

Fujita Toshio: Master of Traditionally Crafted Modern Art

Article by Elizabeth Kiritani and illustrations by Kiritani Itsuo

THE bugs and beetles on the walls and the dead cicadas on the shelves would have shocked me had I not known Fujita Toshio. This time I just nodded at our miniature friends as I entered his rooms. The last time I had visited his studio rats and mice greeted me. This former-architect-turned-artist has more surprises than a magician with doves flapping from sleeves and top hat.

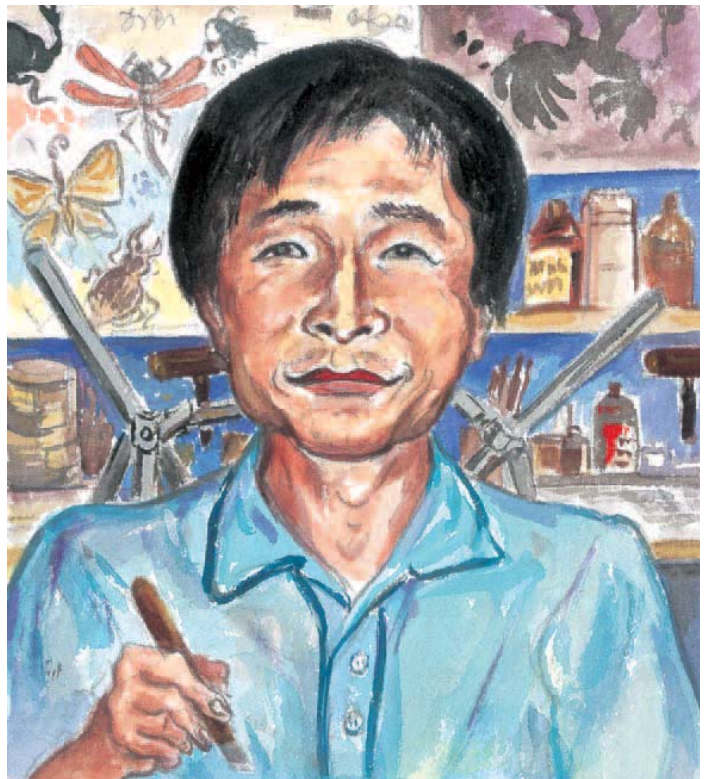
The world of art has had many phases, and today's seems to be dominated by electronic installations and the usual array of cookie cutter fads. The Japanese "art scene" is represented abroad by a select number of graduates from certain famous art schools, from which they derive their connections to foreign art magazines and galleries. Just as the University of Tokyo offers a secure pass to the law and business worlds, a narrow group of artists that gets automatic recognition through connections dominates the art world of Japan. But Japan has its underground of artists that go their own way, unconnected to the mainstream, some of whom I am sure will count as this generation's most gifted creators. Fujita Toshio is one such unique and ingeniously inspired artist.

FROM long past Japan has been noted for its artisans, the traditional craftsmen who work, often from generation to generation, honing exquisite skills in art, woodworking and pottery. Today, few remain because perfecting techniques is time consuming and difficult, and also because Japan is focused almost exclusively on the international and modern. These days it is difficult for an artisan to make a living.

Fujita's artwork retains the essence of the artisan traditions of skill and exactitude. The lines of his creations call forth the fluid quality and use of empty space called *ma* that first attracted the attention of the 19th century impressionists. His works done on Japanese *washi* paper in fluid black ink reflect years of painstaking training. Deeply read and motivated in his own very different directions, Fujita has just that originality and liveliness that surprises and delights the viewer.

Fujita's studio is an enormous space by Tokyo standards – two rooms with 12-foot high ceilings, one dominated by two printing presses and the other by a table where he carves his wood block prints. The shelves are full of inks and chemicals and box upon box of his creations. And everywhere his bugs are thriving.

THE son of a used bookstore owner, Fujita remains where three generations of his family have lived in Komagome, an old area of Tokyo. On graduating from high school he entered Musashi Institute of Technology to major in architecture. Along the way, however, he also studied world literature. Entranced by the work of Ibuse Masuji, Franz Kafka and Anton Chekov he started to write novels on the side. His main aim at the time, though, was to get a good job during the architectural boom in



Japan.

Fujita joined a small architectural firm, got his architecture license and specialized in planning and drawing the drafts for the water systems in homes and tall buildings. In the evenings he continued to write. After a year or so he became increasingly neurotic and nervous – loud sounds began to bother him and he was uncomfortably restless. A friend suggested that he paint to relax and, fortuitously, he started sketching. Six and a half years after launching his architectural career he quit to devote himself to painting, spending the next four years living off of his savings.

The first year he spent sketching at Ueno Zoo in Tokyo. Everyday, from morning until evening, he sketched in pencil. He set himself a quota of 10 full sketches a day. Not being a group person, he studied from books and launched out on his own, determined to develop technique through his own strict drills. "I compared my work to that of the students at Geidai – Tokyo National University of Fine Arts and Music, the most famous art school in Japan – and I worked all the harder after seeing how skilled they were," Fujita explained.

Fujita brought down a box from the top of his shelves and showed me some of the thousands of his original sketches. "I



threw out the first ones," he said. "They were really horrible, but gradually my hand caught the likenesses." I saw sheet after sheet of baboons, mandrills, owls, goats, roosters, cranes, chinchillas, elephants and rams. The fluidity of line was astonishing – his assiduous drills had given him results. Unlike the university trained art student, he captures the feeling and movement of the animals with just a few brief strokes. His sketches skillfully limn the animals while retaining an aura of abstraction and the intense Japanese feeling of *ma*, "I liked the monkeys the best, along with the goats and the birds that gravitated toward me," he explained. His sketches show humor and he manages to convey depth without shading in lines. At the end of the year he concentrated on just the feet and paws of the animals.

He then switched to oil painting for seven years, again teaching himself by rigorously practicing and honing techniques. The oils are of city landscapes. His work then spread out to etching and woodblocks, and he joined the Tokyo Printing Atelier where he concentrated on printing technique. After completing his large series of rats and reading the works of Jean-Henri Fabre, he started to become interested in bugs, which he feels are a subject matter extremely suitable to the printing technique. The result is a vast work of scrolls on rice paper which he combined with his own poems – merging an old scroll tradition with a new subject matter and poetry. Full of motion and energy, these works are truly one of a kind. Some of his scrolls were "discovered" by the director of the Bristol City Museum in England where they were shown in 2001. The museum acquired four panels of insects that same year.

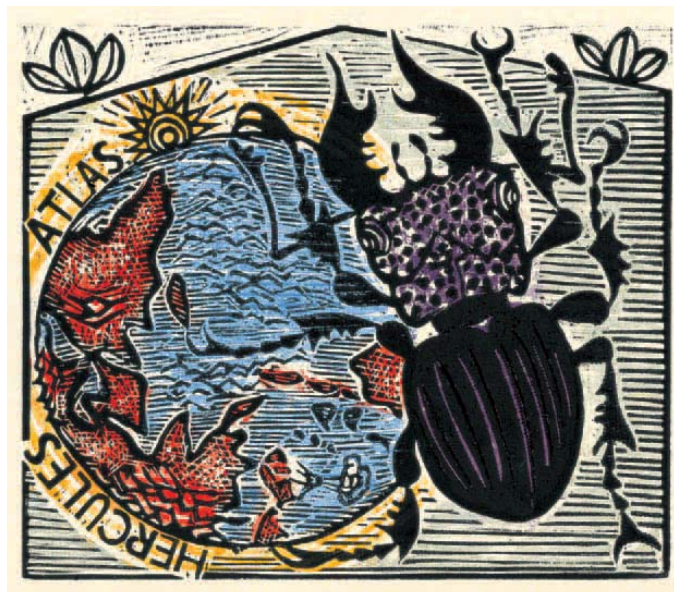
ASKED about the future, Fujita says that he envisions his last big project will be along the lines of the *Muromachi Byobu* Screens of the 16th century that depict the daily life of that era. The Muromachi screens are large works portraying life, inside and outside of shops, *geisha* districts and homes that emerge mystically

in and out of clouds. Fujita is not ready to start his modern rendition of Tokyo life yet, but once he does, he says that this will probably represent his main body of work. At 54 he still has a great deal of time. Fujita says that he works thinking of what people 200 years from now will think of them. "My art is my art, my own effort, but I constantly feel that there is something or someone other than me that is inspiring and directing it."

FOR me, Fujita remains one of the true mavericks of Japan. On a different path from the rather predictable and set styles of the recognized Japanese art world, he seems to be doing some of the finest, freshest and most original work in Japan today while retaining the signature craftsmanship of Japan's traditional past. He is a good example of how the set system of art here or in any country just doesn't make sense. There is a lot of good art in Japan that is not

being recognized today because its art world is focused on "the system" and foreign art critics don't have the means to delve further. From what I have seen in Tokyo, I really feel that the art of this era that will have a future is predominately that of these "rogue" artists that have gone off on their own, the artists that haven't become the "businessmen" of the prominent art universities. Just like *Ukiyoe* prints, which were once considered of no real value and reused to wrap pottery were sent off to foreign countries where they were "discovered," Japan is pulsating with real, talented artists that almost no one even knows about.

J.S



Print by Fujita Toshio

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