TETSUYA ISHIDA

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GAGOSIAN GALLERY
HONG KONG

The Life and Times of Tetsuya Ishida: Confession and Spirit

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Fig. 1
Tetsuya Ishida
Untitled, 2004 (detail)
Acrylic and oil on canvas
35 ¾ × 46 inches
(91 × 116.7 cm)

Influences of *Daigo Fukuryū Maru*, or *Lucky Dragon 5*

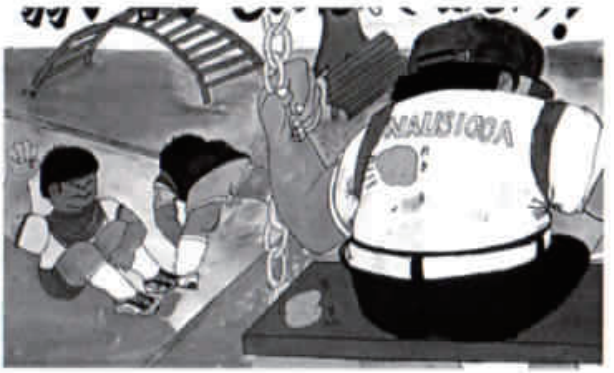
Tetsuya Ishida was born on June 16, 1973, in Yaizu City, Shizuoka Prefecture, and was killed by accident on May 23, 2005, at a train crossing in Machida, Tokyo. He was only thirty-one years old at the time. Yaizu is approximately ninety minutes west of Tokyo by bullet train. The city developed primarily as a fishing port and is known nationally for its deep-sea fishing and seafood processing. It is also known, however, as the provenance of the *Daigo Fukuryū Maru* (*Lucky Dragon 5*), the tuna fishing boat irradiated by nuclear fallout from the U.S. Operation Castle nuclear test carried out at Bikini Atoll in 1954. This accident exposed twenty-three fishermen to high levels of nuclear radiation.

Four years after the incident, in 1958, the American nuclear physicist Dr. Ralph E. Lapp (1917–2004)[1] published his book *The Voyage of the Lucky Dragon*. He also wrote a report on the incident for *Harper's Magazine*. Ben Shahn (1898–1969)[2] provided the illustrations for the series of articles. Shahn's *Lucky Dragon* series (1957, figs. 2, 3), which comprises thirty original illustrations from the piece, was exhibited in Yaizu in 1981. After seeing the exhibition, Ishida, who was then just eight, noted in his diary that he "want[ed] to become a painter like Ben Shahn."

That same year, Ishida submitted an essay titled "*Masshirofunekun*" ("Mr. White Boat") to an essay-writing and reading contest held in Yaizu. The title referred to the *Lucky Dragon* and its exposure to deadly nuclear ash. The following is an excerpt from the essay:

> *From there, the entire body became sick and suffered. The nuclear testing caused hair to fall out and blood loss. They were in pain and could not get up to go to work. It's really a tragedy. Why would humans use H-bombs to kill each other?*

This essay marked Ishida's first engagement with social issues, which would become a recurring theme in his oeuvre. As an elementary school student, he already felt a sense of compassion for others suffering misfortune and had



From left to right
Fig. 2
Ben Shahn
The Consoler (Lucky Dragon), 1957
Ink on paper
7½ × 5 ¼ inches
(19.1 × 13.3 cm)

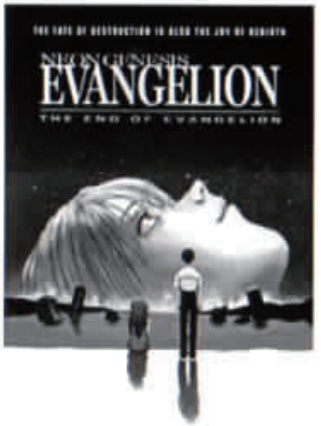
Fig. 3
Ben Shahn
The News (Lucky Dragon), 1957
Ink on paper
7 × 6 inches
(17.8 × 15.2 cm)

Fig. 4
Tetsuya Ishida
Stop Bullying Weaklings!, 1984
Pen and watercolor on paper
12⅝ × 16⅛ inches
(32 × 41 cm)

developed a sense of justice. He had also foreseen the tragedy that a blind faith in scientific progress, which the hydrogen bomb represented, would bring to humankind. Naturally, an eight-year-old could not have fathomed every aspect of H-bomb testing. The essay suggests, however, that Ishida had already discovered an *enemy* and an awareness of *evil*. In 1984, at age eleven, he won the highest award in a human-rights-comic contest hosted by the Shizuoka District Legal Affairs Bureau. Ishida's comic was titled *Yowaimonoijime wa yameyou* (*Stop Bullying Weaklings!*) (1984, fig. 4). This work also suggests that he was interested in upholding human rights and criticizing faith in science and mechanical civilization. His later practice of creating self-portraits, perhaps unconsciously, in which he appears as a martyr, to confront his ego and depict his internal struggles had already been put in motion, if only latently, by the "self becoming absent" deep within.

From *Gundam* to *Evangelion*

Many of Ishida's later works, particularly those produced while he was in college and after, feature cars, trains, and airplanes. Some, such as *Supermarket* (1996, fig. 9) and *Interview* (1998, pp. 26–27, 29), show bodies merged with machines—read: civilization/H-bomb—and these images recall the anthropomorphism and merging of man and mechanism explored in his early *Lucky Dragon* essay. As such, even *Tremor* (2002, p. 47), a seemingly humorous picture of a humanized mop, evokes a feeling of horror. Ishida's sense of justice and sharp critique of technological civilization manifest themselves in depictions of disposable humans in *Untitled (2)* (1998, pp. 10, 33) and *Recalled* (1998, pp. 8–9, 31), the latter a portrait of the artist as plastic model kit. *Conveyor-Belt People*



From left to right
Fig. 5
Film still from
Charlie Chaplin's
Modern Times, 1936

Fig. 6
Movie poster for
Mobile Suit Gundam, 1981

Fig. 7
Movie poster for
Neon Genesis Evangelion: The End of Evangelion, 1997

(1996, pp. 20–21, 23) shows humans being dismantled like machines, and *Exercise Equipment* (1997, p. 25), which depicts Ishida running in place on a conveyor belt to survive without dropping out of society, satirizes social institutions.

These works create a sense of horror and uncertainty in viewers. While the images bring Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times* (1936, fig. 5) to mind, Ishida's machines are also heavily influenced by the animated television series *Mobile Suit Gundam* (1979–, fig. 6), in which people merge with robots.[3] This program was immensely popular while Ishida was in grade school. The paintings he made immediately prior to his death, however, more closely resemble *Neon Genesis Evangelion* (1995–96, fig. 7).[4] As this television series was set in a world where half of the human population had been decimated, the references to it suggest that, in one sense, Ishida's later-period works were self-portraits of the artist moving toward death. In *Waiting for a Chance* (1999, p. 41), for example, beds represent bridges for crossing the river Styx. In *Untitled* (2004, fig. 1), he depicted piles of books and a slight reflection of a person on the surface of a river. These uneasy images, which evoke death, are also a response to the millennial cult Aum Shinrikyō's deadly terrorist attacks of 1994–95, which caused great uncertainty in Japanese society.[5] *The Visitor* (1999, fig. 8), for example, is a terrifying image of the face of the cult's leader, Shōkō Asahara, merged with a nautilus (called *ohmu*, a homonym for *aum* in Japanese) body appearing in a doorway. Based on his production notes, excerpted below, we can surmise that Ishida felt that this tragic incident was a manifestation of the so-called emotional darkness and uncertainty of the "lost twenty years" and that it made Japanese people aware of their inability to understand one another. This, in turn, made the population want to strive for mutual understanding.

Fig. 8
Tetsuya Ishida
The Visitor, 1999
Acrylic and oil on canvas
18 × 20 ⅛ inches
(45.5 × 53 cm)

Previous pages
Fig. 9
Tetsuya Ishida
Supermarket, 1996 (detail)
Acrylic on board
40 ½ × 57 ¼ inches
(103 × 145.6 cm)

Opposite page
Fig. 10
Tetsuya Ishida
Untitled (1), 1998
Acrylic on canvas in two parts
Overall: 57 ⅜ × 81 ⅛ inches
(145.6 × 206 cm)

> *I think that one psychological characteristic of the Japanese is their ideal of "mutual understanding." We tend to think that Japanese people can understand one another without debate or other explicit articulation. What was so shocking about [Fumihiro] Jōyū [Aum spokesperson] was that he revealed that Japanese people do not understand one another at all. He represented the Japanese that one could not understand, either in terms of linguistic structure or thought.*

Be it *Mobile Suit Gundam* or *Neon Genesis Evangelion*, late-twentieth-century animation dealing with crises in human existence resonated with, and was immensely popular among, the youth of Ishida's generation. The overwhelming response was a product of the overlaps created between the depicted fictional crises and real ones, such as the Aum Shinrikyō attacks and other seemingly incomprehensible circumstances of contemporary Japanese society. These events, along with the downturn of the Japanese economy in 1991, constituted the impoverished and stifling lost twenty years. Ishida's generation also faced employment difficulties and was described alternately as the "lost generation" and "employment refugees." Unlike his peers, Ishida, who graduated from the Department of Visual Communication Design at Musashino Art University, chose to become an artist rather than find full-time employment in the design field. Most of his works, even beyond the thirteen included in this exhibition, which he produced up until his death, show that the sensitive Ishida suffered from neurosis and was psychologically unstable. Although these works, which were produced during a period of turmoil in Japanese society, show manifestations of personal difficulties, they are painfully resonant, on a more general level, in their depiction of internal struggles.

Ishida was also moved by the Kobe child murders of 1997, in which a fourteen-year-old killed two children, ages ten and eleven. The boy had beheaded his victims and put one head on display in front of his school gate, because he "wanted to examine it closely." Prior to this horrific display, he had put the head in a plastic bag, hidden it in his attic, and gouged the eyes out with a knife because he "couldn't stand the boy's sleepy eyes." It is said that the killer derived sexual pleasure from and had ejaculated while combing his victim's hair. Initially, the police were unable to identify suspects, as no one guessed that a fourteen-year-old could have been the perpetrator. He sent the following letter explaining his crimes to a local newspaper:

> *Now the game starts. You stupid cops, catch me if you can. Killing is unbearably pleasurable. I'm desperate to see people die. Let the dirty vegetables be punished by death. Let bloodshed bring justice to years of resentment. (School Kill Seito Sakakibara)*

Untitled (2) was made around the time of the Kobe child murders. *Untitled (1)* (1998, fig. 10) is a similar work.

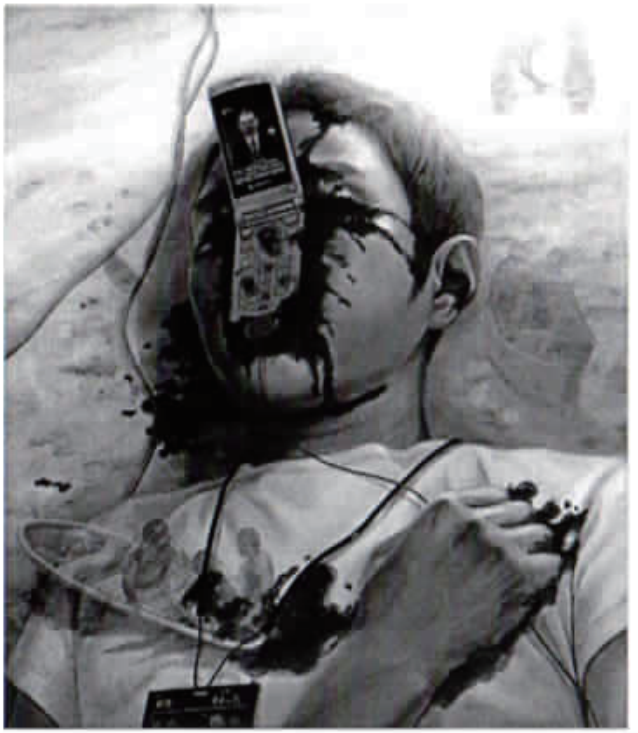


Fig. 11
Tetsuya Ishida
Conquered, 2004
Acrylic on oil on canvas
20⅛ × 18 inches
(53 × 45.5 cm)

From 9/11 to 3/11

Why do people find Ishida's pictures so moving? His images, which depict the artist's pain in detail, are frightening and morbid. His self-portraits are self-deprecating and show him as stiflingly withdrawn. They represent a darkness that might be described as schizophrenic. After mixing life and death in his works, he finally confronted his viewers with his actual death.

The "*Masshirofunekun*," or *Lucky Dragon*, essay, and its equation of irradiation with death, is the origin of Ishida's work. *Descendant* (1999, pp. 42–45), however, is an image of rebirth. It sounds a warning against our uncertain civilization, which Ishida represents through the merging of man and machine, and regarding our unquestioning faith in scientific progress. Undoubtedly, this is a response to the unique catastrophe that Japan, as the only nation in the world hit by nuclear bombs, has suffered. It's hard to forget the shock of seeing the Boeing 767 passenger planes flying into the World Trade Center buildings on September 11, 2001. The world watched in awe as the giant flying machines, arguably man's greatest invention, crashed into the World Trade Center buildings, the symbol of American progress. The tragic event was variously discussed in relation to political contexts and tribal conflicts as resulting from the "clash of civilizations" and as spawning the "war on terror." Seeing the aftermath, many lamented the destruction of our future by products of mechanical civilization turned into murderous weapons. Just like the nuclear physicist Lapp, who helped develop the thermonuclear bomb, we were forced to consider the cost of our progress.

On March 11, 2011, the great East Japan earthquake and tsunami caused a nuclear meltdown. This was a disaster caused by scientific underdevelopment. Our post–March 11 world, in which a blind faith in science could no longer be maintained, seems identical to the world of *Neon Genesis Evangelion*. Since he passed in 2005, Ishida did not experience the earthquake or nuclear disaster. His *Lucky Dragon* essay, however, also deals with irradiation. The tragic events of 9/11 and 3/11 and the irradiation of the *Lucky Dragon* on March 1, 1954, are all warnings against the myth of scientism. They are catastrophes that force us to question our faith in modernization.

Ishida's morbid paintings speak to our hearts. They touch on our experiences of the historical tragedies described above, as well as on our deep fear of catastrophic disasters, to critique civilization. There is a lack of compassion in contemporary society. Young people live without physically interacting with others and consider their cell phones their friends. Contemporary man, for whom the phone is the sole connection to the exterior world, is depicted in *Long Distance* (1999, pp. 34, 35–37) and *Conquered* (2004, fig. 11). These works employ images of a nonexistent self, a self interchangeable with others, and portray the self as divided and contradictory to hint at the era of the loss of the self.

The shock of Ishida's paintings is constituted by the confession and spirit they present to our selves, which have been warped by contemporary society.

I will conclude with the following text excerpted from Ishida's production notebook.

> *I'm strongly drawn to saintly artists. I mean people who believe that each brushstroke will save the world or can represent the suffering of humanity in the face of a sheep. They make me aware that I'm just a philistine.* (June 1999)

Postscript 1

Around 6 a.m. on May 23, 2005, unaware of the crossing gate, Ishida walked onto the train tracks of the Odakyū Line in Machida, Tokyo, and was hit by a train. I was told that his mother, who lived far away, had called him just half an hour prior to his death. Worried about her son, who worked night shifts, she had called to make sure he had eaten breakfast. After the phone call, he had decided to go and buy breakfast at the convenience store located on the other side of the tracks from his apartment. Strangely, it was discovered that he did not have his wallet with him when he was killed. He only had a US$100 bill in his pocket.

I visited Ishida at his apartment two or three years before his untimely death. He opened his bankbook to show me that he had saved nearly a million yen from working his part-time job. He wanted to know if it was enough to have a solo exhibition in New York. I told him that there are no rental galleries in New York and that a million yen would only last about three months there. I added that with his inability to speak English, no one would take him seriously and that he would be better off making more work and studying English. Following his death, his family allowed me to read his diary. Immediately after our discussion about his wish to go to New York, he'd begun studying English by purchasing a textbook for an English-learning program on TV. It then dawned on me that the $100 bill in his pocket was his ticket to New York. He was prepared to go at any time.

Postscript 2

This text is not written exclusively in regard to the thirteen paintings shown at Gagosian Gallery Hong Kong. Ishida produced more than two hundred works between the ages of twenty, when he was still at Musashino Art University, and thirty-one, when he died. My text is written in response to all of these works and his childhood artworks and essays, which I accessed with permission from his family. The works included in the current catalogue constitute a small selection from his oeuvre.

Notes

1 Lapp participated in the Manhattan Project, which developed the atomic bomb, but upon discovering the effects of radiation and the health risks of radioactive fallout caused by nuclear tests, he became a vocal opponent of atmospheric nuclear experiments. Joe Holley, "Ralph E. Lapp, 87; Nuclear Physicist," *The Washington Post*, September 13, 2004, http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A17102-2004Sep12.html.

2 Shahn was a Lithuanian-born Jewish-American painter who made a living as a lithographer in Brooklyn, New York. He empathized with those on the bottom rungs of the ladder of American society, including laborers and the unemployed. "Ben Shahn (1898–1969)," The Phillips Collection, accessed June 13, 2014 http://www.phillipscollection.org/research/american_art/bios/shahn-bio.html.

3 *Mobile Suit Gundam* is widely known as a robot action anime but, more importantly, it is a story about a hero's growth in society. Set amid a war, the story features rich and realistic human dramas. It also introduced a new type of a humanlike robot weapon called "mobile suits," which were later referred to as "real robots," and it became the forerunner of robot anime series from the early to mid-1980s.

4 *Neon Genesis Evangelion* is a third-generation animation that inspired the anime boom. The story takes place in the year 2015 in a world where half of the population perished in the Second Impact, a catastrophe that occurred on September 13, 2000. In the post–Second Impact world, boys and girls who reach the age of fourteen become pilots of giant humanoid weapons known as "Evangelion." The story depicts their battles to protect Tokyo-3 from invasion by their mysterious enemy the "Angels."

5 Aum Shinrikyō was responsible for many antisocial activities, including the sarin-gas subway attack, a mass murder that took place on the Tokyo subway system in 1995. Holly Fletcher, "Aum Shinrikyō," Council on Foreign Relations, last modified June 29, 2012, http://www.cfr.org/japan/aum-shinrikyo/p9238.