

Transcript: In-Conversation by Reuben Keehan with artists Junko Harada and Natsumi Seo

Facilitated by Emily Wakeling

Japanese-English interpretation by Junko Ichikawa

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Emily Wakeling: Hello everyone, thanks for coming. I'll start by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land on which we meet. I extend my respects to elders who are past, present and emerging. This talk is a part of the exhibition 'All We Can Do is Pray.' In keeping with this exhibition's theme, which is coping with great loss, I'd like to share a little of the history of loss in this very location. It includes the significant disruption of Indigenous people's culture, freedom and lives due to European colonisation. This place has also been a military training ground, in which many people went off to die in conflict. During World War II, this location has been a place of holding for Japanese prisoners of war. This exhibition builds on this history by presenting 20th century and 21st century events of great loss, connecting World War II to the 2011 Great Earthquake and Tsunami in northeastern Japan from the perspective of people who have been traditionally disempowered including women, children and the elderly.

To discuss these themes more, I present two artists, Junko Harada and Natsumi Seo. Junko is an artist, poet and activist. She is also a founding member of Tokyo collective Rojitohto who have supported creatives and activists in Tokyo for over a decade. Natsumi is an artist and writer, with a recently published book (on sale today, it's in Japanese), who in 2012 moved to Rikuzentakata, a town that was impacted by the 2011 tsunami. She has devoted her practice to this town's survivors' stories ever since. They are being assisted by an interpreter.

They are joined today by Reuben Keehan. Reuben is curator of Asian art at the Queensland Art Gallery (QAGOMA). Reuben's exhibitions have included 'We Can Make Another Future' 2015 and 'Roppongi Crossing' 2013 held at the Mori Art Museum. Most recently we worked together on the 9th Asia Pacific Triennial at QAGOMA.

Time permitting, this talk will end with time for questions, and I warmly welcome questions. Let's welcome them all. *[applause]*

Reuben Keehan: Thanks so much Emily. And as Emily said my name is Reuben and I work at QAGOMA. I've spent the last eight or so years analysing and contextualising the gallery's Japanese collection alongside its other collections of contemporary Asian art. I too would like to acknowledge the traditional owners and to thank Emily and the Boxcopy team for having me here today.

I won't talk too much because I really want to focus on the artists and their work, the artists present. But I wanted to contextualise their work within the history of recent Japanese art.

Now it's fair to say that among the various sectors of society who were transformed and profoundly affected by the events of March 11th 2011, Japanese art was certainly something that became, if not unrecognisable, certainly very very different in this decade to the one prior. Throughout the 2000s, the dominant trends as far as the major journals and institutions and the art markets were concerned went by a couple of names. It was initially known as the 'zero zero' generation, later in the decade it was renamed 'micropop' after another exhibition. The kind of work that was being produced was quite reflective of what was quite an uncertain period for younger Japanese people. After the 'lost decade' of the 1990s, jobs for life were no longer guaranteed. Labour arrangements became more flexible and underemployment became a problem. And a lot of certainty that an earlier generation experienced had really been evaporated. This was reflected in work that had often quite dark themes, but which was really directed towards a micropolitics or a certain personal politics that was expressed through various media. One of the precursor artists who is often cited is Yoshitomo Nara, whose very small scale work and popular drawings held a certain juvenile anger in them, maintained throughout adulthood. A lot of this work was small, and tended towards very tradition forms including drawing and painting, and often had a certain quietness to it and was often mistaken for being not very political—certainly in comparison to a lot of the work that was circulating internationally which was leaning towards having a much more political content since the 1990s.

Now, after the tsunami and especially the Fukushima disaster, all of that changed. For one thing, people across Japanese society were asking questions; 'how could this happen?'. For another, very painful memories of previous traumas and particularly those of World War II and of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and

Nagasaki were evoked by the nuclear disaster—the ongoing nuclear disaster—of Fukushima. And this created a context for artists with activist backgrounds, artists interested in social issues, artists interested in working with community, could flourish. And we started to see something of a change in Japanese art. Many artists started addressing the questions provoked by the disaster directly. Some of the work you may very well be familiar with is the art of ChimPom, from Tokyo, and a project they're involved in called Don't Follow the Wind, essentially creating an exhibition within the exclusions zone around the Fukushima nuclear power plant. But there are other, less headline-grabbing practices at work, and I think Emily has done a wonderful job at bringing them together in this exhibition.

So I'm very happy to have Natsumi and Junko here with us today to talk about their work which platforms some of the lesser-heard voices, the voice of women, of children, of the elderly, of people directly affected by the disaster, and it's channeled in very, very interesting ways.

So going back to the shift that March 11th produced in art, I want to ask each of you how your practices changed. So Junko of course you come from an activist background, to your work as an artist. How did the situation for activist artists change after 2011?

Junko Harada [via interpreter]: In my case, after the Japan earthquake, I was working as a comic writer and illustrator, not just an artist. Before the earthquake, I was always thinking about how to express myself. It was more like self expression. After the earthquake happened, many people were in shock. I think that many artists as well as many ordinary people became interested in the issue of nuclear as well. It was a big change in Japan. In my case, I was thinking about the expression of myself, but after the earthquake I was really shocked and I wanted to represent many people's fear, anger or sorrow for them, so it's no longer just an individual expression. So in that sense it was a big turning point in my practice.

In Japan, traditionally, there's a hesitation about speaking openly about politics. There's a bit of an allergic reaction against it, like we don't want to talk publicly about political issues in Japan. But after the earthquake, the situation became even worse than before. I think that the government became worse and it became difficult to talk about one's individual political opinions because it might hurt the [forward] movement of the nation.

I was interested in those political voices. After the earthquake, I started to make even more efforts so that people can approach me. For example, if I wear nicer clothes, different style of clothes, people might come closer to me and they might find it easier to talk to me. Or, if I draw beautiful pictures, play musical instruments well, and so on. My creative activities became a sort of common language to communicate with more people in that sense.

RK: And Natsumi, you made quite a dramatic move to the Tohoku region. What prompted the shift?

Natsumi Seo [via interpreter]: When the earthquake happened, I was a student studying art, and then when I heard the news about the big earthquake, at first I was really confused and didn't know what to draw. What sort of motive should I have to keep drawing? That triggered my move. I wanted to know what was going on. That is why I first visited the affected area as a volunteer. And there I met many nice people who were affected by the tsunami.

Many people died in the disaster, and many people were left there to mourn them. There were families who lost many family members. They were figuring out how to reconnect their families and communities. Many were trying to be considerate of each other so that they can rebuild relationships. They used *sahou*, which is a kind of 'manners' in English translation, to build relationships with each other, and I strongly felt that was one thing I truly need and I thought I could be a medium who could help connect the people in that area.

It was essential to be living in the area to do that.

RK: My next question is about how your experiences in working with people contribute to the work on display here in the exhibition. Perhaps it's easiest to start to talk about the work itself.

NS: In the exhibition, there are two main artworks. There are videos and there are drawings. The videos were created by me and Haruka Komori and together they are called 'Under the Wave, on the Ground'. The work was made 3 years after the tsunami, in 2014. After the tsunami, the affected areas were all green fields, but still we could see traces of the former town. A little bit of road, and things like that. Even through the long grass fields, people can still see traces of their old towns. So there were bunches of flowers on the ground, some flower beds were maintained and shared lots of memories.

But, because the reconstruction started, all traces were removed. The construction is large-scale, it will build up the land by 12 metres. So basically they remove everything and add a huge amount of earth. When this began, locals were saying that "I thought I had lost everything, but there was still something I could lose." I

heard this voice in the town. It's like a secondary loss. This loss was not reported in the media at all. Instead, it was considered "reconstruction" as a positive symbol of hope. So there are people who are reluctant to talk about this pain because it would be as if they were denying/stopping the recovery of the town. For me, I thought it important to share the hardship of the secondary loss. One reason we created the video is to share the feelings and people can more easily talk about their secondary loss experiences.

About the paintings and drawings, there are 3 series. One is called 'Voices from the Landscape'. In 2015, I started writing stories in response to the reconstruction work. I can no longer imagine what the town was like before the earthworks began, it is so different. By using my imagination, I wanted to see the original scenery before. I collected words from the townspeople, and used my imagination. It's a method that could be applied to any destroyed landscape, like post-atomic Hiroshima for example.

RK: Junko, I think there are similar things in your work. Different time periods, different memories, and a link made between the March 11th disaster and the war. I'd love to hear more about your manga.

JH: It was a very interesting experience. I was born after the war, so I never experienced it personally. My parents experienced the war but never talked about it. When the earthquake happened in 2011, Tokyo was affected. I was in Shibuya at the time. Many people had to walk through Shibuya because the trains had shut down. I heard older people on foot make comments along the lines of "this is just like the post-war period." I also heard this sentiment repeated on the radio and television. Even though I didn't know anything first-hand about the postwar period I felt it must have been like this—people on foot, all has gone dark. Of course, all school children in Japan learn about the war, but my education might not have been an authentic record. What I had learned was something I started to question and consider more. As a result, I began to consider the connections between the postwar period and the current disaster. It came from thinking a lot about the postwar period after the 2011 disaster hit.

Two days after the earthquake, news of the Fukushima nuclear power plant crisis reached me. I was very shocked. Those two incidents (the earthquake and nuclear crisis) pulled into question our modern lifestyles. Many people probably shared those same feelings. I was already involved in the anti-nuclear movement. Within the movement, there were many different opinions. Some people thought we should completely stop using nuclear power, others disagreed. As I explained earlier, it's very difficult to express one's political opinions very openly. For weak [more vulnerable] people, it's even more difficult. So I wanted to express people's anger and anxiety, I wanted to share their real voice, how they actually feel. That's how I started my activities after the disaster, through demonstration. I met many people there. After the earthquake, what I noticed is that more women and mothers had joined the anti-nuclear movement demonstrations. These women weren't so interested in the political issues before, but because it was a 'love' issue [affecting their family] lots more people became involved. I hadn't consciously looked to collaborate with mostly women, but that's how it turned out. Our activities were not like a traditional demonstration. For example, I was dancing in the street. Of course, there was still anger there as a motivator, but we wanted to project more positive feelings in our activities as feminists. At the same time as the anti-nuclear protests, there were changes being proposed to Article 9 in Japan's constitution [concerning the end to Japan's military aggression]. We were responding to these two issues around the same time.

I was working with many women for the anti-war movement. But I hadn't really talked to my grandmother about her experience of the war, or my parents. I wanted to hear from them, especially the stories about how the war affected my hometown. Even before the 2011 earthquake I was working as a comic book writer, so that is why I put these stories to manga form as 'Mizu no Misaki' as seen in the exhibition.

RK: You both spoke about the very strong emotions that came from March 11th. Natsumi, you mentioned a sense of loss. And Junko, you spoke of anger. Which I think is present in both of your works. There's something quite positive about them, and I think the exhibition in general. Despite this being a show that focuses on trauma, there is a sense of hope even if it's just a strategy for coping. Does that mean there is some positive function for art in at least helping people heal?

NS: I met people in Rikuzentakata including one old lady who talked a lot about her experiences, her sorrows, but also said that there are people who suffered more. There were some things she held back. I was aware that one of the major effects of the disaster for survivors was loneliness. There were new boundaries with people. When it comes to loneliness, everyone at some time feels lonely. Maybe loneliness could become a medium that can connect. I spoke before about sahou, the manners and kindness, which could be something important in that sense. There are people who faced loneliness after their losses.

Also, when I spoke to survivors, I noticed that there were thoughts that reappeared in many of my conversations. I spoke to people with war experiences, and I work with people with disabilities often in my practice. These people all have to cope with loneliness, and this is something they have in common even

though their situations are so different. I aim to deploy this commonality as a way for them all to connect. I would like to collect the many manners that have helped people mitigate their loneliness, and share this coping strategy with anyone who might also face loneliness at some time.

When I was listening to people affected by the earthquake, for the first time I became aware of people who are affected by trauma who are living in the same age as me. My grandparents experienced the war, but I never asked them about it. I felt like I shouldn't ask, it might be painful. There might be trauma for them. However, by not asking, it could be similar to ignoring the issue, or even creating a stigma for people who might be holding trauma. In a way, I was living in the illusion that everyone around me is living a healthy, trauma-free life. Everyone has experiences of pain, so it's important that everyone knows that their feelings are a natural response to hardship.

I think art can make some sort of room, a place where everyone can accept that everyone has weak moments, everyone feels pain. I believe that is one of the functions of art. Everyone can share their weaknesses with each other safely. That's why I keep reaching out to people, making art, doing exhibitions, and having these talks.

RK: Junko, any thoughts on that?

JH: You said that I express anger and sorrow in my work. These are difficult things to express in Japanese society, even though everyone gets angry and sad. For weak [vulnerable] people, it's even more difficult for them. By sharing these lesser-witnessed feelings, there can be hope. 'Mizu no Misaki' attracted a lot more reactions than my other comics. I've had readers come up to me and say, "my grandfather experienced this" and, "my grandmother experienced that". Some older people share their direct feelings and experiences during the war. In a way, by sharing personal stories, it encourages people to share their stories as well. It's symbolic, in a way. The tunnel is filled with anger or sorrow, but there is light at the end of the tunnel. Anger and sorrow have their own legitimate reasons for existing. By expressing it, in the form of art, people can reach the hope at the end of the tunnel.

The comic isn't really about war, it's about the individual person's situation and their power to overcome their hardships.

RK: I think we've run out of time for any more questions, but thank you so much. Emily, is there time for any audience questions?

EW: Our interpreter must be very tired, but everyone is welcome to come and talk to the artists after this is finished. Thank you everyone. *[applause]*