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Jelena STOJKOVIC, Resisting classification: Nonaka Yuri's collages

Résumé : Nonaka Yuri a publié plusieurs ouvrages avec des écrivains surréalistes, et réalisé une œuvre à la lisière des arts littéraires et visuels. Cet article accorde une attention particulière à ses collages et à deux publications réalisées avec Shibusawa Tatsuhiko, dans les années 60 et 70, selon plusieurs directions esthétiques, le modernisme, le design, la pratique du surréalisme au féminin.

mots-clés : [Collage](#), [Surrealism](#), [Women artists](#), [Text and image](#), [Book design](#)

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Resisting classification: Nonaka Yuri's collages

I first encountered Nonaka Yuri's work when a friend took me to the *LIBRARIE6* bookstore in Tokyo, which I remember as one long room nestled atop a flight of stairs in a nondescript new build in Ebisu, the kind of space you could easily miss if you didn't know where to look. Filled with books, objects, and pictures, it was a surrealist treasure trove with books in French and Japanese lined up alongside original prints by such Japanese artists such as Nonaka. I was instantly drawn to the delicate appearance and the subject matter so clearly informed by a love of nature and fantasy of her intricate imagery. I was particularly interested in her collage work, not least because of its distinct iconography and a striking colour palette.

As I quickly realised after that first encounter, it is not easy to learn about Nonaka outside of Japan. I visited *Galerie LIBRARIE6* after it relocated to a new space (also in Ebisu) a couple of years later and my interest grew stronger, but there remained very little opportunity to see or read about her work in Europe. The situation is very different in Japan, where she has achieved recognition in the institutional art context. Kamakura Annex at the Museum of Modern Art Kamakura and Hayama mounted an exhibition of her work, *Sukitōtta yume: Nonaka Yuri (A transparent dream: Nonaka Yuri)* together with Kosugi Takehisa, in 2002, with the exhibition catalogue also titled in French as *Yuri Nonaka: Œuvres artistiques et littéraires (Figure 1)*. Her solo exhibition, *Utsukushii hon to tomoni (Beautiful books, and more)*, took place at the same museum in 2012. These two shows, like the effort of *LIBRARIE6*, have largely evaded broader art historical recognition. My intention here, limited in several respects, is to start disturbing this *status quo*, rather than to provide a well-rounded overview of Nonaka's rich oeuvre.[1]

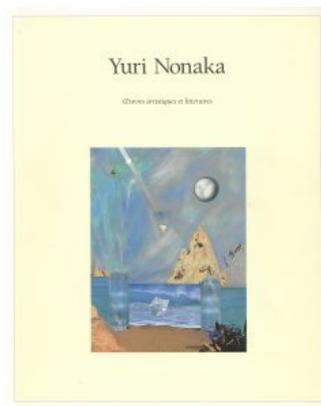


Fig.1 Yuri Nonaka: *Œuvres artistiques et littéraires*, exhibition catalogue (Kamakura Annex at the Museum of Modern Art Kamakura and Hayama), cover page, 2012; featuring *Yume no chihyō VI, Emerarudo no suimon* (*Surface of the Dream VI, The Emerald Water Gate*), 1979.

Nonaka's artistic practice is inseparable from her involvement with the Japanese literary world. In addition to actively exhibiting since the 1950s, she produced a substantial body of work in book format together with the leading surrealist writers in Japan – Takiguchi Shūzo, Shibusawa Tatsuhiko and Iwaya Kunio – with whom she collaborated regularly and across different projects. She also worked with various publishing houses as a book designer and illustrator on a range of publications so versatile that her portfolio reads as a catalogue for progressive literature and poetry. Her design work encompasses books by such authors as Terayama Shūji, Morisaki Kazue and Takahashi Mutsuo, among many others, as well as important translations of surrealist literature and criticism to Japanese, not only by prominent writers like André Breton and Antonin Artaud but also by Joyce Mansour and André Pieyre de Mandiargues.[2] In this manner, her output invokes several relevant lineages and can be observed not only vis-a-vis the histories of modernist avant-gardes, but also in terms of the intersection between book design and artistic practice. Last and not least, her work offers a particular perspective on the relationship between text and image, especially within the production of artists' books in Japan. These are the main strands of thought that I am developing in this essay, considered in parallel through several examples of Nonaka's collages made during the 1960s and '70s.

Paraphrasing and visual coding

Born in 1938, Nonaka decided to be an artist at fifteen. She briefly attended an etching school run by Sekino Junichirō but was mostly an autodidact. While still in her teens, she met Takiguchi, a leading surrealist poet and critic in Japan, who included her work in a group show that he curated at the Takemiya Gallery in 1957. In the same year, she took part in the first *Tokyo kokusai hanga ten bienāre* (*International Biennale Exhibition of Prints in Tokyo*), a seminal event of the internationally recognised *sōsaku hanga* creative print movement in the following decade. Two years after, she had her first solo show at a gallery space in Ginza and met Shibusawa. A French literature scholar and a surrealist critic, like Takiguchi, his infamous translation of Marquis de Sade's *L'Histoire de Juliette ou Les Prosperités du vice* (1797), which was to become enwrapped in a decade long court trial for obscenity, was published in that same year. She started collaborating with both at the turn of the decade, designing Shibusawa's *Kuromajutsu techō* (*Notebook of black magic*, 1961) and then producing two of Takiguchi's books of poetry – *Hoshi wa hito no yubi hodo no* (*A star, like a human finger*, 1965) and *Shirazu shō* (*Unknown summary*, 1967) – which she self-published together with her original artwork (mostly decalcomania drawings and silkscreen prints). By the time she worked with Shibusawa on *Kyō-ō: Rūtovihī ni sei* (*Mad king: Ludwig II*, 1966), an extended piece of literary criticism discussing the life of Ludwig II of Bavaria (1845-1886), a significant proportion of her practice started to manifest in collage form, which she had experimented with alongside her work as an illustrator and printmaker since childhood.

In Japan, modernist collage developed through the nineteenth century emergence of studio photography and subsequent historical avant-garde movements, as it did in Europe and Russia, but can also be linked to several autochthonous predecessors – in fact its artistic lineage can be traced back to at least the twelfth century (Kersey 2018, 17). Embraced by Japanese dadaists in the 1920s, it blossomed with surrealism's interdisciplinary make-up in the following decade, offering a means for progressive artists to experiment across visual arts and literature. Takiguchi played a significant role in these circles, writing poetry and criticism and translating from French and English, as well as introducing several international artists working in the technique to Japan, authoring for instance the first monograph ever written on Joan Miró in 1939. In that both artists emerged during the 1950s in a direct continuation of the Japanese avant-garde activity after the Second World War, Nonaka's early work can be compared to that of Okanoue Toshiko. They consciously worked with strange juxtapositions as a surrealist technique for image-making, favoured collage and were supported by Takiguchi at the beginning of their careers. Okanoue was trained as a textile designer and sourced her material in foreign fashion magazines. In contrast, Nonaka mostly works with woodcut and steel engravings sourced in the nineteenth century European illustrated press, as well as natural science and industrial art catalogues. Similarities between the two artists are apparent across their bodies of work, especially in their open admiration for Max Ernst.

However, Nonaka's collages undoubtedly acquire a unique layer of signification through their direct connection to the text alongside which they are seen.

Uniquely, Nonaka worked on several *livres d'artistes* that are best situated in the tradition of surrealist books, often developing as collaborative projects between artists, poets, and publishers, as is the case in her collaboration with Shibusawa. A central figure in a circle of close friends that apart from Nonaka also included Hijikata Tatsumi, Kanō Mitsuo, Katō Ikuya, Ikeda Masuo, Tomioka Taeko and Shiraishi Kazuko, Shibusawa shared his encyclopaedic knowledge generously throughout his life. As Nonaka later described it, their collaboration on *Kyō-ō* was made possible by the *Presse Bibliomane*, a private publisher run by a Buddhist monk and a book collector Sasaki Kikyō. During the production, Shibusawa took part in the entire process of the book's making, including the choice of binding, insisting on an austere and minimal design, despite the ability to produce a lavish and more luxurious volume, and drawing from his extensive library of French literature for inspiration (Nonaka 1988, 121).

In *Kyō-ō*, Shibusawa discusses the colourful life of this controversial king, who was a life-long bachelor and a dedicated patron of arts and culture. He considers his alleged madness and homosexuality in the context of an obsession with the construction of several famously elaborate castles, which for Shibusawa represent a concrete materialisation of a personal dreamscape and therefore a type of surrealist artwork. Appearing mostly on every other page, a large proportion of Nonaka's full-page collage works in the book are titled *rex demens* (mad king), indicating that they are depictions of Ludwig II. In a passage in which Shibusawa describes the sparse remaining photographs of the king as a tool through which to think about his idiosyncratic character traits, Nonaka's collage uses the wood engraving of Titian's *Man with a Glove* (ca 1520) by Timothy Cole, reproduced in his *Old Italian masters* (1892). Substituting the face and hands with pictures of a seashell, butterfly, and elusive abstract shapes she intervenes into those parts of the portrait that can be seen to represent reason and artistic expression, producing a mirror reflection of the text (Figure 2). In this way, at least to a certain extent, Nonaka adopts a classical approach to book illustration, a typical characteristic of surrealist books in which the image is often used to paraphrase the text (Hubert 1988, 1-6).



Fig. 2 Shibusawa Tatsuhiko (text) and Nonaka Yuri (images), *Kyō-ō: Rūtovihī ni sei (Mad King: Ludwig II)*, excerpt, 1966 (pp. 14-15).

In addition, referencing Ernst's work is not accidental, and is another relevant component of Nonaka's early collages. Nonaka later told the story of how, searching for the source material to use in *Kyō-ō*, Shibusawa and she went to Kanda, a part of Tokyo famous for its second-hand bookstores. There, they found a copy of the same book that Ernst had used in the construction of his own collage works. When they reported this discovery to Takiguchi he suggested that she should deliberately experiment with the same pages as Ernst (Nonaka 1988, 122). Nonaka does not provide any details about the book, but this recollection is intriguing in view of her earlier collage portrait of Shibusawa, seen at the opening of *Notebook of black magic*, which replicates the composition of Ernst's *Deuxième poème visible* from *Une semaine de bonté* (1934), indicating that Nonaka was aware of his work from early on in her career. During the 1970s she was employed as a book designer on several of Iwaya's translations of Ernst's work into Japanese, including *La Femme 100 têtes* (1929) in 1974.



Fig. 3 Nonaka Yuri, *Shi to hihyō*, cover page, July 1967.

In 1967, a year after *Kyō-ō* was published, Nonaka produced a set of twelve collages for the covers of *Shi to hihyō*, a magazine for poetry and criticism, adopting similar working methods (Figure 3). In this case, no direct reference is apparent between the images and the content of the individual issues as the source material is mostly defragmented beyond recognition. This strategy is often seen in her book cover designs, in which she either recomposes the material into abstract arrangements or places seemingly disparate parts of the image into inconclusive interrelations on the page, abandoning the rules of perspective and playing with perception. In these instances, Nonaka's work does not necessarily operate in a direct relation to the content but as part of a certain milieu, pertaining directly to surrealist literature but also resonating, more broadly, with the alternative theatre and music scenes in Japan. For instance, her first book design was for *Sora ni wa hon* (*A book in the sky*, 1958), the debut collection of Terayama's *tanka* poetry, and she also produced the cover art for Asakawa Maki's LP *Hitomoshigoro* in 1976. In such a manner, often working on commissions within what we might consider as the counterculture of the time, Nonaka's collages assume varied roles, not only paraphrasing but also visually coding the text.

Dreams, fantasy and science fiction

As both artists were frequently employed as book designers and illustrators, Nonaka's work can also be related to Katsura Yuki, a pioneer woman avant-garde artist who worked with collage and in a distinct association with surrealism, from the 1930s onwards. Despite their distinctly different approaches, it is interesting that some of Nonaka's preferred motifs – such as flowers, butterflies, and small animals – also feature in Katsura's collages from that period.[3] This aspect of Nonaka's work places her into a constellation of artists in Japan whose practice extended across both modernist art (surrealist as well as abstract) and design. Here, we could think of Onchi Kōshirō, who is considered a pioneer or *sōsaku hanga* and has designed over a thousand publications during his prolific career, adopting progressive modernist styles as early as the Taishō era (1912-1926).[4] The work of Kitasono Katue, a surrealist and concrete poet who also worked across multiple disciplines, is equally relevant for the narrative use of abstract form, colour and composition found in both his artistic practice and commercial commissions. There are many parallels that can be made between these different artists, throughout their prolific careers. In terms of Katsura's book designs, it should be noted that these were mostly limited to the production of covers and illustrations.[5]

Once more, we can consider Nonaka's unique position among these artists through her collaboration with Shibusawa, this time on *Yōsei tachi no mori* (*Forest of fairies*), published by Kōdansha in 1980. Comprised of decalcomania drawings, classical collages and a mixture of collage and painting (in which appropriated engravings and photographic reproductions are combined with pastel or acrylic), the artworks are a showcase of Nonaka's practice spanning 1977-1980. The text first describes the ancient Greek, Celtic and Germanic myths and legends pertaining to the existence of fairies and other magical creatures in such natural elements as water, fire and wind. In this section of the book, Nonaka's collages set her recognisable arsenal of motifs (including minerals and precious stones) against the natural locales talked about in the text and combine them with photographic reproductions of classical paintings and sculptures of nudes or drawings of fairies, much as on the cover page (Figure 4). This time it was Nonaka who commissioned a text from Shibusawa for a compilation of recent artworks. After the first reading, she then responded to it with new images, which are seen in the later part, progressing towards a discussion of the transformative character of nature and different beliefs around the world involving plants and stones (Nonaka 1988, 125). In such a manner, the book becomes more of a playground for the interplay between text and images and is inconclusive in character.[6]



Fig. 4 Nonaka Yuri and Shibusawa Tatsuhiko, *Yōsei tachi no mori* (*Forest of fairies*), cover page, 1980.

There are several aspects of *Yōsei tachi no mori* that are important to note, including of course the rich nature of Shibusawa's text. In the section on stones alone, his reading list comprises such contemporaries as Gaston Bachelard, Roger Caillois and Jurgis Baltrušaitis but also classical sources, including Athanasius Kircher and Ulisse Aldrovandi. Visually, this collaboration exemplifies a different stage in the evolution of Nonaka's collages during the 1970s, in which elements of the image are increasingly brought together into a coherent if clearly fantastical scenario. Her collages also start to adopt a somewhat futuristic iconography evoking otherworldly landscapes. Shared across her different bodies of work in the 1970s, including the artwork for *Korinton kyō tōjō* (*The appearance of Lord Colington*), a book co-produced in 1974 with Taruho Inagaki and Suehiro Tanemura, this shift in her practice merits further attention. In *Yume no*

chihyō (*Surface of the Dream*), for instance, a series of six collages made in 1978-1979, her regular set of motifs float in the sky or are turned upside down in compositions of a dreamscape, which is often illuminated by bright colourful light emanating across a blue sky. A collage from this series, *Kogane no hana* (*Golden Flower*), closes *Yōsei tachi no mori* and uses a photograph of barren ground to add to the realistic appearance of the fantastical scene. This image was later featured on the cover of *Gensō bungaku* in 1996, a special issue titled *Encyclopaedia of dream literature* also containing within it a section titled 'Nonaka Yuri's dream universe' (Figure 5). On this occasion, Nonaka described this kind of work as a peak of her practice, produced in her late 30s, and relates it to several interconnected strands of interest under the umbrella term of 'dreams' (Nonaka 1996, 136).

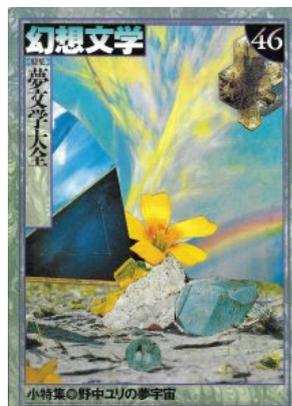


Fig. 5 *Gensō bungaku* No. 46, cover page, 1996 ; featuring Nonaka Yuri, *Kogane no hana* (*Golden Flower*) from the series *Yume no chihiyō* (*Surface of the Dream*), 1979.

While she is well-read in pertinent criticism, including texts by Sigmund Freud and Gustav Jung, her fantastical compositions are also inspired by vernacular Japanese storytelling and interpretations of dreams, often found within a Buddhist heritage and tradition. For example, she references *Dream diary*, written by a thirteenth century Japanese priest Myōe, as an early influence, together with the narrative complexity of *Avatamsaka sutra* and the fantastical tales about Manjushri and Maitreya bodhisattvas (Nonaka 1996, 136). In addition, in her collages during the 1970s the compositions are effectively rendered in a vivid colour scheme, evoking the simultaneously popular psychedelic iconography of hippie culture.[7] As Nonaka relates in the later interview, her work around this time was informed by Takiguchi's appreciation of Henri Michaux's experiments with LSD and mescaline, as well as her own experience taking part in surrealist experiments which attempted to access the subconscious mind (Nonaka 1996, 134). In other words, her collages during the 1970s started to incorporate a set of references from the Japanese popular culture and even SF.

Japan was among the most important publishing markets in the world for science fiction in the 1970s (after the US, UK, and Russia) and was second only to the US with regards to regular magazines. Furthermore, it sought to redefine itself in comparison to the distinctly technological US approach by drawing specifically on surrealism, as well as existentialism and Japanese literary traditions (Ashley 2007, 420-421).[8] For Nonaka, a science fictional scenario offers another opportunity to imagine and depict parallel worlds, in the same manner as dreams, and are not contradictory to her primarily fantastical image-making or her other interests. To her, Miyazawa Kenji, a famous writer active in the 1920s and '30s, is the best example of such imaginative power (Nonaka 1996, 136). In her later collages, this appreciation for Miyazawa will manifest in frequent references to Giovanni and Campanella, the protagonists of his famous SF novel *Ginga tetsudō no yoru* (*Night on the galactic railroad*, 1934).

As Paul Roquet has shown, the popularisation of this very story through related *manga* comic books during the 1970s—such as Matsumoto Leiji's *Ginga tetsudō surī nain* (*Galaxy express 999*, 1978)—and a feature animated film in 1985, coincided with the so-called 'age of fiction', a time in Japanese culture when mass media was increasingly offering alternative realities to their audiences to immerse in and escape to (Roquet 2014, 127). In such a manner, Nonaka's mature collages can be observed within what Theodor Adorno described as a longer modernist trend for anti-rationalism in his essays on astrology and the occult written between the 1930s and 1950s (Adorno 2020). Emerging amidst the activities of the Japanese avant-garde of the 1950s, Nonaka's collage work evolves from coding the alternative counterculture of the 1960s into the intertextual referencing of a popular visual culture during the 1970s. As an artistic strategy, this evolution seems to be closely aligned with a surrealist desire to collapse the barriers between so-called high and low art (Parkinson 2015, 1-5). Systematising an idiosyncratic range of references – Japanese children's novels, SF, Buddhist tradition, fantasy, and dreams – her imagery speaks to a broad range of audiences via and within the popular culture of its time.

Conclusion : Surrealist Women Artists

Nonaka's collages also suggest a surrealist fascination with mysticism and the occult and their crossovers with scientific forms of knowledge in disciplines such as astronomy. Indeed, optical instruments and images of outer space start to appear in Nonaka's collages in the late 1960s and feature continuously in her work from the 1970s onwards. This

element might be again inspired by Ernst, who made references to the controversial German astronomer Ernst Wilhelm Leberecht Tempel (1821-1889) and included images of celestial objects in his work as early as in 1931.[9] In any case, this aspect of her practice allows us to draw parallels with other women surrealist artists around the world – a final context of importance to understanding her collages that I wish to point out.

Within this context, Valentine Hugo and Leonor Fini immediately come to mind due to their illustrations of Surrealist literature. Nonaka confirmed having seen Fini's work in Shibusawa's library, most probably referring to her illustrations of de Sade's *Juliette* in 1945 (Nonaka 1988, 122). However, the interest in esoteric symbolism and astronomy evokes a connection with Leonora Carrington or even Ithell Colquhoun. As the former was included in Tokyo in a group show of Mexican art in 1974 and then had a solo exhibition at the Art Space Mirage gallery, also in Tokyo, in 1987, it is possible that Nonaka saw it in person. Although she is not exactly a painter, what Nonaka has in common with these artists are elements of their working methodology and their aesthetic preferences. These are evident in the laborious character and colour palette of her collages as well as in her decisive dedication to fantastical and natural motifs. In addition, she shares with these artists her aspiration as a writer, with several of her short stories also collected in the 1996 special.

As with many other women artists and writers who were younger than their male surrealist counterparts, her more mature work appeared later, in a period that Gwen Raaberg calls the 'second generation' if not even after (Raaberg 1995, 2). Following Takiguchi's passing in 1979 and Shibusawa's in 1987, Nonaka continued to grow her artistic practice, integrating increasingly esoteric Buddhist imagery—lotus flowers, rays of light, mandalas—in the cosmological iconography of her collages in the 1990s and extending her interests into sculptural assemblages in the 2000s. Spanning a period of several decades, her output is not only versatile but also long-lived, and sits comfortably in the production of artists' books in Japan as much as among the lineage of surrealist women artists around the world. Above all, it defies simplification or any attempt at easy classification, traversing disciplines, categories, and modes of artistic work.

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[1] I would like to thank the Oxford Brookes University for assisting with the acquisition of some of the research materials used in this essay and to Dan Abbe for sending them from Tokyo to London during the national lockdown in the UK in 2021. All translations are mine, unless stated otherwise and Japanese names are referred to by the last name first. Illustrations are from publications in my private collection.

[2] For Nonaka's biography and a list of her exhibitions and publications, see: Kanagawa Kenritsu Kindai Bijutsukan (ed.), *Nonaka Yuri: Gabunshū*, Hayamamachi, Kanagawa Kenritsu Kindai Bijutsukan, 2013, 100-105.

[3] For some examples of these see: Tokyo-to Gendai Bijutsukan (ed.), *Seiten hyakunen Katsura Yuki: Aru gūwa* [Yuki Katsura: A fable, the centennial exhibition], Tokyo, Tokyo-to Gendai Bijutsukan, 2013, 50-54.

[4] Murayama Tomoyoshi is another example of modernist artists who worked on the intersection of avant-garde art and commercial design during the 1920s.

[5] Apart from her long-term collaborative work with Hanada Kiyoteru, a prominent literary and art critic, Katsura's work in this domain is mostly figurative and often appears in children literature. She also illustrated the translation of James Baldwin's *Another Country* (1962) in Japanese.

[6] According to Elza Adamowicz, Surrealist books were meant to operate as portals of sorts, inviting the encounter between image and text to transport the reader beyond the space of the page or the book itself, as in: Elza Adamowicz, 'The Surrealist Artist's Book: Beyond the Page', *The Princeton University Library Chronicle*, Vol. 70, No. 2 (Winter 2009), 290-291.

[7] For instance, Nagaoka Shūsei's popular designs, often featured as album cover art for such bands as Earth, Wind and Fire or Deep Purple in the 1970s, adopt an intensified version of similar aesthetics.

[8] A literal example of the crossover between Surrealism and SF in Japan would be Yoshio Aramaki's 'Yawarakai tokei' [Soft clocks] (1968), a story in which Salvador Dalí's famous motifs of melting clocks are speculatively explained through their allegedly scientific existence on Mars.

[9] These were included in *A l'intérieur de la vue (8 poèmes visibles)* (1947), a joint publication with Paul Éluard. His later collaboration with Iliasz on *Maximilana ou l'exercice illégal de l'astronomie* (1964) is dedicated to Tempel's work, who is co-signed as an author.

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