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ART REVIEW

JAPANESE ART: SUBLIME TO LIGHTWEIGHT

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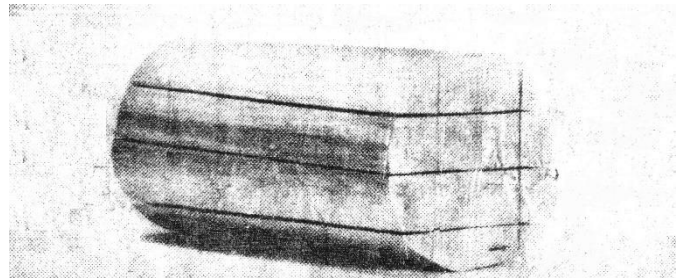
SAN DIEGO-Japanese Art Today" is one of those well-intentioned exhibitions that range widely, as the cliché says, from the sublime to the ridiculous. On one hand it demonstrates that the Japanese sense of refinement remains something to inspire Westerners. On the other, it demonstrates that the Japanese can be just as silly in their art as we. The exhibition of works by six Japanese artists at the Mandeville Gallery at UC San Diego coincides with the institution's 25th anniversary and the inauguration of its Graduate School of International Relations and Pacific Studies. Curator Brent Riggs organized the exhibition and, with the collaboration of San Diego-based artist Margaret Honda, wrote its introductory essay.

Most intriguing because it is the most alien, what we assume to be most authentically and mysteriously Japanese, is the work of Kazuo Kadohara, who uses a traditional, natural material: wood. With a variety of simple hand and complex technological processes he alters tree limbs and trunks he has selected. For the metaphorically suggestive "Wood No. 7A" (1976) he baked one end of each of 10 branches lying parallel to one another in a kiln until it became charcoal while leaving the other end in its natural state. "Wood No. 5W" (1978) is a length of cedar (approximately 1 foot by 6 feet) that he sliced paper-thin with a veneer-making machine and reassembled.

He subtly carved the surface of "Wood No. 12 D" (1981), split "Wood No. 11R" (1982) into a grid-like pattern and painted the sides of "Wood No. 10F" (1981), a large wall piece (242 by 9 feet), with black pigment. The ostensible simplicity of Kadohara's works belies their poetry and presence.

The most beautiful works in the show, in a traditional modernist sense, are the collages by Katsuro Yoshida, who transfers photo-reproductions of torn magazine pages onto white paper fields, which he alters through the painterly addition of acrylic pigments. Graphite lines, both straight and irregular, refer to what is missing. Although abstract, some of the works suggest fans and kimonos.

Kazuo Shiraga has for more than 30 years made paintings with his feet as he swings from a rope attached to a beam in the ceiling of his studio. (Could we call them "pedal paintings"?) His use of the whole



body in the creative process is related to his early activities in performance art.

As the catalogue essay appropriately points out, this technique differs from the action painting of Jackson Pollock, who used hand-held tools, and from the body painting of French artist Yves Klein, who directed the actions of others, his human paintbrushes. (A brief videotape, in Japanese, documents the artist's procedure. It shows, by the way, that he does use hand-held tools as well as his feet.) The results are old-fashioned looking Abstract Expressionist works with an Oriental flavor that might have been painted by a Westerner strongly influenced by Japanese aesthetics. Although they convey a sense of the vigor that went into their execution, they have a quality of high decoration that would not long sustain visual interest.

12 The works of Yayoi Kusama and

Ryoichi Majima are, in contrast, lightweight. Kusama shows boxes and ceramic forms shaped like gourds decorated with polka dots. She also shows glitter-covered women's shoes filled with penile forms. (New York artist Rhonda Zwillinger makes similar work with greater authority.) About five minutes of videotape out of a total of 60 at the gallery are sufficient as an introduction to her performance work.

Majima freezes artifacts from contemporary life-tape cassettes, pill bottles, that kind of stuff-in plastic. Her "Let Us Talk No. 43, Pee Company" (1985), with four miniature Caucasian (probably American) men relieving themselves against a wall to the sound of barking dogs is not even sophomoric.

Finally, however, "Trip Into the Interior," a 13-minute videotape by the Sankai Juku dance group, leads us through a series of grotesque, discontinuous episodes to the sublime. It's addictive. One of the performers, Goro Namerikawa, is scheduled for a performance June 20 at 7:30 at a location to be announced.

The exhibition continues through June 22.