

The Shocking Avant-Garde Art of the “Kyushu-Ha”

Former members gather to reminisce about their bold activities

Around 1960, members of the avant-garde art group “Kyushu-ha,” who boldly pursued their activities based in Fukuoka, recently held a reunion where all members gathered. They reminisced about their passionate days and reaffirmed their shared significance. This gathering was organized to address the ambiguity in the documentation of the Kyushu-Ha movement, prompted by the return exhibition of Takami Sakurai—a former leader of Kyushu-Ha now residing in Paris—and the concurrent exhibition of Mokuma Kikuhata's objects and drawings at the Fukuoka City Museum of Art. Curators from the museum also participated, recording testimonies of the rare avant-garde movement that originated in the region.



At its peak, the group had over thirty members, and the total number of artists exhibiting at the Kyushu-Ha Exhibition reached fifty. Those present that day included Sakurai and Kikuhata, along with Shigeharu Obana, Hidesuke Obata, Junnosuke Miyazaki, Yasuyuki Ishibashi, Osamu Ochi, Iwaichi Oyama, and Toshio Taniguchi. Among the women were Mitsuko Tabe and Aiko Ohguro. Kikuhata led the discussion as moderator. Kyushu-Ha began in the fall of 1956 with the street exhibition *Persona* held along the road west of the

Fukuoka Prefectural Office. By year's end or early the following year, the name Kyushu-Ha was born. The name Kyushu-Ha was proposed by Mr. Mamoru Matano.

Most members joining the group were born around 1930. It also stemmed from rejected artists who had submitted works to the Nika-Ten and Independent Ten exhibitions holding their own gathering. Some had previously been selected. These included Kenichiro Terada, Shin Kinoshita, and Yoji Kuroki.

Young men with artistic aspirations, their hearts filled with restless longing, soon came to embrace the anti-tableau, anti-art philosophy and activities of Neo-Dada. This spirit of opposition became the very foundation of Kyushu-Ha. Kyushu-Ha's creed was to smash conventional art, an anti-group exhibition, an anti-prefectural exhibition. They refused to paint oil paintings in frames. Their basic stance was not to submit works to juried exhibitions judged by others. Their main works became happenings where they expressed themselves physically and objects made from discarded materials.

The Yomiuri Independent Exhibition held at the Tokyo Metropolitan Art Museum became a target precisely because it was non-juried. Kyushu-Ha's entries, brimming with rustic character, stunned Tokyo audiences. "Some 'works' were rejected for display on management grounds, deemed too filthy and akin to garbage. 'The main materials were coal tar and asphalt, smeared on until pitch black, titled things like "Ah, the Warship Flag" and exhibited' (Yasuyuki Ishibashi)."

The peak of Kyushu-Ha came in 1959 with the Kyushu-Ha Exhibition at the Ginza Gallery in Tokyo, followed by the West Japan Independent Exhibition held for three consecutive years starting that same year in Fukuoka, Kitakyushu, and other locations. "Don't lose to Tokyo—keep promoting the Kyushu-Ha!" That's why several artists traveled to the capital around that time, holding joint exhibitions at various galleries. 'We would skillfully persuade those entering the prefectural exhibitions, telling them this show was better than that one, to enter the West Japan Independents Exhibition. But as the scandalous notoriety of Kyushu-Ha grew, fewer joined, making the group more elite and the works more radical,' (Takami Sakurai). "Internal strife was a daily occurrence; someone was always fighting with someone else, getting angry and quitting, then rejoining. It was a time of fervor, but Kyushu-Ha was truly a swirling vortex of a group, with no chairman or representative" (Shigehisa Kikuhata).

From 1961 to 1962, the Kyushu-Ha Exhibition was held at the Nakaya Department Store in Fukuoka's Shintencho district and at the Shinten Hall. The former featured objects, while the latter focused on happenings. In 1962, they staged a happening event called "The Great

March of Heroes” at the city's Momochi Beach. Each of these presentations stunned the general public, and their extraordinary boldness became a topic of discussion even within Tokyo's art world.

By the 1960s, the Kyushu-Ha movement gradually cooled off. While the members' age-related choices in life played a part, circumstances that loosened their bonds, such as Sakurai's move to the United States, also contributed. By 1967, the Kyushu Contemporary Art Trends Exhibition was organized, and while the name Kyushu-Ha remained, the group had effectively ceased to exist. However, regional art movements—including that Trends Exhibition, today's art shows, the Artist Union Exhibition, and others—were successively organized, with the core being Kyushu-Ha's challenging tradition and the members who carried on its spirit. Even in the postwar art histories compiled by art magazines and others, their activities are recorded with a somewhat legendary and humorous treatment.

『I was caught up in the inexplicable fervor of youth, yet I never felt driven mad. It was a passion without regret.』 (Hidesuke Obata) 『Without Kyushu-Ha, postwar Fukuoka's art scene would have been utterly dull.』 (Osamu Ochi). However, most members were approaching or had passed fifty. Many painters had returned to the easel. Though they say art knows no age, whether they could rekindle Kyushu-Ha's passion and reignite the avant-garde flame, or if they would merely sleep within the records as past reminiscences—no forward-looking conversation emerged anymore.

