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## Visual arts



*Kabuki Actors*, woodblock print by Kunichika, published by Wakasaya (White Lotus Gallery)

electricians" and set out to develop three lines of hand-crafted "outlandish and bizarre mechanical devices" and "utterly useless nonsense machines."

Two of these lines can be experienced in Eugene this month. The NAKI ("fish tool") series with its fish motif and ostensibly ontological theme (who am I?) is exhibited at JSMA in slightly reduced scale, together with an explanatory video. The Tsukuba series of 100 VAC-powered musical instruments will be demonstrated at the Shedd on Friday, Nov. 18. Various toys, CDs and videos are also commercially available, and each unique art work (nonsense machine) is to be further refined for mass production.

Among the products in the NAKI series, only the *Fish Cord* is truly functional. It is an extension cord with a fish body, a female head and a male tail. The case also can be made for the *Glass-Carp*, *Fish-Harp*, *Pachi-Moku*, *Dosu-Koi* and *Koi-Beat* music and rhythm devices, or even for the *Bow-Fish #2* (the first was a flop).

Two pieces count as fish-made art: the *Koi-Bumi*, a fish-operated typewriter, creates random texts that you're welcome to call a novel, while the *Grafish* builds upon the Japanese tradition of *gyotaku* (fish-printing), which involves rubbing a dead fish with ink to create an imprint on paper or silk. Maywa Denki uses live fish instead, and these create random ink marks as they struggle for oxygen.

Some machines explore even more directly the concept of randomness. *Holy Fish* is a caterpillar-tractor that moves according to the motion of a fish swimming above sensors in a cross-shaped tank placed on top of the vehicle. The notion of arbitrary fate is played out with *Uke-TEL*, an elaborate device hooked to a phone line. A specific phone signal releases a spear that may or may not kill a fish swimming in the tank below. In all these cases, precise technology ends up being controlled by the random movements of a goldfish.

Because Maywa Denki's ideas for machines are based on linguistic puns, the foundation of these devices ends up being the very

arbitrariness of language. The series is limited to 26 machines, the number of letters in the alphabet — an arbitrary decision connecting production to an arbitrary system.

Tosa pokes fun at philosophical systems by equating his machines taken as a group to a system that "stands as a single large Nonsense Machine." He then proceeds to turn on its head the old Cartesian metaphor of the body as machine by adding: "just like our internal organs act in concert with each other."

The names that come up most frequently in connection with Maywa Denki are Rube Goldberg, Duchamp, Fluxus, John Cage, Devo, Kraftwerk, Duran Duran. The Tosas place their artistic lineage squarely

within the European modernist avant-garde of the last century, with a special affinity for artists who were interested in kinetic art. They view their products as a cross between kinetic sculptures and (noise-making) performance. Stemming from their Japanese heritage, they say, is their high level of craftsmanship.

Maywa Denki's products and marketing strategies together blur the lines between art, entertainment and business. Concerts are dubbed "product demonstrations," and exhibitions are "product showcases." Performers wear blue factory coveralls. Products are marketed through every possible media channel, from lecture hall to DVD. Interestingly, Maywa Denki's marketing strategy becomes itself a marketable and marketed product: Marketing becomes (performance) art. It is this very idea of marketing as high art the Tosas believe earns them a place in the artistic avant-garde.

Just as the *ukiyo-e* in their time, Maywa Denki has become a wildly popular commercial art in tune with the spirit of its time. Instead of responding to customers' needs as the Edo artists did, Maywa Denki both deliberately highlights and exacerbates the very needlessness of most of the commodities our culture believes it cannot do without. They turn art into a marketing strategy to justify its own existence as a commodity.

All five exhibits are most highly recommended. **EW**

### IMPORTANT DATES:

Nov. 16 at 5:30-8 pm, JSMA: *Maywa Denki*, artist talk and reception.

Nov. 18 at 7:30, The Shedd: *Maywa Denki* live performance.

Nov. 19, December 16, 17 at 8 pm, DIVA: Japanpalooza Festival of Japanese Films *Nobody Knows*, *Princess Mononoke*, *Tampopo*

### SHOWS REVIEWED:

"Nineteenth-Century Japanese Woodblock Prints," White Lotus Gallery, through Dec. 6.

"Inside the Floating World: Japanese Prints from the Lenoir C. Wright Collection," Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art, UO, through Jan. 8.

"Ukiyo-e Outside In: Western Impressions of the Floating World," Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art, UO, through Jan. 8.

"Art and Everyday Life in Japan," JSMA, UO, through Jan. 8.

"Maywa Denki: Nonsense Machines Naki," JSMA, UO, through Nov. 20.