

Gadabout

Ataru Sato offers to pick us up half way to his studio, located near controversial Yasukuni Shrine, but unable to wait sprints forward as soon as he spots us. He immediately starts talking. It's a straight brain to mouth process which never seems to stop, whether he's actually voicing it, or lets it loop inside of his head. The artist has never learned how to restrain himself.

Fifty meters from the main route and we are in a quiet residential area. There are only school kids and a few policemen in sight. "I love watching kids" says Sato, "but (his eyes sparkle) have to be cautious, policemen may get suspicious." We enter his studio. Bright light and an empty space in front of the window make it appear more spacious than it actually is. The drawings crawl everywhere, they even made their way to the desk's surface, "I brought it along when I moved to Tokyo." Even when still, his body never stops moving.

Sato speaks about drawing in the same breath as sleeping and eating. Yes, drawing is that important to him. Drawing and sex.



Artist Ataru Sato in his favorite vintage Kansai Yamamoto jacket

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AB Tell us about your background.

AS I've been drawing for as long as I can remember, but kept it mostly to myself in the beginning. I thought my drawings were odd. Then, my friends started to show some interest, what boosted my confidence and eventually led me to art school. Keiichi Tanaami has been teaching at the Kyoto University of Art and Design and I chose to go there. At the university I've met Tabaimo who introduced me to Gallery Koyanagi which I've been working with ever since.

AB You and Tanaami-san seem to be quite close.

AS When I first saw the CD jacket he did for Supercar in high school it blew my mind. Until then I felt my works were too gross to openly show, but after seeing over-the-top Tanaami's works I felt unrestrained. I suddenly realized my own works can be also understood by the others. Later, when I got to know him personally my admiration for him as a person grew only stronger.

AB How was he as a teacher?

AS His classes didn't match my schedule so I never studied under him. Instead, I'd wait in front of Tanaami-san's office after the school and show him my works. He was very understanding and warm. He made me feel comfortable with myself and what I do, always telling me to only do what I want to. Let me show you something.

(Takes out his first book, "First Love")

This book contains all my works from high school to university. See, first drawings are made on the back of test papers, but as you flip through you can see how my works changed under Tanaami-san's influence. He encouraged me to go further. I had nothing but drawing in high school. I wasn't into studying, or sports... drawing was a way out, an escape. It set me free.

AB What did your family think of you becoming an artist?

AS They really disliked my drawings. I mean, corpses and stuff... not the type of drawings you'd get awarded for in school. My book collections were thrown away numerous times... They came to accept what I do since, but I don't think they like it. I started drawing to communicate with them, both of my parents have a hearing disability.

AB Where does your early fascination with decay come from?

AS From when I was hospitalized with a spinal disease. I'd draw those images laying in the hospital bed.

AB How would you describe your works?

AS Hmm... I've been thinking about this a lot lately. It's really difficult! I haven't thought about what I do in verbal terms until now, but after the Louis Vuitton show I suddenly became more interested in drawing for others, touching on the others' imagination. I'm mystified by what people think of my works... Foreigners often give me some feedback and it always surprises me, gives me a new insight into what I do. [Laughs]

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AB Do you think your growing success may influence your work?

AS I can only produce works that I personally find satisfying, regardless what it takes. I think there are two of me—the artist-me and the social-me. When I see my works at the exhibition I go “Wow, did I draw that?!” [Laughs] The artist-me always keeps on pushing, he wants to do more. His grip is much stronger than public opinion. Romance always seems to resurface in my works. Separation, the distance between two people... In a way, I create works to get over these feelings, to find the answers.

AB Even in romance you focus on the loss.

AS I have a hard time understanding other people. I can't imagine others thinking the way I do and vice versa. So the closest I can get to the “true” feeling is to dig deeper into myself.

AB Are you in a relationship right now?

AS Yes.

AB Is it a happy one?

AS Yes, but not without difficulties. My recent works reflect that.

AB So even though you need someone, you can't completely “be” with someone?

AS I guess. I always question how close you can really be with another person. Still, I can't be alone, I think I'd go insane!

Wait...

(Takes out a folder)

This is a “diary” I kept through 2009 while with someone. One drawing per day. I quit when we broke up. These are very important to me. See, I'd draw even if I wasn't an artist!

AB Anyone you look up to?

AS Hmm... Atsuko Koyanagi, my gallerist. Even though we don't discuss art in depth, she definitely guides me, takes care of me. Her and my manager, Chie Fukasawa. I owe them a lot.

AB What are you interested in besides art?

AS Umm... What would that be... Hmm.

AB Anything at all?

AS Oh! I like clothes, I designed this t-shirt. But to think of it... I only have my art. I never did homework at school and now, when work gets really tough, I often think I'm paying for my unfinished homework.

AB Is there anyone you can relate to?

AS I used to share a studio with my friends and quickly realized that everyone was only interested in themselves. Everything comes down to a personal experience. I was a kid when the bubble bursted, CEO's hanging themselves in the news... To be “number one” quickly became irrelevant. It made me think I'd rather be on my own, not a part of the team. Do what I want.

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AB Does present-day influence you?

AS I guess, but I'm more into things before the Heisei. Crazy stuff from the 80s, like Yamamoto Kansai. I don't know why... I'm not interested in what money can buy, but the crazy things you can create in your mind. I think the Japanese have a natural talent for making some thing brilliant out of nothing. My family isn't rich, but with a piece of paper and my imagination alone I could create anything.

AB Where do you see yourself in 30 years time?

AS Hopefully alive. I'm not suicidal, but not physically strong either. Many people tell me that I'll die young. I'd be happy to draw. Even if I didn't have arms I'd probably draw with my feet! [Laughs]. I pictured myself naked with an erection in my recent work, "Maybe Tonight"—most people who see the title imagine something promising, but to me "Maybe tonight... the world will end." I want to capture this duality within me. I can be happy and sad at the same time. Something bad happens and I feel low, yet, a little pleased at the same time. I want to live, but also want to die. It has been always like that for me.

AB Do you think of the world's end often?

AS Only recently, after the earthquake, I felt this world may easily end at any given moment. Not only it made me realize I'm no longer safe, it also made me think how previously unquestioned thoughts and beliefs can be easily changed overnight. So to me, "Maybe Tonight" alludes to the fact that art may not mean much after all.

AB Still, the erection is quite optimistic, no?

AS Yeah that's true! [Laughs] I was a little hesitant at first, but a friend of mine told me to go ahead, because I can only do it now, not in my fifties. [Laughs]

AB Your favorite hangout in Tokyo?

AS Umm... here. There is a nice empty space in front of my studio, which I like to look at without worrying about people looking back, even when I work naked. [Laughs] I'm not from Tokyo and sometimes find locals a little scary. I felt the same in New York... Ground Zero made me think how terrifying 9/11 must've been, also all these people moving cash in Twin Towers...

AB What inspires you most?

AS Sex! Both, as an actual act and a mentally stimulating experience. It lets you touch a person in a different way from, say, a handshake. You have to accept in order to be accepted. I'm not an overly confident person, but feel empowered by sex. It also exercises my five senses. I don't read, or watch TV much. I mostly get inspired by people, interacting with them.

AB Are you as imaginative in sex as in your works?

AS Could be. I was talking with my friends the other day and realized people tend to get very creative during sex. We loose guard when we're with our partners. I find it very liberating. Sex was not meant for reproduction only. How does it feel like to have a penis in one's mouth? I want to capture that feeling on paper. It's also interesting to compare what women have to say about men. Men and women seem to have a different angle on relationships.

AB What's your biggest ambition?

AS To create at least one work that possess enough impact to cause insanity! People are in awe with natural geometric patterns found in nature, like snow flakes. I also want to create something that goes unquestioned, a masterpiece of sorts. Like "The Scream" by Munch. I saw it first when I was in elementary school. No knowledge of art back then, but I understood instantly it was something great. I aim for something that goes beyond intellectual understanding and rational beliefs.



Ataru Sato, *Maybe Tonight*, 2012. Pencil on paper mounted on panel, 84.1 x 59.4 cm. Photo by Keizo Kioku. Courtesy of Gallery Koyanagi.