breezy shoreside—then one painting with a pale blue background struck me. I pointed to my friend: “This one must taste like fizzling ramune” (fig. 1). She responded that it more closely resembled our N95 COVID face masks. The nostalgic palette of childhood memories collided immediately with the sterile anxiety of a global crisis, snapping me back into the museum space. Back to art. Back to politics.

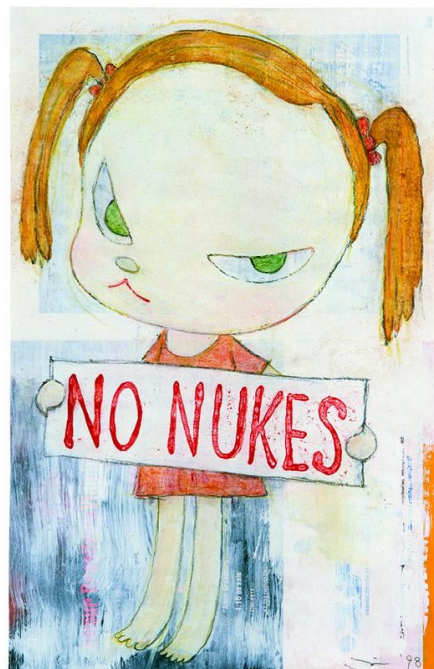


Fig. 1. Yoshitomo Nara, *No Nukes*, 1998.

As my gaze lowered from this ramune background, the pigtailed girl clutches a hand-painted sign reading, “NO NUKES.” Here, the aesthetic language of childhood—soft hues, rounded cheeks, oversized head—declared directly the rhetoric of protest. The dimming memories of ramune and summer rain existed in the same visual field as nuclear history. Having almost mirrored myself in the subject, a childhood at the nexus of Japanese & American identities, I was exposed to the duality of art and its affective communication of political consciousness; the slogan did not eclipse the softness of the girl’s form—it sharpened it.

This paper begins with the premise that contemporary Japanese anti-war art operates through the mobilization of affect as a political force. Artists such as Yoshitomo Nara, Tomiyama Taeko, and Makoto Aida stage their emotional afterlives, rendering nuclear memory, imperial reckoning, and generational dissent through psychological interiority, grotesque exaggeration, and acts of visual witnessing. Within Western museum contexts—where Japanese art is often aestheticized or absorbed into the lexicon of global pop—these artists reinsert historical gravity into visual pleasure, destabilizing the viewer’s relationship to innocence, nationalism, and collective memory. To illuminate the specificity of these strategies, this paper situates their work in dialogue with canonical Western precedents (as discussed in lecture), including Francisco Goya’s *The Disasters of War* and Pablo Picasso’s *Dove of Peace*. As Goya confronts atrocity through graphic realism and Picasso condenses anti-war politics into a universal symbol, contemporary Japanese artists frequently operate through atmosphere, ambivalence, and affective tension. By analyzing these visual languages of resistance, this study demonstrates that anti-war art is not monolithic: it can emerge through spectacle, symbolism, or sensation. In contemporary Japanese practice, politics are not only represented—they are felt, inherited, and lived.

I. Yoshitomo Nara and Aesthetic Politics

A. Biography

Born in 1959 in Hirosaki, Aomori Prefecture, Yoshitomo Nara grew up in rural northern Japan during a period defined by postwar reconstruction, Cold War nuclear tension, and expanding American cultural influence. Although he did not directly experience wartime devastation, he belonged to a generation shaped by its aftereffects—what might be described as an inherited atmosphere of nuclear memory and geopolitical unease. This generational positioning is crucial to understanding his anti-war sensibility: Nara's work does not arise from battlefield testimony, but from the psychological sediment of living in war's long shadow.

After earning his BA and MFA at Aichi Prefectural University of Fine Arts and Music, Nara relocated to Germany in 1988 to study at the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf. He remained in Germany until 2000. This period was formative. Removed from Japan and immersed in European art history, Nara experienced intense isolation—an experience he has repeatedly cited as shaping the psychological depth of his figures. During these years, his paintings began to collapse innocence and aggression into a single unstable form: children with knives, hands morphing into flames, divided compositions suggesting fractured moral landscapes. While not yet overtly slogan-based, these late 1980s and early 1990s works reveal the emergence of an anti-authoritarian and anti-violent undercurrent.

Nara's explicitly anti-war imagery crystallized in the late 1990s. The 1998 painting *No Nukes*—depicting a pigtailed girl gripping a hand-painted protest sign in uneven red letters—marks a decisive moment in his political articulation. Unlike his earlier psychologically charged but ambiguous works, this piece declares its stance directly. The slogan situates nuclear anxiety at the center of the canvas while retaining the formal language of childhood: oversized

head, softened palette, rounded cheeks. The tension between innocence and protest becomes the work's political engine. Although produced in 1998, *No Nukes* gained renewed urgency in 2012 during mass anti-nuclear demonstrations in Japan following the Fukushima Daiichi disaster, when the image was widely circulated and adopted by protestors. This afterlife underscores how Nara's affective strategy—embedding dissent within childlike form—allows his work to migrate from museum walls into public political action.

Further, in *Stop the Bombs* (fig. 2), Yoshitomo Nara makes his political commitments unmistakable. The small, wide-eyed child—rendered with his characteristic economy of line—holds a protest sign that bluntly declares its message. Unlike earlier works where defiance simmered beneath the surface, the text anchors the image in explicit anti-nuclear resistance. The painting's directness aligns with Nara's reflections in his 2022 interview with *The Guardian*, where he spoke of the 2011 disaster's profound toll: "Fifteen thousand people within the 650km from where I live now, north of Tokyo, to my home town, were killed," he says. "I felt an enormous sense of loss" (Sherwin 1). That grief transforms the child figure from a psychologically ambiguous protagonist into a moral witness.



Fig. 2. Yoshitomo Nara, *Stop the Bombs*, 2019.

The events of March 11, 2011—the Tōhoku earthquake, tsunami, and subsequent nuclear crisis—deepened the introspective tenor of Nara’s practice. His figures became quieter yet heavier, their closed eyelids and subdued palettes suggesting mourning rather than confrontation. However, this tonal shift did not mark a retreat from politics. Instead, it intensified his engagement with what this paper terms the emotional afterlives of war. Nuclear catastrophe was no longer an abstract historical memory; it was proximate, contemporary, lived.

Across these biographical phases—postwar upbringing, European exile, late-1990s anti-nuclear declaration, and post-Fukushima introspection—Nara’s work evolves from psychological unease to explicit anti-war articulation, and then toward a more atmospheric reckoning with collective trauma. His politics do not rely solely on graphic depiction or documentary realism. Rather, they emerge through affect: through the uneasy coexistence of softness and dissent, nostalgia and threat. His practice thus demonstrates that anti-war art need not stage violence directly to confront it. It can operate through inherited mood, through the destabilization of innocence, and through the persistent gaze of a child who refuses to look away.

B. Child as Political Witness

In Nara’s visual language, the child functions not simply as a symbol of innocence but as a charged site of political witnessing. Marilyn Ivy describes in her journal article, “The Art of Cute Little Things: Nara Yoshitomo’s Parapolitics,” that the recurring figure of the solitary child occupies a paradoxical position—simultaneously vulnerable and defiant, tender and aggressive. These figures often appear suspended within muted, indeterminate backgrounds, isolated from social context yet emotionally saturated. The result is a scene in which the child seems to bear

the weight of an unnamed historical trauma, glaring outward with an affect that oscillates between sadness and quiet hostility.

This affective strategy helps explain why the child in works such as *No Nukes* or *Stop the Bombs* can hold a protest sign without collapsing into didactic political imagery. The child's presence destabilizes the authority typically associated with protest slogans. Instead of presenting a rational political argument, Nara stages a confrontation between innocence and catastrophe. Their small body and simplified form amplify the violence implied by the message she carries. As Ivy notes, Nara's children frequently appear both wounded and capable of wounding—sometimes holding knives or cigarettes, other times staring outward with an accusatory glare (fig. 3). Their emotional ambiguity disrupts conventional narratives of childhood purity while revealing how the burdens of historical memory are unevenly inherited.

Further, Ivy analyzes that the child's quiet defiance evokes memories of one's own childhood: "His mobilization of volunteers for his installations, his ongoing contact with his fans, his published diaries, his blogs and writings, his globe-spanning art projects can all be seen to form a parapolitics based on a zero degree of community: the fact that we've all been children" (Ivy 23). Here, rather than addressing the audience through ideology or argument, Nara appeals to a universal emotional memory—*childhood* itself. As we all inhabit the vulnerability, confusion, and intensity of youth, the subject becomes a point of immediate identification. The viewer does not stand outside the work as a detached observer; instead, the figure on the canvas quietly calls forth one's own memories of fragility, loneliness, and defiance. When I view a piece like *Too Young to Die*, it triggers my own childhood memories—particularly relatable with the micro bangs—which, juxtaposed with the cigarette's presence, cues the sensitivity of youthful naiveness. Children are impressionable; I remember the first time I broke my bones, first coffee

drank, first time behind the wheel: thus amplifying the pathos of the drug and, anti-war signals. In this way, Nara's politics seem to emerge through *feeling* rather than declaration. The child's gaze, often distant or wounded, seems to reach into the viewer's emotional past, producing a recognition that feels intimate and almost involuntary. What Ivy describes as a "zero degree of community" therefore becomes an affective bridge between artist & audience. The work touches something interior—an emotional memory that precedes ideology—allowing the viewer to experience political consciousness not as abstract discourse but as a deeply personal resonance.



Fig. 3. Yoshitomo Nara, *Too Young to Die*, 2001.

C. The Aesthetics of Cuteness

The emotional intensity of Nara's imagery can further be studied through the aesthetic framework of "cuteness." In her essay "The Cuteness of the Avant-Garde," Sianne Ngai argues that cuteness is not simply a decorative or sentimental quality but an aesthetic structured around vulnerability and power. Cute objects are typically small, soft, and formally simplified, qualities that foreground helplessness and invite emotional attachment from the viewer. Simultaneously,

this vulnerability can produce an uneasy tension, as the viewer becomes aware of the object's susceptibility to harm or control.

Nara's child figures operate within this aesthetic register while simultaneously complicating it. The rounded faces, oversized heads, and simplified features of his characters initially align with the visual language of cuteness described by Ngai. Yet the emotional atmosphere surrounding these figures resists the comforting associations typically attached to cute imagery. Rather than presenting innocence in its pure form, Nara's children frequently glare outward with expressions of irritation, sadness, or quiet hostility. As Ngai notes, cuteness often depends on the presentation of an object whose vulnerability is exaggerated, producing a mixture of tenderness and discomfort in the viewer. In Nara's work, this dynamic becomes particularly pronounced: the viewer is drawn toward the apparent fragility of the child while simultaneously confronted with an affective intensity that destabilizes the image's initial softness.

This tension between visual softness and emotional resistance deepens the political dimension of Nara's imagery. When a child rendered in this aesthetic language holds a sign reading "No Nukes" or quotes "Stop the Bombs," the contrast between form and message becomes striking. The simplified, almost toy-like body of the child amplifies the violence implied by the slogan, heightening the viewer's awareness of the historical trauma to which it refers. In this way, the aesthetic of cuteness functions not as a neutral stylistic choice but as a mechanism that intensifies the emotional force of the work. By pairing vulnerability with defiance, Nara transforms the visual language of childhood into a vehicle for political affect, allowing the viewer to encounter nuclear memory not only as a historical fact but as an emotionally resonant presence.

II. Tomiyama Taeko & Makoto Aida: Confronting Imperial Memory

A. *Tomiyama Taeko: Critique of Empire*

While Nara mobilizes the emotional vulnerability of childhood to evoke the inherited trauma of nuclear memory, other contemporary Japanese artists confront the legacies of war more directly. Tomiyama Taeko's work confronts the legacy of Japanese imperialism through a practice grounded in visual witnessing and historical memory. Born in 1921 and raised partly in Japanese-occupied Manchuria, Tomiyama experienced the realities of empire firsthand. These experiences shaped a body of work deeply concerned with colonial violence and its afterlives. Debra Herrick notes in her article, "Japanese artist Tomiyama Taeko's critique of imperialism," that the artist "witnessed firsthand the consequences of imperialism and war," experiences that would later inform her critique of colonialism and militarism in Asia (Herrick 1).

Throughout her career, Tomiyama approached imperial history not through heroic narratives but through layered visual symbolism. Her paintings frequently juxtapose mythological imagery with historical references, creating compositions that expose the submerged violence beneath official national narratives. In the series "Hiruko and the Puppeteers: A Tale of Sea Wanderers," for example, Tomiyama draws on the myth of Hiruko—the abandoned "leech child" cast into the sea—to construct an allegorical narrative about Japan's imperial past (fig. 4). The works incorporate imagery such as skulls, army helmets, and imperial flags embedded within surreal underwater landscapes. These motifs suggest that the violence of empire lies concealed beneath the surface of collective memory. As curator Gabriel Ritter observes, what initially appears as a surreal seascape gradually reveals something "more sinister that has sunk to the bottom and is out of sight, but has not disappeared" (Herrick1).

Tomiyama's artistic strategy, therefore, operates as a form of historical excavation. Rather than presenting imperial violence directly through documentary realism, she constructs symbolic environments in which traces of war emerge slowly as the viewer looks closer. Seashells transform into skulls, decorative forms into military artifacts, and mythological imagery into political allegory. In this way, Tomiyama challenges viewers to recognize how imperial violence continues to haunt the present; that the past is not a closed historical chapter but an unresolved force embedded within cultural memory. By foregrounding these submerged histories, Tomiyama transforms painting into an ethical act of remembrance. Her work insists that confronting imperial memory requires more than historical acknowledgment; it requires sustained attention to the lives and landscapes shaped by that violence. Through allegory, symbolism, and layered imagery, Tomiyama thus creates visual spaces in which suppressed histories reemerge, compelling viewers to engage with the emotional and political weight of Japan's imperial past.



Fig. 4. Tomiyama Taeko, *Adrift I*, 2008.

B. Makoto Aida: *Vivid Critique of War Memory*

As Tomiyama Taeko approaches imperial memory through acts of visual witnessing and historical remembrance, Makoto Aida confronts similar histories through grotesque exaggeration and satirical distortion. Born in 1965, Aida belongs to a generation shaped by postwar prosperity but still haunted by the unresolved legacies of Japan's wartime violence. His work frequently exposes the contradictions embedded within national narratives of victimhood & heroism, using shock, absurdity, and visual spectacle to destabilize conventional understandings of war memory.

One of Aida's most provocative works, *A Picture of an Air-Raid on New York City (War Picture Returns)*, exemplifies this strategy (fig. 5). The painting imagines a fantastical scenario in which Japanese fighter planes bombard New York City, sending explosions across the Manhattan skyline. Rendered with bright colors and exaggerated visual drama, the scene initially resembles the spectacle of a manga or animated battle sequence. Yet the reversal of historical roles—Japan attacking the United States—creates a deeply unsettling effect. By imagining an alternate history in which American cities become the targets of Japanese air raids, Aida directs viewers to reconsider the asymmetrical narratives through which wartime violence is often remembered. The painting, therefore, operates as a form of grotesque historical inversion. Rather than presenting a realistic depiction of war, Aida constructs an exaggerated spectacle that exposes the instability of national memory. The destruction of New York becomes less a literal fantasy than a conceptual device that highlights how wartime suffering is unevenly acknowledged across different historical contexts. Through this disturbing reversal, Aida compels viewers—particularly Western audiences—to confront the broader dynamics of bombing, destruction, and civilian vulnerability that shaped the twentieth century.

In this way, the piece exemplifies Aida's broader strategy of confronting war memory through shock and distortion. By transforming historical violence into an exaggerated visual spectacle, he reveals how narratives of national identity often obscure the complex realities of wartime suffering. The grotesque imagery resists sentimental interpretation, instead forcing viewers to engage with the unsettling possibility that the positions of victim and aggressor are historically contingent. Through this destabilization of perspective, Aida's work challenges the viewer to reconsider the moral frameworks through which war is remembered.



Fig. 5. Makoto Aida, *A Picture of an Air-Raid on New York City (War Picture Returns)*, 1996.

Makoto Aida's *Gate Ball (War Picture Returns)* then develops his critique of Japan's wartime memory by appropriating and distorting the visual conventions of imperial war painting (fig. 6). The work depicts a group of elderly Japanese men calmly playing gateball—a leisurely sport popular among retirees—while using human skulls as the balls of the game. The scene initially appears almost mundane, evoking the quiet rhythms of everyday life. Yet the grotesque substitution of skulls for sporting equipment immediately disrupts the image's apparent

normalcy. What begins as a familiar image of leisure becomes an unsettling confrontation with the lingering presence of wartime violence.

The title itself underscores this confrontation. By invoking the phrase “War Picture,” Aida directly references the tradition of *sensōga*—propaganda paintings produced during the early twentieth century to glorify Japan’s imperial military campaigns. These works typically celebrated heroic soldiers and triumphant battles, presenting war as a spectacle of national honor and sacrifice. Aida’s painting deliberately inverts this tradition. Instead of depicting soldiers in the midst of battle, he portrays an aging generation quietly engaged in recreation, surrounded by the remnants of death. The skulls scattered across the field evoke the unacknowledged victims of imperial expansion, transforming the game into a grim metaphor for the way historical violence can become normalized or forgotten within everyday life.

This grotesque juxtaposition reflects Aida’s broader strategy of exposing the contradictions embedded within national memory. The elderly players represent a generation that lived through or directly inherited the aftermath of Japan’s wartime past. Yet their calm participation in the game suggests a form of collective detachment, as though the violence symbolized by the skulls has been absorbed into the background of daily existence. Through this unsettling imagery, Aida suggests that imperial violence has not been fully confronted or resolved but instead lingers beneath the surface of contemporary society.

In this way, *Gate Ball (War Picture Returns)* exemplifies how contemporary Japanese anti-war art mobilizes affect as a political force. Rather than presenting historical violence through documentary realism, Aida constructs an outlandish scene that provokes unease, discomfort, and reflection. The viewer is confronted not only with the remnants of war but with the unsettling possibility that such histories have been integrated into ordinary cultural life. By

transforming a scene of leisure into a symbolic landscape of death, Aida exposes the fragile boundary between memory and forgetting.

Together with the works of Yoshitomo Nara and Tomiyama Taeko, Aida's painting demonstrates the diverse strategies contemporary Japanese artists employ to confront the legacies of war. While Nara evokes inherited trauma through affective intimacy and Tomiyama restores suppressed histories through acts of visual witnessing, Aida deploys grotesque spectacle to reveal the ideological distortions that shape national memory. In each case, the political force of the artwork emerges not simply through representation but through the emotional and psychological responses it provokes. These artists transform anti-war art into an experiential encounter, demonstrating that the histories of violence embedded within the twentieth century are not only remembered—they are felt, inherited, and lived.

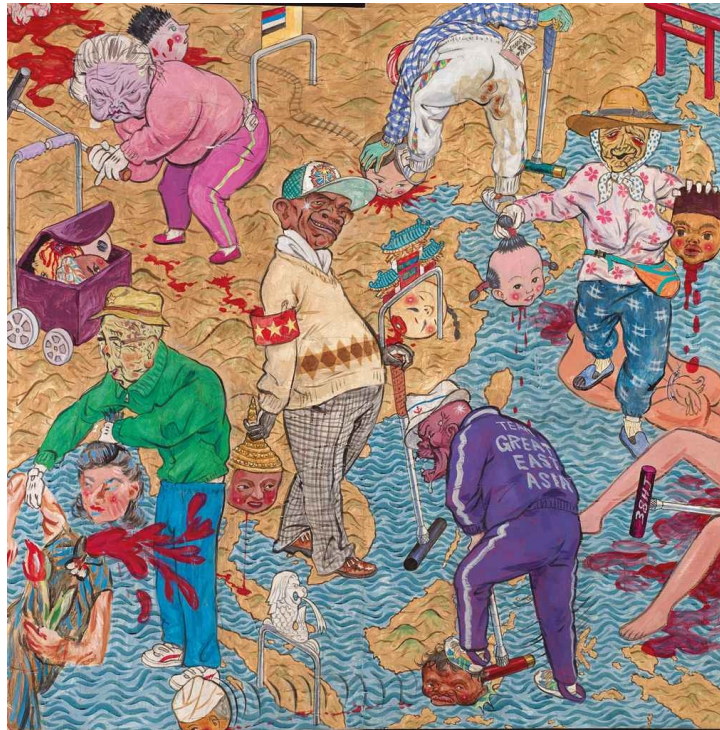


Fig. 6. Makoto Aida, *Gate Ball (War Picture Returns)*, 1999.

III. Western Precedents

A. Francisco Goya: Brutal Witnesses

To situate the strategies employed by contemporary Japanese artists, it is useful to place their work in dialogue with earlier Western traditions of anti-war art. As outlined in this paper's premise, anti-war imagery has historically emerged through different visual languages—ranging from stark realism to symbolic abstraction. Francisco Goya's *The Disasters of War* (1810–1820) represents one of the earliest and most influential examples of this tradition, offering a model of political critique grounded in graphic representation and direct witnessing. By confronting viewers with the physical devastation of war, Goya demonstrates how visual art can function as a powerful form of moral testimony.

Produced in response to the Peninsular War between Spain and Napoleonic France, *The Disasters of War* consists of a series of etchings that depict executions, mutilated bodies, and scenes of civilian suffering. Rather than glorifying warfare through heroic imagery, Goya focuses on the vulnerability of ordinary people caught within acts of violence. His compositions are stark and stripped of decorative elements, forcing viewers to confront the brutality of conflict without the mediation of nationalistic symbolism or heroic framing. The result is an uncompromising portrayal of war's human cost. In this sense, Goya's work embodies one visual strategy through which anti-war art can operate: the direct exposure of violence through realism. By presenting war as a spectacle of suffering rather than glory, Goya transforms the act of representation into an act of witnessing. His images demand that viewers confront the ethical implications of war, refusing the comfort of distance or romanticization.

One particularly striking image from the series, *On account of a knife* (fig. 7), captures this strategy with disturbing clarity. The composition depicts a condemned civilian bound to a

wooden post, moments before execution. Surrounding him are soldiers who prepare to carry out the sentence, their bodies partially obscured but their authority unmistakable. The victim's posture—his arms restrained behind his back and his body exposed to the viewer—emphasizes the vulnerability of the human body in the face of institutional violence. Unlike traditional battle paintings that celebrate military heroism, the scene contains no triumphant gestures or dramatic movement. Instead, Goya presents the quiet, procedural cruelty of execution, transforming the act into a chilling spectacle of power. The title further intensifies the image's political critique. The phrase suggests that the execution has been justified by a minor or ambiguous accusation, implying that the punishment far exceeds the supposed crime. Through this disjunction between cause and consequence, Goya exposes the arbitrary violence exercised by occupying forces during the war. The viewer is left to confront the unsettling reality that the machinery of war often operates through such disproportionate acts of brutality.

Taken together, Goya's etchings demonstrate how anti-war art can operate through stark realism and direct confrontation with violence. By exposing the vulnerability of the human body and the arbitrary cruelty of institutional power, *The Disasters of War* transforms the act of representation into a form of ethical witnessing. Yet the contemporary Japanese artists examined earlier in this paper approach similar questions of war memory through markedly different visual strategies. While Goya forces viewers to confront violence through graphic depiction, Yoshitomo Nara, Makoto Aida, and Tomiyama Taeko mobilize affect, symbolism, and grotesque distortion to engage the viewer on a psychological level. Nara's wounded children evoke the inherited anxiety of nuclear memory; Aida's grotesque spectacles expose the ideological absurdities underlying imperial militarism; and Tomiyama's layered compositions recover the suppressed histories of those marginalized by official narratives of empire. In contrast to Goya's stark

realism, these artists often operate through atmosphere, ambiguity, and emotional tension. Their works demonstrate that the political force of anti-war art does not reside solely in the direct depiction of violence but also in the affective responses it provokes. In this sense, contemporary Japanese anti-war art expands the tradition established by Goya, transforming the visual language of resistance into a space where the legacies of war are not only represented but emotionally felt and historically inherited.



Fig. 7. Francisco de Goya y Lucientes, *On account of a knife*, 1810.

B. Pablo Picasso: Symbolic Condensation & the Language of Peace

If Francisco Goya exposes the brutality of war through stark realism and graphic testimony, Pablo Picasso approaches anti-war imagery through symbolic condensation. Rather than depicting violence directly, Picasso distills the political aspiration for peace into a single visual emblem. His Peace Dove lithograph (1949), later reproduced in posters such as *XX Anniversaire Mouvement de la Paix* (1969), became one of the most recognizable symbols of pacifism in the twentieth century. The original lithograph depicts a simple white dove, an image that was used for the 1949 Paris Peace Congress and quickly became associated with

international peace movements (fig. 8). In *XX Anniversaire Mouvement de la Paix*, Picasso revisits this now-iconic image to commemorate the twentieth anniversary of the global peace movement. The composition centers on the dove holding an olive branch, rendered in fluid, economical lines that emphasize clarity and immediacy. Unlike Goya's scenes of bodily suffering, Picasso's image does not confront viewers with the spectacle of violence. Instead, it offers a visual counterpoint to war: a symbol of reconciliation, renewal, and collective aspiration. The dove itself draws on longstanding cultural associations with peace, while the poster format allowed the image to circulate widely through international political activism. As a lithographic print produced for public dissemination, the work demonstrates how art can operate beyond museum spaces as a tool of political communication.

The power of Picasso's image further lies in its radical simplicity. By reducing the complex political realities of war to a single universally legible symbol, the *Peace Dove* transforms anti-war sentiment into visual shorthand. In a way, this simplicity parallels Nara's depiction of childhood in its purest form, digesting the audience's attention fluently without the mental hassle of analyzing hidden meanings. This symbolic condensation (dove as a symbol, childhood as a universal experience) also allows the images to transcend national boundaries and linguistic differences, making it accessible to diverse audiences around the world. In contrast to Goya's graphic realism, Picasso's approach thus emphasizes idealized possibility rather than direct confrontation with violence. The dove gestures toward a future free from conflict rather than depicting the devastation that war produces.

Yet, this emphasis on symbolic clarity also reveals a distinction between Picasso's approach and the affective strategies employed by contemporary Japanese artists. While the *Peace Dove* offers a universally legible vision of reconciliation, the works of Yoshitomo Nara,

Makoto Aida, and Tomiyama Taeko resist such resolution. Rather than condensing political meaning into a singular emblem of peace, these artists often foreground the lingering tensions and emotional afterlives of war. Nara's solitary children carry the quiet weight of nuclear anxiety, their defiant gazes suggesting a vulnerability that cannot be easily reconciled through symbolic closure. Aida's grotesque spectacles expose the ideological distortions embedded within nationalist memory, forcing viewers to confront the unsettling absurdities that underlie imperial mythology. Tomiyama, meanwhile, approaches the legacy of empire through layered acts of visual witnessing, restoring visibility to histories that have been suppressed or forgotten.

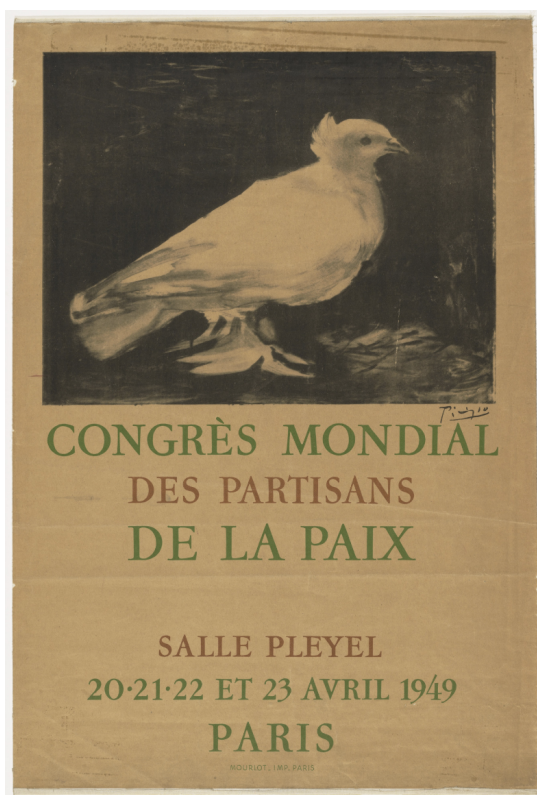


Fig. 8. Pablo Picasso, *Congrès Mondial des Partisans de la Paix*, 1949.

In this sense, the contrast between Picasso's symbolic condensation and the affective complexity of contemporary Japanese practice highlights the diverse visual languages through which anti-war art can operate. Picasso's dove proposes an idealized horizon of peace, offering

viewers a clear and hopeful emblem through which collective aspirations can be expressed. By contrast, the artists examined earlier in this paper emphasize the persistence of historical trauma, inviting viewers to engage not only with the possibility of peace but also with the unresolved memories that shape the present. Through these differing strategies—symbolism, realism, and affect—anti-war art reveals its capacity to operate across multiple registers, transforming historical violence into a site of reflection, confrontation, and emotional recognition.

Conclusion

Contemporary Japanese anti-war art reveals how political critique can emerge not only through representation but through affective experience. As this paper has demonstrated, artists such as Yoshitomo Nara, Makoto Aida, and Tomiyama Taeko mobilize distinct visual strategies to confront the legacies of war, nuclear trauma, and imperial violence. Nara's solitary children transform the visual language of childhood into a site of emotional resistance, allowing viewers to encounter nuclear anxiety through vulnerability and close identification. Aida's grotesque spectacles destabilize nationalist mythology, exposing the ideological absurdities embedded within narratives of honor and sacrifice. Finally, Tomiyama's layered compositions operate as acts of visual witnessing, recovering suppressed histories of empire and insisting on the ethical necessity of remembrance.

Placed in dialogue with Western precedents such as Francisco Goya and Pablo Picasso, these practices reveal the diverse visual languages through which anti-war art can function. Goya confronts viewers with the stark brutality of war through graphic realism, transforming representation into a form of moral testimony. Picasso, by contrast, condenses anti-war aspiration into the universal symbol of the peace dove, offering a vision of reconciliation that transcends

national and linguistic boundaries. While these strategies emerge from different visual traditions, Western and contemporary Japanese anti-war art often converge through similarly accessible forms that invite broad emotional identification. Just as Picasso condenses the aspiration for peace into the universally recognizable image of the dove, Nara mobilizes the equally universal figure of the child to communicate vulnerability, dissent, and inherited anxiety. Both images rely on symbolic clarity and shared human experience, allowing them to transcend national boundaries and linguistic differences. In this sense, the dove and the child function as parallel visual devices: simplified figures through which diverse audiences can emotionally and intuitively grasp complex political realities.

The differing visual strategies thus reveal how anti-war art can engage audiences not only through representation but through emotional and symbolic resonance. The works of Yoshitomo Nara, Makoto Aida, and Tomiyama Taeko demonstrate that confronting the legacies of war requires forms capable of making those histories psychologically and culturally legible to contemporary viewers. Nara's child figures, Aida's grotesque spectacles, and Tomiyama's acts of visual witnessing each create distinct avenues through which audiences can encounter the afterlives of war. When placed alongside Western precedents such as Goya's stark realism and Picasso's symbolic dove of peace, these approaches reveal that anti-war art operates through a range of visual languages that bridge historical context and shared human experience. The political significance of these works must therefore be approached by considering not only their historical subject matter but also their capacity to mobilize affect, memory, and recognition—transforming the experience of war from a distant historical narrative into something emotionally immediate and collectively understood.

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