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BOOK REVIEW

Review of *In the Shadow of Empire: Art in Occupied Japan* by Alicia Volk. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2025. 464 pages.

Earlier scholarship has often portrayed the immediate years following the Asia-Pacific War as a period of artistic inertia or stagnation in Japan. Alicia Volk's *In the Shadow of Empire* challenges this narrative. By foregrounding artworks created during Japan's occupation era, Volk delves into an array of artworks across different media by demonstrating the thematic concerns they conveyed; the intellectual debates they engaged; and the transformations and continuities they embodied from the prewar period into the years of occupation.

The book consists of five chapters, along with an introduction and an epilogue. The introduction outlines the historical context that frames the book: the democratization of art in post-imperial Japan during the U.S. occupation, a period marked by the United States' emergence as a dominant global power the Asia-Pacific War. The first chapter further examines the complexities and upheavals of this transitional moment, situating the key figures discussed throughout the book within their historical contexts. The subsequent chapters, organized around a series of case studies, explore occupation-era art productions from multiple lenses, addressing diverse media – including painting, printmaking, and sculpture – as well as the experiences of women artists.

Volk opens the introduction with the dramatic reversal of Japan's fortunes during the Asia-Pacific War. Whereas Japanese fighter planes had once dominated the skies over mainland China with extensive bombing raids, by the autumn of 1944 American air power controlled the Asia-Pacific airways, devastating large areas of Japanese cities. The shift in military dominance foreshadowed Japan's post-war trajectory under U.S.-occupation. Surveying the field of postwar Japanese art history, Volk succinctly points out what she



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calls a “mutual forgetfulness” between the two countries regarding both the war and the occupation (p. 8), a dynamic that has produced a “yawning amnesic void” in the historical narratives of twentieth-century Japanese art made during the occupation era (p. 9).

To delineate the intellectual atmosphere of this historical moment, Volk introduces Kitawaki Noboru’s 1949 oil painting *Quo Vadis* as an emblematic expression of the uncertainties, the dilemmas, and the predicaments faced by Japanese artists – and the people more broadly – in the immediate post-war years. Volk’s discussion of Kitawaki’s work also sets-up the central question that runs through the subsequent chapters: when the legacy of the wartime past still looms over the present, and individuals are suddenly confronted with an unprecedented degree of personal choice, which path should be taken?

In the introduction, Volk has also identified the Gordon W. Prange Collection at the University of Maryland as one of her primary archival sources, which houses an unparalleled archive of Japanese-language printed materials produced during the occupation-era (p. 33). She also draws extensively on the National Archives in College Park, Maryland, which contains a vast repository of U.S. military and administrative records. Together, these archives provide complementary perspectives on the occupation: the Prange Collection preserves those from occupied Japan, while the National Archives documents the viewpoints and policies of the occupying authorities.

The first chapter walks the reader through the tumultuous transition from the wartime period to the occupation era, revealing both the conflicts and contradictions as well as the striking continuities that endured across both periods. At the core of the democratic mandate for art after the war lay the question of the relationship between the individual and the collective, the part and the whole. During the war, a mythologized body politic (*kokutai*) had subsumed individual autonomy, demanding its assimilation into the collective. Consequently, in the postwar art world, artistic autonomy emerged at the center of debates and was repeatedly addressed by different groups. Yet the very notion of an “art world”, as Volk succinctly points out, reveals a fundamental dilemma since its very existence has been taken for granted and never really been questioned (p. 40). Comprising a constellation of both established and emerging organizations, the art world functioned to secure the artist’s professional and social standing while also providing the framework through which art, as a form of expression, became legible to both artists and the public. However, the unquestioned acceptance of the art world’s existence bares similarity with the wartime subsumption of the

individual into the collective on the epistemological level. This tension ultimately produced an ironic situation: despite many artists' deep commitment to democracy and dismantling the structure of wartime state, their activities could only coalesce around what Volk describes as, borrowing Matsumoto Shunsuke's term, "a certain power or paradigm" (p. 80).

Organized chronologically, the first chapter traces the shifting contradictions of the Japanese art world from 1940 to 1941 – when it had been fully absorbed into the wartime state – through to the democratization mandate of the early occupation and then into the reverse course (*gyaku kōsu*). The reverse course marked a shift in U.S. policies in occupied Japan, which pivot around 1948 amid rising Cold War tensions. At the center of these transformations was the fraught question of artists' war responsibility. The debate about their responsibility exposed a deep frustration over the rapid retrenchment of establishment artists and institutions into the postwar art world. Through figures such as Yokoyama Taikan and Fujita Tsuguharu, Volk demonstrates how the government – particularly the Ministry of Education – as well as the elite artists associated with the Imperial Art Academy moved swiftly to preserve the privileged position they had enjoyed under the wartime order, often without meaningful reflection (p. 58).

As a reaction to the conservative establishment and in an effort to rebuild the art world, the Japan Art Association, or Nichibi, came into formation. This organization served as a key institutional node in the book, as many of the artists discussed across its chapters were members, including Matsumoto Shunsuke, Uchida Iwao, Fukuzawa Ichirō, Ono Tadashige, Hongō Shin, and Akamatsu Toshiko. Yet Nichibi also failed to confront the issue of artists' war responsibility. As Volk notes, artists endeavored to gradually redirect the debate from reckoning with the past to envisioning the future, producing a significant blind spot that later commingled with an emerging discourse of victimhood as Cold War tensions intensified (p. 70).

Through an analysis of Uchida Iwao's *Come Sing Along! (People Protecting Culture)* (*Utagoe-yo Okore [bunka-o mamoru hitobito]*), Volk further illustrates how artistic antagonism shifted during the reverse course, increasingly targeting the United States amid the Occupation's deepening alliance with Japanese conservatives. The Japan Communist Party (JCP), with which many of the artists discussed in the book were affiliated, exerted a significant influence on the postwar art world and contributed to the internal disputes within Nichibi that ultimately led to its fracture. The fraught relationship between art, politics, and ideology introduced here recurs throughout the book as a persistent concern for the postwar art world.

The second chapter centers on the founder of the Art Culture Association, Fukuzawa Ichirō, whose wartime arrest – introduced in the first chapter as an example of the coercive inclusion of artists during the war – serves as the historical backdrop for Volk’s analysis. Volk positions Fukuzawa’s 1948 oil painting *Monument to Defeat in War* (*Haisen-no Kinenhi*) as an emblematic work that crystallized the ideological conflict of the immediate postwar period. She argues that the painting stakes out “a position with respect to ideological battles between left and right, and between liberal modernists and radical leftists, in a time of profound anxiety and intense struggle over both ideals and representation” (p. 87).

Volk traces the pictorial genealogy of this work back to Fukuzawa’s wartime and early postwar paintings. Examining three seascape paintings from 1942 – *Returning Geese* (*Kigan*), *Sea (1)* (*Umi* [1]), and *Sea (2)* (*Umi* [2]) – she argues that these works express disorientation rather than wartime triumph. This ambivalence intensified in Fukuzawa’s immediate postwar production, culminating in his 1946 series *Fantasies Inspired by the Inferno from Dante’s Divine Comedy* (*Dante Shinkyoku Jigokuhen-ni Yoru Gensō*), whose inferno imagery Volk interprets as a “veritable purgatory” reflecting both the occupation era and the psychological aftermath of forced ideological conversion (*tenkō*) (p. 101). She further identifies the 1948 painting *Fighting Group* (*Tatakau Gunzō*), depicting a writhing mass of unclothed bodies, as a direct precursor to *Monument to Defeat in War*. Volk suggests that this work drew on wartime visual idioms, including the “deathly battle scene” genre associated with Fujita Tsuguharu and imagery of Mount Fuji painted by Yokoyama Taikan (p. 109). Read in relation to Mount Fuji’s wartime status as a symbol of the *kokutai*, the pyramidal mass of bodies in *Monument to Defeat in War* becomes, in Volk’s interpretation, “a bitter rebuke of the pernicious wartime ideal of *kokutai* and of the utterly useless, defeated war that was fought in its name” (p. 117). In this way, Volk reads Fukuzawa’s painting as a temporal collage of the artist’s earlier artistic endeavors, reflecting a continuing and evolving struggle that persisted from the wartime to the postwar era.

Volk also highlights the motif of ruins in *Monument to Defeat in War*, arguing that ruins function as a “perfect vehicle for representing the persistence of the past in the present” (p. 119), particularly as the institutional structure of the wartime art establishment continued into the postwar period – a continuity that deeply frustrated Fukuzawa. At the same time, Volk draws attention to Fukuzawa’s response to the ideological rupture unfolding within the artistic left. While the JCP adopted a hardline stance against literary and artistic modernism, Fukuzawa instead prioritized the

artist's individual autonomy (p. 120). Through examining Fukuzawa's discussion with Hongō Shin (who is central to the book's fourth chapter), Volk underscores Fukuzawa's conviction that the social role of art lies in mediating the "opposition" between the individual and the collective (p. 122). In this way, Volk returns to the argument she introduced at the beginning of the chapter, proposing that the painting should be understood as a site of confrontation where opposing stances, and even different temporalities, collide; a future "overthrowing" a present within which the past remains embedded (p. 123).

Chapter three opens by foregrounding the materiality of prints (*hanga*), which, as Volk highlights, was the primary reason printmaking appeared to hold particular promise for the new democratic age. The medium's accessibility seemed to evidence its fundamentally popular – or democratic – nature. Volk organizes the chapter by juxtaposing two types of prints, each representing contrasting visions of the artists behind them. On the one hand, the creative prints (*sōsaku hanga*) artists adopted an essentially modernist stance, seeking to elevate the medium's status and secure its recognition within the established art world. On the other hand, proponents of people's prints (*jimmin hanga*) regarded printmaking as inherently political and promoted it as a social medium created by and for the working class.

Through this juxtaposition, Volk reveals the central issues at stake in the postwar debate. The first concerns the authorship. Creative print artists insisted on the individual artist's sole authorship of an image and placed the artist's subjective expression at the center of artistic production, in keeping with modern art theories originating in Europe. Advocates of people's prints, by contrast, emphasized the communal potential of printmaking, grounded in the medium's accessibility and reproducibility, and sought to enable the laboring masses to create their own prints. Many artists associated with the movement went to live and work with communities in peripheral regions (*chihō*), hoping to introduce printmaking both as a form of expression through which people could develop their own proper subjecthood and culture and as a tool of social liberation. A key inspiration for these artists was Chinese woodblock prints, which sought direct representation of social and political realities and offered Japanese artists on the left a model for emulation toward the completion of the Japanese democratic revolution (p. 159).

Another question that lies at the core of the debate between these two stances is the audience. Onchi Kōshirō, as the representative of creative prints, insisted that "an artwork should emerge in response to form itself, not to something external to it", emphasizing the autonomy of art and the artist's

independence from the audience (p. 163). Examining Onchi's post war practice, Volk highlights his formalist experimentation, in which printmaking became increasingly abstracted into a process of image-making (p. 166). Artists associated with people's prints sharply criticized Onchi's "art for art's sake" approach, arguing that he failed to recognize that the artistic qualities he valued in prints were inherently tied to social conditions and even to specific social classes (p. 163). For people's print artists, printmaking functioned as a social medium grounded in continuous exchange between artists and workers (p. 181). Yet Volk also points out a revealing irony: as their practices evolved people's print artists, similar to Onchi, gradually moved away from the woodcut medium toward the primacy of the image (p. 180).

The chapter concludes by examining the reception of both movements, where Volk expands her scope of discussion to the level of international exchange. Onchi's immediate postwar print practice was closely associated with the souvenir market and increasingly targeted toward English-speaking buyers. In tracing the developing relationship between the occupiers and the occupied, Volk highlights the role played by American collectors. She further traces how creative prints entered American exhibitions and came to be received in the United States as a representative form of contemporary Japanese art. Onchi's abstractions in particular became highly sought after by major American museums. People's prints were also circulated internationally as projects of transnational solidarity and grassroots people's diplomacy. Their first overseas exhibitions were held in China, contributing to a dialogue with Chinese printmaking, before their next stop "aimed at the heart of the beast" – the United States (p. 188). Nevertheless, Volk concludes the chapter by pointing out the bleak reality behind both prints' seemingly universal reception: both people's prints and creative prints have been "art-historical losers" (p. 196), their transnational receptions largely absent from art histories written in both the United States and even in Japan. Moreover, despite their stylistic and ideological alignment with America's Cold War Other, people's prints surprisingly found no place in a disciplinary system of value and judgement that was itself shaped by Cold War ideology. This observation resonates with Volk's earlier challenge to the "still-present Cold War frame of knowledge" introduced in the book's opening chapter (p. 32). Chapter four, "Listen to the Voices of the Sea", shifts the medium of focus from prints to sculptural monuments. Although monuments are amongst the most compelling forms of a society's cultural expression, they also became one of the most divisive forms of art in Japan during the occupation due to the reverse course and the intensification of the Cold War. As the chapter's

title suggests, Volk centers her discussion on Hongō Shin's sculptural monument, *Voices of the Sea (Wadatsumi-no Koe)*, presenting it as an emblematic example of postwar peace monuments that exposed the contradictions and tensions embedded in the notions of peace, democracy, and freedom in the final years of the occupation.

Through a compelling formal analysis of the sculpture and comparisons with precedents such as Kitamura Seibō's *Brave Special Attack Corps Hero (Tokkō Yūshi-no Zō)* (1944), Volk highlights the notion of humanity (*ningeisei*) within Hongō's leftist-leaning intellectual milieu. The sculpture's idealized youthful male body – representing a student sacrificed in war – evokes a range of historical associations, including the wartime state's eugenic policies and hygienic campaigns. At the same time, what makes this sculpture particularly poignant, as Volk points out, was Hongō's portrayal of the figure's inward-looking posture and contemplative psychological state, suggesting an inner conscience governed by reason and intellect (p. 235).

The timing of the sculpture's creation further intensified the controversy that would surround it. While Hongō was working on the monument the Korean War had begun and the Red Purge of communists was unfolding across Japanese universities. Within this historical context, *Voices of the Sea* emerged as a highly contested object, whose shifting locations reflected broader societal anxieties and fissures. Despite the inherent immobility expected of monumental sculpture, *Voices* proved remarkably mobile: rejected installation in the University of Tokyo, it was temporarily displayed at peace gatherings in the early 1950s before eventually being installed at Ritsumeikan University. Volk further follows the sculpture's afterlife in the post-occupation period, when it became the target of violence during the student protests in the late 1960s. Reflecting on its destruction, she cites a protesting student who accused the statue itself of symbolizing a "false peace" – a critique that revealed the growing disenchantment surrounding Japan's postwar democratic ideals.

In the fifth chapter, Volk expands upon her earlier journal article (Volk 2020) and examines two prominent women artists of the postwar period: Migishi Setsuko and Akamatsu Toshiko (also known as Maruki Toshi). While both artists were deeply engaged with questions of liberation and contributed significantly to postwar artistic production, they pursued markedly different creative paths shaped by their respective ideological commitments. Compared with the artists discussed in earlier chapters, Migishi and Akamatsu articulated their positions from the perspective of

women artists, a point Volk underscores by opening the chapter with Migishi's statement: "History has given us our first chance" (p. 254).

Volk devotes the chapter to examining Migishi's and Akamatsu's competing visions for the role of art in a democratic society. In Migishi's case, she refused to submit her work to any external authority or political authority and insisted that art was fundamentally a personal endeavor. Volk identifies this stance as explicitly modernist, and notes that Migishi emphasized the separation between the artist and the general masses. Migishi's understanding of liberation and independence was closely tied to her vision for the postwar Japanese art world, which also fueled her critiques of its current establishment. Yet the persistent gendered interpretation of Migishi's work became a source of deep frustration. Volk cites Migishi's own words from the early 1950s, in which she lamented that everything had been a mistake from the beginning simply because she had been born a woman (p. 278). In 1954, Migishi left Japan for an extended stay in Europe and would not return until 1988.

Akamatsu's career developed along a strikingly different trajectory. Volk illustrates this contrast through a diagram that maps Akamatsu's artistic practice along a horizontal axis between artist and audience, in contrast to Migishi's vertically oriented model. Volk traces the evolution of Akamatsu's work from the immediate postwar through the reverse course: from *Hunger (Ue)* (painted in 1944 but revealed in 1946), in which the artist declared a determination to speak the *truth* with her brush, to *Emancipation of Humanity (Kaihō Sareyuku Ningen-sei)* (1947), which expressed her belief in humanity's future liberation. By 1948, however, her work had darkened in tone and started to adopt the theme of mother and the child. Volk then centers her discussion on Akamatsu's collaborative project *Atomic Bomb Pictures (Gembaku-no Zu)* (1950), created with her partner Maruki Iri. Volk highlights that during this project, Akamatsu and Maruki came to recognize that their authority as artists was necessarily partial and that their own perspectives needed to be supplemented by those of many others in order to represent the "totalized reality" of the atomic bomb (p. 298). Volk interprets the project as a new form of democratic artmaking grounded in dialogue and collective testimony. The series ultimately came to embody Akamatsu's commitment to the women's and peace movements and her belief in the transformative potential of art. By early 1956 the series had expanded to ten paintings and had been exhibited internationally in thirteen countries.

To conclude the chapter, Volk draws the reader's attention to a striking similarity between Migishi and Akamatsu's creation despite their differing artistic visions: both positioned themselves at a distance from the Japanese

art world (p. 302). This observation underscores a broader historical reality—that neither Akamatsu’s vision of proletarian empowerment nor Migishi’s rejection of gender as a defining social category would be realized during the occupation period. Volk concludes by noting that, despite both artist’s profound commitment to the liberation of women, as far as the *art world* was concerned, such promises would exist more as ideals than lived realities well beyond the postwar years.

The book’s epilogue reflects on the contested meanings of peace, freedom, and artistic practice in Japan at the end of the American occupation. Through a comparison of two works from 1951 – Akamatsu Toshiko’s satirical drawing *Goddess of Liberty, This Is Peace* (*Jiyū-no Megami, Heiwa-yo*) and Inokuma Gen’ichirō’s mural *Freedom* (*Jiyū*)—Volk demonstrates how artists articulated sharply divergent responses to the emerging Cold War order. Akamatsu’s image condemned the nuclear violence and geopolitical power underlying the U.S.-led “peace”, aligning itself with leftist and anti-imperialist critiques, while Inokuma’s pastoral mural presented a serene vision of prosperity and leisure that aligned with the cultural ideal of postwar reconstruction and stability. By juxtaposing these works, the epilogue underscores how artistic representations of peace and freedom were deeply entangled with the political divisions and competing visions of Japan’s place in the postwar world.

The epilogue then situates these artistic debates within the broader political turmoil surrounding Japan’s regained sovereignty in 1952, including the mass protests of “Bloody May Day” and the rise of activist art aligned with labor and leftist movements. Works such as Suzuki Kenji’s *Occupation of the People’s Plaza* (*Jimmin Hiroba Senryō-no zu*) exemplified attempts by artists to intervene directly in political struggle and to visualize popular resistance to the U.S.–Japan security framework. At the same time, the author traces how a new postwar art establishment centered on museums, critics, and international exhibitions began to consolidate in Tokyo, promoting artists whose work resonated with Euro-American modernism while marginalizing more overtly political practices. In its final reflection, the epilogue critiques the Cold War biases embedded in global art history that have privileged movements like Gutai because of their compatibility with Western avant-garde narratives. By contrast, the book advocates a more expansive art history attentive to the messy, contested, and contradictory artistic responses produced in the shadow of both the Japanese and American empires.

Volk’s book makes a significant contribution to existing scholarship on the still underexplored artistic activities of the occupation era. The study unfolds

through the theoretical questions introduced in the opening chapter – particularly those of relationality and incommensurability – and Volk consistently follows through on this conceptual framework. This theoretical coherence allows her to examine how artworks operated within complex political and cultural networks while maintaining a clear methodological through-line across the book. In this way, Volk’s analysis successfully reveals the entanglement of art and artistic practice with broader geopolitical and ideological contexts.

Writing at a moment when the war has grown increasingly distant for contemporary generations, Volk closes the book by reminding readers of the continued presence of U.S. military bases across Japan as lingering reminders of the enduring legacy of the occupation. By challenging global art historical narratives that remain largely structured around Euro-American canons, Volk brings attention to materials and practices long marginalized by dominant paradigms. She identifies the persistence of Cold War frameworks in shaping the writing of art history and positions her study as an intervention into these inherited structures of knowledge. In doing so, the book opens a productive horizon for rethinking the relational dynamics that shaped postwar art and for understanding artistic production across overlooked sites in the shadow of empire.

References

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