

"Human Dogs", Aida Makoto, and the Mori Art Museum Controversy [犬人間]、会田誠、そして森美術館問題

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On February 11, the *Asia-Pacific Journal* ran David McNeill's piece (<https://apjif.org/events/view/173>) on the Mori Art Museum's controversial Aida Makoto exhibit "Sorry for Being a Genius". McNeill's piece attracted critical comments, one linking to the People Against Pornography and Sexual Violence's Letter of Protest (<http://paps-jp.org/action/mori-art-museum/statement-english/>) against the Aida exhibit.

This protest has focused on Aida's "Human Dogs" series. I will not link to the disturbing images here, but interested readers can locate them with a Google Image search for "Aida Makoto, dog". In his recent work, Aida has attempted to meld anime and manga visuals with the techniques and conventions of the "orthodox" Japanese art tradition. The "Human Dog" paintings - which show nude girls, their arms and legs severed so they appear to walk on all fours, being led around on dog leashes - were almost certainly inspired by Nagai Go's manga *Violence Jack*, which ran off and on between 1973 and 1990. In the series, a post-apocalyptic story in which Japanese society collapses after a series of natural disasters and the survivors are ruled over by sadistic strongmen, a male and female pair is made into "human dogs" by "Slum King", the brutal boss of the Kansai region who considers himself a latter day samurai lord. Slum King's samurai affects link the series with understandings of Japanese history as the domination of the masses by a minority elite that has monopolized violence. Aida's paintings are in "traditional" style. Is it enough, however, to simply

bring Nagai's horrifying images into "high art"? *Violence Jack* shows both male and female characters being tortured in this way but Aida uses only young girls - sparking accusations of child pornography. Nagai's characters continue to resist and struggle to retain their humanity in degrading circumstances while some of Aida's girls appear as dogs - seeming to beg or at least to have the happy earnestness of pets. Is Aida adding anything here? It can be argued that his work erases much of the subtlety that Nagai managed to work into his mostly pulpy manga work. Is Aida's addition simply misogyny posing as the artistic transgressions of an "unapologetic genius"?

In its March 1 edition, the current affairs magazine *Kinyobi* ran an article which presented two different points of view on the Aida exhibit.

First, Miyamoto Yuki, a *Kinyobi* editor, argued that the exhibit was harmful and should be withdrawn by the Mori Art Museum. She points out that the protests are not focusing on Aida's right to produce these images, but rather the decision of the Mori Art Museum to present them in a public space. The author quotes Yokoda Chiyoko an anti-violence activist who has long worked with victims of abuse, "It is okay if someone wants to display these images in their home or in a closed space, but they should not be shown in a museum. Displaying pictures that trample on human dignity in a public place as art is a violation of human rights." She also points out that the girls in the paintings appear to be either powerless or to actually enjoy being abused. This seems to negate the potential of the images to inspire critical reflection on violence and to place them instead as pornographic fantasy. The Mori Art Museum has given these images a significant public stage as part of a widely advertised and commercialized exhibit (the museum offers "luxury

hotel packages” and sells bric a brac like Aida jigsaw puzzles). Yokoda asks readers to consider how survivors of abuse could feel if exposed to the images.

Miyamoto goes on to outline arguments to the effect that while state censorship is never desirable, that a social consensus against the display and promotion of exploitative images of violence against women and suffering needs to be solidified. The images were placed in an “18 and over” zone. The exhibit catalogue, however, is widely available at bookstores across Japan and is not shrink-wrapped. The images are there, without warning, to browsers of any age, in the “Art” section of any major bookseller in Japan. Miyamoto, as well as the numerous anti-violence activists quoted in the article, are concerned that the Mori Art Museum is using its reputation and resources to not only affirm the images as cutting-edge artwork but to actively disseminate and promote them without taking a stand on the content. The piece also reports that the People Against Pornography and Sexual Violence have received a stream of complaints from Aida supporters for whom “freedom of expression” trumps all other considerations. Ritsumeikan University Lecturer Ida Hiroyuki is quoted as saying, “As expected, a lot of people are saying that the critics of Aida’s work are morons who don’t understand art and are interfering with free speech... Freedom of speech is most valuable, however, for minorities, for the weak, for victims of discrimination, for those at the bottom of the social order, and it should guarantee the right to say things which run counter to prevailing views. The Mori Art Museum, which is presenting Aida Makoto’s works affirmatively, lacks the will to criticize the sexual discrimination which is a part of the social mainstream and has simply chosen to go along with that mainstream.”

Finally, Miyamoto points out that the museum, in its response to protests, has simply refused to engage with the content of the images, referring only to the abstracts of artistic expression rather than to the realities of sexual violence.

In *Kinyobi*, freelance writer Shibui Tetsuya took the opposite position, arguing that the images were open to diverse interpretations and that art should produce a space for different viewpoints to be expressed and normative understandings to be contested. He argues that the works are open to interpretation and that critics have focused too strongly on a “sexual” reading. For him, the images exist within a context of “the everyday” and are challenging for this very reason. He quotes a young woman who finds Aida’s work to be engaging and compares the Mori exhibit to a sort of imaginative “theme park”. Shibui asserts that while the exhibit is “public”, it is not a public space like a street or a train, that visitors must pay specifically to see Aida’s works, and “accidental” exposure to uncomfortable images should not be a factor. On the whole Shibui’s account differs little from the Mori Art Museum’s official response to protests, which avoided commenting on the content of the images. The gap between the Mori / Shibui position and that of People Against Pornography and Sexual Violence is a wide one, and is unlikely to be closed before the Aida exhibit ends on March 31.

The editors of *Kinyobi* are careful to present two sides of the debate but end by asking some difficult questions about art and public display. How would “human dog” images of African-Americans be received in the United States? Could the same arguments used to defend the Mori Art Museum Aida exhibit be used to defend violent Nazi-themed pornography?

In defense of the Aida exhibit, the Mori side claims that, “Aida’s works address topics spanning war, statehood, love, desire, and art, and he frequently displays an approach to these topics that is unique and unconventional. To fully appreciate the humour and prescience of Aida’s approach, we thought it crucial to introduce the full range of his works.” Neither Aida nor the Mori Art Museum side, however, offer any comments on what the “Human Dogs” might mean. It is simply taken for granted that pictures of naked young girls, panting happily after gruesome mutilation, are somehow productive of deeper consideration of big themes. Aida and the Mori Art Museum owe their critics a more direct dialogue on these issues.

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