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Brushing Up Against the Buddha

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Collage by Marshall Arisman

An artist born in America today stands a ten times greater chance of being admitted to a mental institution than an art college. Perhaps it is the way we educate artists that drives them mad. Art is eliminated from school curriculums in favor of science and math. Most parents want their children to become lawyers, dentists, doctors, accountants, computer programmers—anything, as long as they don't choose to become artists.

Japan, on the other hand, makes living artists National Treasures. Many of the artists work in the traditional forms of pottery and doll making.

SATORU ARRIVED at the hotel breakfast table out of breath and unable to speak English. Patting his chest repeatedly, he bowed, took a deep breath, and finally said, "Very exciting news! A National Treasure is considering serving you tea!"

I smiled.

"It is a great honor to even be considered," Satoru said, obviously disappointed at my lack of response.

"I am confused," I said, "I'm not Andy Warhol or Jasper Johns. I'm not a world famous artist. I doubt the National Treasure has seen my magazine illustrations or any catalogs from my exhibitions in this small island."

"Kyushu," Satoru said.

"I know," I said, watching Satoru's automated hand move from his chest to his slightly protruding stomach. He waived the waitress away. I watched the mist from the hot springs fog the window behind him.

"Did he come to the slide lecture last night?" I asked.

"No," Satoru said, "I asked him that when he called this morning."

"Tell me more about him," I said.

"For many years he was a Buddhist monk. Now he is married and has three small children."

"How old is he?" I asked.

"Ninety years old," Satoru said.

"Pretty amazing man," I said, smiling.

Satoru, pretending not to hear me, continued to pat his stomach.

Having spent two weeks with Satoru as my traveling companion and translator, I knew that his ulcer was acting up. I knew that this situation would only aggravate his condition.

"Stomach no good," he said to himself as we walked the narrow streets from the hotel into town. Checking his address book, we entered an exclusive art gallery and antique shop. Locking the door behind us, we were led to a small viewing room where a small statue, covered in blue silk, was sitting on a glass table.

Two business men in black suits carefully unwrapped the statue and stepped back reverently. The morning sun reflected off the porcelain figure of a samurai in full battle gear. Satoru remained seated as I put on my glasses and slowly walked around the sculpture. It was exquisitely crafted with every detail painted to perfection. Beautiful as it was, it left me cold.

"Very beautiful," I said repeatedly, as I studied the figure.

The official invitation arrived at the hotel that afternoon accompanied by the two art dealers and three more men in suits.

"Ground rules," I thought, as we ordered drinks from the bar. Sipping a glass of milk, Satoru listened intently and took notes as the senior suit spoke to him in Japanese, often reading back for clarification. Tapping his stomach, Satoru finally turned to me.

"This will be a formal tea ceremony," Satoru said.

"The master himself will conduct it. A very great honor for all of us."

I nodded, smiling at the men around the table.

“Major point,” Satoru said, raising his finger for emphasis...Under no conditions should I ask to see his studio. This would be a serious insult to him: his wife, his children, no one was allowed in his studio. To ask and then be refused would cause loss of face for everyone.

“I understand,” I said.

THE CEREMONY

A LARGE WOODEN door opened into a formal rock garden in front of the house. Framed in the doorway, a small man with a wrinkled face dressed in a simple kimono smiled and extended his hand as we approached. He didn't wink, but he did. Following him into the house, I instinctively knew we had met before. Not in this lifetime. I knew why I was there. We were old friends.

The bitter, frothy, bright, green tea was long in the making. The pungent taste bit my tongue as I raised the ceramic bowl with both hands to my lips. Without looking up, I said to Satoru, “Ask him if I can see his studio.”

Satoru, stunned speechless, watched in horror as the old man rose to his feet. He beckoned me to follow him with one hand and held the others back with the palm of his other hand.

We entered a small, eight-mat studio at the top of the narrow stairway. The freshly laid mats smelled like sea grass. The side walls were lined with book cases, and a small lacquered table sat in front of a window at the north end of the room. The north wall had three pedestals holding three separate dolls. They were the only art objects in the room. Placing his hand on my shoulder, he motioned for me to inspect the dolls.

The doll on the left reminded me of African fetish dolls made from mud and blood. The clay surface was cracked and the color of burnt orange. It was vaguely threatening, and I could feel the goose bumps rising on the back of my neck when he handed it to me.

“When I made this doll, I get sick,” he said. “Then my wife get sick and my children get sick.”

“I believe it,” I said, quickly returning the doll to the pedestal.

“This doll,” he said, grabbing the arm of the doll on the far right, “I make to get well. Then I get well, my wife get well and my children get well.”

The rag doll hung limp from his hand like a Raggedy Ann doll, the button eyes and sewn lips forming a smile. He handed me the doll, and I nestled her in the crook of my arm.

“This doll,” he said holding up a porcelain figure much like the one I had seen in town, “I make for money.”

I have often thought back about that afternoon. Satoru visits New York occasionally. His ulcer is worse. We have never spoken about the National Treasure. Satoru pretends it never happened.





Desnudo clásico, 1973

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