



Dante in the Hell of Fukushima. Lorenzo Amato interviews with Kazumasa Chiba

Since reading a Japanese translation of Dante in 2000, Chiba Kazumasa (born in Kanagawa in 1967) has represented scenarios and images inspired by the Divine Comedy. Chiba makes Dante's political and social commentary his own, translating them into the modern world. As on a theatrical stage, Chiba 'dresses' as Dante, and wanders through large allegorical landscapes that are made with hybrid cultural elements, deriving from a blend of Japanese pop culture and the most important classics from the West and the East, both ancient and modern. His art acquired notoriety after being awarded the prestigious Toshiko Okamoto Award in 2012. On that occasion he first introduced to the public his large painting representing the tragedy of Fukushima as a Dantesque allegory of Hell.



From August 21st to September 21st the exhibition "Modern Interpretation of Dante's 'Divine Comedy'", where many recent works by Chiba were shown in public for the first time, was held at the Mizuma Gallery, Tokyo. I met Mr. Kazumasa Chiba and his manager, Mr. Hatano Ko, for a long interview held in a café near the Gallery. The interview was conducted in Italian and in Japanese. Interpreting and translation was provided by my Maiko Mancini, to whom go my sincere thanks, also for the assistance provided as a whole.

(link to the exhibition: https://mizuma-art.co.jp/en/exhibitions/1908_chiba-kazumasa-modern-interpretation-of-dantes-divine-comedy/).



How did you start as an artist? What made you want to become an artist?

I have always enjoyed the feeling of creating things with my hands. When I was young I liked plastic models, such as the Tamiya models of World War II. I was fascinated by soldier uniforms, such as the uniforms of the US, German or Italian armies. I also liked tanks, heavy machinery, transport vehicles (airplanes, boats, cars), and all the small realistic details of those models, such as rust, mud, etc. I was completely unaware of the ethical debate going on in Europe about the reproduction of weapons and of Nazi-related symbols. At that time it became fashionable to make dioramas (i.e. realistic reconstructions of battlefields where plastic models could be placed), with trees, stones, collapsed buildings, and other landscape elements that could be bought or made from scratch. Building dioramas made me want to learn painting. I wanted to place my models in sceneries as coherent and realistically made as possible. But when I started painting I was using techniques, such as the dry brush or splashes of colour, that I had learned in painting minute details of models. My works received special praise thanks to the use of those techniques. At the time I was making and collecting dioramas to place one besides the other on my shelves, and I was seeing myself as a future owner of a plastic model store full of dioramas. But this passion led me to art, and art ended-up prevailing eventually.

This is why as an art student initially you were working on modeling clay?

Yes, I started by learning sculpture. My first materials were stones and clay. But while the process of sculpting stones is very rigid, clay is more flexible, and for this reason I immediately preferred clay. Also, unlike stones, clay can be painted. When in art classes I was trying to model and then colour my works in clay I regularly ended up being praised by my teachers, which in turn encouraged me to continue on the same path.

Is there a classical artist you were imitating while working with clay?

I took inspiration from Auguste Rodin's technique. He shaped clay, and then he covered it with bronze. I always tried to imitate that technique, and I am still fascinated by the atmosphere of

his sculptures, although I tend to represent a different kind of subject [*some of the works exhibited at the Mizuma Gallery are closely reminiscent of Rodin's *The Thinker* and *The Gates of Hell*, a copy of which stands in front of the Tokyo National Museum of Western Art, N.D.I.*].



石粉粘土、アクリル絵具
Plasticine, acrylic



地獄の門
Gates of Hell
2013
35 × 50 × 25 cm

Which artists or movements have had an impact on your style and artistic vision?

As I said earlier, my style was at first defined mostly by the esthetic of plastic models, illustration, music, and various subcultures existing in Japan. I was also inspired by the collective imagery derived from western movies, such *Star Wars*, *Alien* and *Predator*. Thanks to *Alien* I got to know H.R. Giger, a great master of body-fantasy. I was (and still am) fascinated by the apocalyptic imagery made popular by the *Mad Max* saga. The recent movie (*Mad Max: Fury Road*, 2015) had a deep influence on some of my representations of Purgatory.

Are there Western artists who gave you inspiration?

In my Dante-related works I often reference artists who represented similar themes, like Gustave Doré, William Blake, Hieronymus Bosch, and Pieter Bruegel the Elder. I also studied the physicality of Michelangelo, Caravaggio and Rodin's works.



Are there Japanese painters who are equally important for your painting?

Yes. Among the Japanese painters who had a deep impact on my approach to art I can certainly mention Kanō Kazunobu (1816-1863). I got to know his works thanks to two exhibitions in Tokyo [in 2006 at the Tokyo National Museum, and in 2001 at the Edo-Tokyo Museum, where the entire set of 100 rolls depicting the 500 arhats, 五百羅漢図, was shown to the general public for the first time. This allowed the rediscovery of Kanō Kazunobu, until that moment quite under-appreciated, N.D.I.J.]. I also like very much Soga Shōhaku (1730–1781), and his paintings of gods and demons. In general I feel close to the painters belonging to the so-called “Lineage of the Eccentrics” [i.e. the *Kisō-ha*, 奇想派, which includes Soga Shōhaku and other painters who are known for representing themes deriving from the tradition in a bizarre and unconventional way. The most famous of them are Hakuin Ekaku, Itō Jakuchū, Nagasawa Rosetsu, N.D.I.J.]. Of these and other painters I studied the works depicting war scenes. Among the artists living today I have great appreciation of Makoto Aida, Takashi Murakami, Hisashi Tenmyouya, Tetsuya Ishida.

What are the working tools of your choice? How do you choose your media?

I tend to use a vast array of painting tools, and I have my own way to prepare the paper I paint on. I work on Fabriano paper, which in Japan is quite difficult to find, or on Canson Montval paper. I prepare the paper with a dark base of instant coffee. I scatter the coffee powder all over the surface, and then with a brush I wet it with a bit of water. The resulting base is not uniform, but has a sort of dark wave pattern. This is my way to enter into Dante's world, a dark filter that enables me to see a different world. I would not be able to paint on a white canvas. As coloring tools I can use acrylics, pastels, pencils, pens, depending on the effect I want to create on the painting.

How about sculpture?

When sculpting I still use clay, white thread, aluminum, iron and wood, depending on the work. As I said above, from a technical point of view I feel inspired by the way Rodin worked with clay and metal layers.

Your major paintings are very large and full of details. How long does it take to you finish one painting?

If we try to estimate the time needed for completing a project from start to finish, we have to take into account not only the painting process per se, but also the preliminary research on stories and characters to be represented. Preparatory drawings and sketches are also important and take time. I would say one - one and a half years circa.

At some point in your career you started using Dante's *Divine Comedy* as your source of inspiration. How did you get to know Dante's work?

At first my knowledge of Dante was mediated by Japanese mangas, and specifically Go Nagai. Many of Nagai's works make use of ideas and images from Dante. For example I really liked *Devilman*. But among Nagai's mangas the one that is based more overtly on Dante's lore is *Mao Dante*. This is the way I got to know Dante. The *Divina Commedia* is published in Japan in many versions, very different one from another as far as translation and lexicon are concerned. Some of them are very difficult. I looked for simple versions, that I could understand even as a non-expert of Italian history and language. I found the translation by Bunshō Jugaku very useful (ed. Shūeisha, 1974-1976).

What was the aspect of Dante's *Divina Commedia* that interested you the most? Why did you decide to focus your work on Dante exclusively?

As I said at first I got interested in Dante thanks to *Devilman* and *Mao Dante*. Later, though, I was impressed by Dante's depth, and how he manages to show his rage against the social and political problems of his time while describing otherworldly realms. This influenced my approach to art, and channeled my rage against today's social problems into my first paintings inspired by the *Divina Commedia*. Since then I've decided to talk about political and social matters through my art. My paintings are not illustrations of the *Divina Commedia*, rather while representing Hell, Purgatory and Paradise they are meant as a commentary on today's world.

In your representations of Hell, Purgatory and Paradise the character dressed in red clothing, supposedly Dante, is in fact a self-portrait. This means that the person who wanders through the otherworldly realms is actually Kazumasa Chiba.

In a way my approach comes from theater. Traditionally, in Japanese Kabuki theater different directors represent the same story with different stage settings and stylistic choices. The same happens, for example, in Italian opera. Different stylistic choices often means a different



message of the overall theatrical performance, although the story represented is basically the same. While reading Dante I wondered at some point how the representation of the otherworldly realms would have changed if I had been there instead of Dante. I do not identify myself with Dante, but I would like to have his eyes to scrutinize our current society. In other words, I use the *Divina Commedia* as a means to talk about the contradictions and problems that in my opinion are the deepest in today's world.

Will you use other authors in the future, or you will keep on basing your work on Dante exclusively?

Many people have suggested that I also get inspiration from other writers, but at the moment I have no intention to change my model. I have been painting Dante-inspired scenes for years: even so, I think I still have a lot to learn, and that I should deepen my understanding of Dante as much as possible. There are many cantos of the *Divine Comedy* that I have yet to represent!

What was the turning point in your career?

With no doubt the prize I got at the 15th edition of the Taro Okamoto Memorial Modern Art Award (2012). Being awarded helped me very much, and made me very proud. On that occasion I could show my first paintings inspired by the Fukushima tragedy in public. Some people refused to look at them, because in their opinion I was representing real events inside fantasy paintings.

In some drawings and paintings you show politicians and other famous Japanese personages. Sometimes you associate their names with negative symbols or even insults. This happens very seldom in Japanese art, which usually avoids commenting on social and political matters. Does this strongly nonconformist choice come from reading Dante?



Dante mentions explicitly the names of famous persons who, in his opinion, are guilty of misdoings, even if they are still alive. Let's say that his poetry showed me a possible way to face the problems of our world through art. It also showed me a way to express the anger that sometimes I feel over persons who, either as politicians or in other roles of responsibility, cause great catastrophes, such as those involved in the Fukushima tragedy. Any time disasters happen, or choices are made at a political level that have very negative outcomes, I feel a strong anger. It is rare that common people like me have a say on these choices, and sometimes I feel so furious that I would like to show my disdain through some form of violent protest. Thus art allows me to vent my anger, but it is also a way to leave a mark and show what I think.



76 × 56 cm

水彩紙、アクリル絵具、パステル、ペン

Watercolor paper, acrylic, pastel, pen



1945 年 8 月 6 日 島市の原子爆弾投下
August 6th, 1945 Atomic Bomb dropped on Hiroshima
2012 - 2013



地下鉄サリン事件

Subway Sarin Attack

2014 - 2015

Let's talk about one of the most widely discussed aspects of your art: the representation of the disaster that in 2011 hit Fukushima and all the prefectures in that area. First of all: what is your relationship with Fukushima?

I was born in Tokyo, not in Fukushima. But my family comes from Fukushima, and my grandparents' graves are in Fukushima. As a child I used to go to the Fukushima countryside for summer vacations. I have wonderful memories of sunny days spent eating watermelon, or bathing in the lakes or in the sea. Sometimes we fished all together, and then we ate the fish we had captured. Until the 2011 disaster my relatives worked in farming, and every year they sent me their rice, which was excellent. This relationship stopped after March 11th 2011.

390 × 162 cm

パネル、水彩紙、アクリル絵具、パステル

Panel, watercolor paper, acrylic, pastel



地獄篇 4-6 圏 FUKUSHIMA

Circle 4-6 of the Inferno FUKUSHIMA

2011

In March 2011 a very powerful earthquake struck Japan, and caused a huge tsunami that not only devastated many towns near the east coast, but caused a terrible accident to the nuclear plant of Fukushima Dai-ichi. The loss of radioactive material triggered a crisis that is still ongoing after almost ten years.

As far as I am concerned, the 2011 disaster was a huge shock. My relationship with people from Fukushima changed completely. As most of the energy produced in the nuclear plants in Japan is used for supplying the huge energy needs of the Kantō area [*i.e. Japan's central region, dominated by Tokyo's metropolitan area, N.D.I.*], most of the communities hit by the disaster identified everyone living in Tokyo as co-responsible for all of their troubles. After the disaster some of my relatives even refused to keep in touch with me.

What is the current situation in Fukushima? Has the condition of the affected communities improved?

Since 2011 I have not been to Fukushima anymore. It is hard to know how things are actually going on. The media do not mention the problem, as if it had never happened. One thing is certain, though: radioactivity is still very high. Agriculture is damaged, and I was told that it is absolutely forbidden to eat fish from the rivers, as rivers are considered contaminated.

Unfortunately the Fukushima tragedy has had a long-lasting impact on everybody's life, including non-Japanese persons. I started my life in Japan in those days. Let's say that my programs, both family-wise and work-wise, have been completely derailed by it. Did this huge tragedy influence your art?

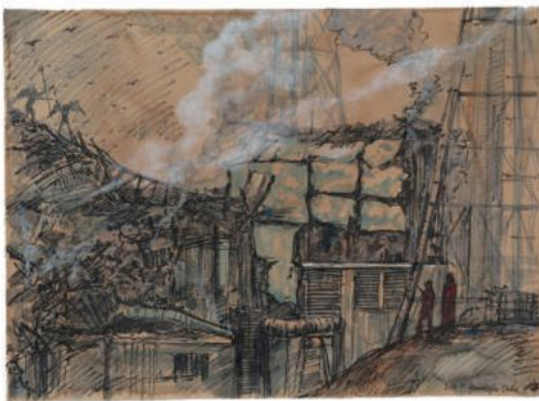
Yes. Before 2011 I was already painting scenes and subjects inspired by the *Divine Comedy*. The Fukushima tragedy did not change my interest in Dante, but pointed it towards a deeper immersion in current events. I created a series of drawings specifically dedicated to the tragedy, and some of the large paintings of Hell and Purgatory are overtly inspired by it. That is why in my works strong allegories of energy consumption, waste and nuclear threats emerge. As far as I am concerned this is the real Hell.



内部風景
Interior Scenery



1 号機タービン建屋内
Unit 1 Turbine Building



壁穴奥に使用済燃料貯蓄プールがある 4 号機
Unit 4 with spent fuel storage pool
behind the hole in the wall



放水作業
Water Discharge Work



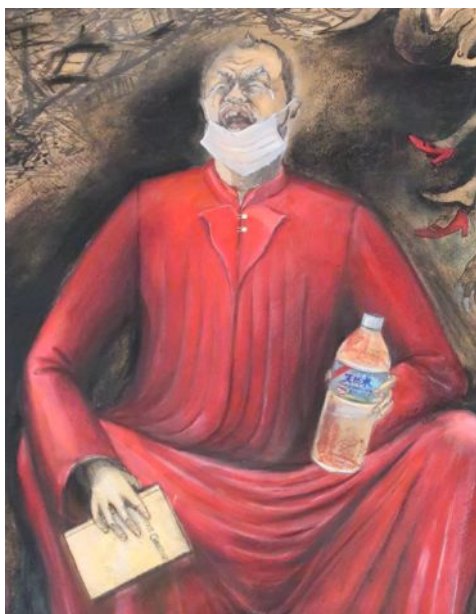
4 号機原子炉格納容器
Unit 4 Reactor Containment

In one of the big panels that were shown during the exhibition held at the Mizuma Gallery we could see a devastated landscape: radioactive, full of demons, full of people in pain; in its center sat a crying Dante-Chiba, tormented by pain. Can you tell us something about this painting?



The title of the painting is *Hell 4-6*. I finished it and showed it for the first time in 2012, but I started collecting materials and making sketches a few weeks after the Fukushima tragedy. In that period I was living in Nagoya, where I moved out of fear of possible further explosions of the nuclear plant. The painting shows the unspeakable pain I was feeling. I felt I could not do

anything useful, I was completely powerless. Drawing was the only thing I could do. I was drawing and then painting without any project of showing the results to anyone, much less selling them. I was just trying to express my great pain. In that period I was in deep personal trouble: I had three little children, and even finding water for drinking was difficult. Tap water was contaminated. That is why in this painting I represented a bottle of mineral water from the Japanese Alps: even this kind of water, so easy to find in any convenience store in Tokyo, at the time of painting was nowhere to be seen. It was hard finding fuel for the car. Some days I arrived at the gas-station at 9 a.m., eventually to get gas as late as 6 p.m. Nevertheless, in this painting I am not crying for my personal troubles, but because in the face of this catastrophe I am thinking about the end of the world.



The painting is full of politicians and other real persons

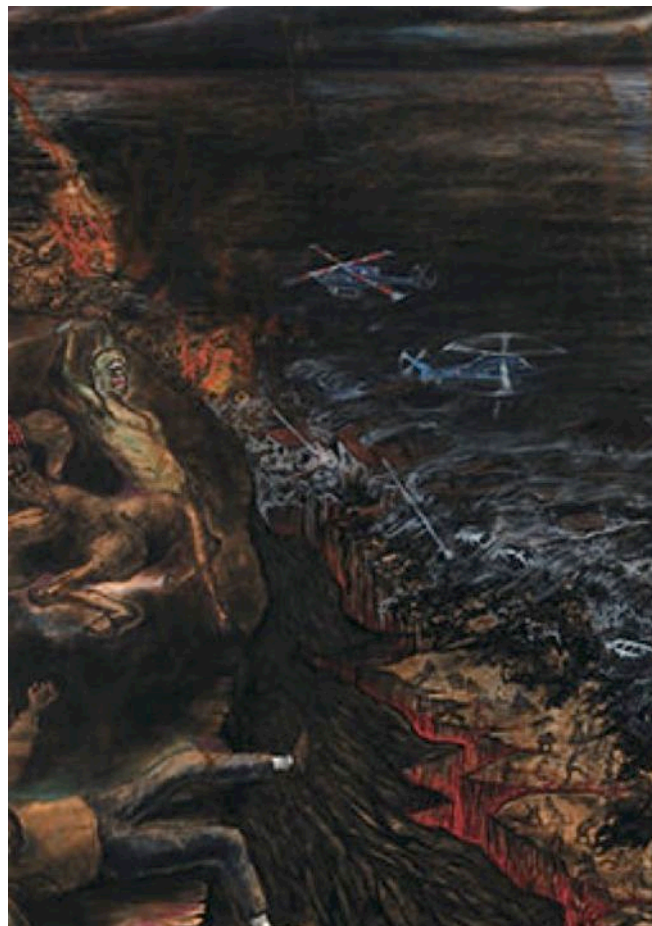
Yes. Those are the persons who had some role in mismanaging the situation, leading to the disaster. Or had some kind of responsibility towards the Japanese citizens, but betrayed those responsibilities. The man on the left, with the exploded head, is Naoto Kan [*Prime Minister at the time of the disaster, N.D.I.*], while the lady on the poster is Hou Ren, Minister of State for

Special Missions. You can also see the then Chief-of-Cabinet of the Government, Yukio Edano. On the right the person stabbed by Minotaur is Hidehiko Nishiyama, the then Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry, Nuclear Safety and Security Agency. The head on the pole represents Haruki Madarame, Nuclear Safety Commissioner. The painting is also full of monsters, partly derived from Bosch, partly from Kanō Kazunobu, partly from the wider tradition of Japanese *yokai* or from Western imagery.



There are also characters who look like some of the actual victims of the catastrophe.

Yes. I reproduced people who in those days were shown on the newspapers. For example: on the top right you can see a woman in red who is praying in front of the catastrophe, while closer to the center a woman is crying in front of her dead child. These images reference photos that were iconic in those months. I remade them in my painting. The landscape above the city, dominated by the rescue helicopters, comes from a picture from then. I wanted to represent the great fire that followed the tsunami with a pen, stroke by stroke. The whole landscape represents symbolically not only Fukushima, but all the prefectures involved in the disaster. Also Dante, having a paper-type protective mask over his face, derives from the common sentiment of those days: many people were using a protective mask against possible radiation, although, obviously, that type of mask is designed against bacteria, and is completely useless against radioactivity. But people did not know what to do in order to keep on living and going out of their home.



As a whole, the scenery closely recalls post-apocalyptic imagery à la *Mad Max*.

Yes, and not by chance. In all movies of that genre [*i.e. the original Mad Max trilogy, directed by George Miller from 1979 to 1985, N.D.I.*] the common theme is the near-disappearance of water and gasoline for vehicles, and the plot of the movies centers around the control of these primary goods. The events that followed the tragedy of Fukushima showed us how easy it is to find ourselves in the grim conditions forecasted by even the most pessimistic of the post-apocalyptic movies.

Bruegel's influence is also very strong

As a whole, studying Bruegel influenced my way of seeing large paintings as an ensemble of many symbols, each of them carrying a specific meaning. In Bruegel's paintings each character means something specific, and in order to fully understand the allegory behind the characters you need explaining [*at this points Mr. Chiba shows a Japanese translation of a Taschen book dedicated to Bruegel, opening the page on a painting where each of the near 100 characters has an explanatory note on its allegorical meaning, N.D.I.*]. My series of large paintings of Hell, Purgatory and Paradise require similar notes to be interpreted in detail. To each character and object are connected symbols and ideas concerning the condition of the world in which we are living now. Studying Bruegel's, and also Bosch's paintings (filled with monstrous creatures and hellish visions charged with deep symbolism), inspired me this way. In the past I had an internet site where each painting of mine was accompanied by a set of notes about each character and object represented. But since I started my collaboration with Mizuma Galery I do not have this kind of direct relationship with the public anymore.

This attention to symbols is a feature of all of your paintings. For example in other images of Hell demons are dressed as militaries, with armour and assault weapons, or they are monsters who bear symbols of war. You also represent daily products, money, and advertising as sins. Could you clarify at least some of these symbols as templates for the others?

Sure. Let's examine for example the painting called *Purgatory I* (the first large painting in a set of three).



In this painting we can see the gates of Purgatory, which visually are inspired by *Mad Max* (as the car in the center of the painting is inspired by the Interceptor, Max's car). The painting as a whole represents the material desires that oppress humans as if they were physical weights on the souls of the sinners. Some examples: on the left we can see a box of cup-noodles: the problem with cup-noodles is that they are not healthy, and, despite being easy to use and convenient to buy, all the plastic packaging connected to them creates a big problem for the environment.



There is also a portion of *gyudon* [beef meat on rice, usually served in cheap restaurant chains, *N.D.I.*]. It is fast-food, low-quality level food. It is unhealthy, and a cow was killed to produce it. Similar products are consumed in millions every day, so we can estimate that every day millions of animals have to die in order to become trash-food. Similarly, the refrigerator



represents this way of living, dictated by consumerism and money. It is money, in fact, that is the origin of these evils. That is why in the painting we can also see persons who are being crushed by the weight of money and other valuable items, including a ruby. A ruby is a natural stone, per se, but in our way of life it becomes a source of greed, hence it represents a sin. Other

symbols are connected to this core idea: on the left you can see a bomb, which refers to Little Boy, i.e. the first atomic bomb ever used in history (the one that devastated Hiroshima).

In another painting of this set, *Purgatory III*, you represent a robot who defends Purgatory. Which symbols are connected to this painting, and which pop-culture elements inspired it?



Many aspects of the characters, and of the composition as a whole, derive from Japanese and international sub-cultures. The influence of 'metal' culture is very strong, starting from the metal tiers of Purgatory. The pyramid references both ancient Egyptians *[as it is possible to see also in the body position of some of the people praying in the relief, N.D.I.]*, and, more in general, as the surrounding robots show, the mecha-rock culture, integrated by visual loans from the recent *Transformer* movies directed by Michael Bay. Down left I reference the visual imagery linked to the American Low Riders and to H.R. Giger. You can also see a creature inspired by *Predator*, and a robot inspired by Japanese cartoons (*animes*) such as *Kyashyan* and *Gundam*. Up right the mechanical monster is a design of mine derived from my appreciation of big working machinery (as the mechanism bending the leg shows). These big mechanical creatures are part of Purgatory: they are the guardians of Purgatory. Those red masked sort-of demons you can see on the pyramid are inspired by the Heavy Metal band called Sleep Note. Not only demons: Purgatory hosts all kinds of sinners. Inside the clouds of smoke, which comes from Doré's Purgatory, are concealed the souls of the sinners. On the tiers of the pyramid are represented the pains of different kinds of dead people, i.e. those who sleep forever, or have to run forever, or who are placed in eternal flame, etc.

Virgil also represents symbols that are not present in Dante

Virgil is Dante's guide, his master. Usually he is represented as a well-mannered and gentle person. But since he has the task of leading Dante through the hardships of Hell, I thought that he would need all sorts of defense, first of all weapons and armour. Also, as Virgil has witnessed and gone through the Evil of Hell, he has taken on the features of the demons as a self-defense measure. He has become red because red is the colour of blood, and in a certain sense Hell is a sea of blood. Virgil's uniform is inspired by Vietnamese clothing and by the American and Japanese tiger-pattern street-fashion.



Your representation of Hell is often linked to images of war.

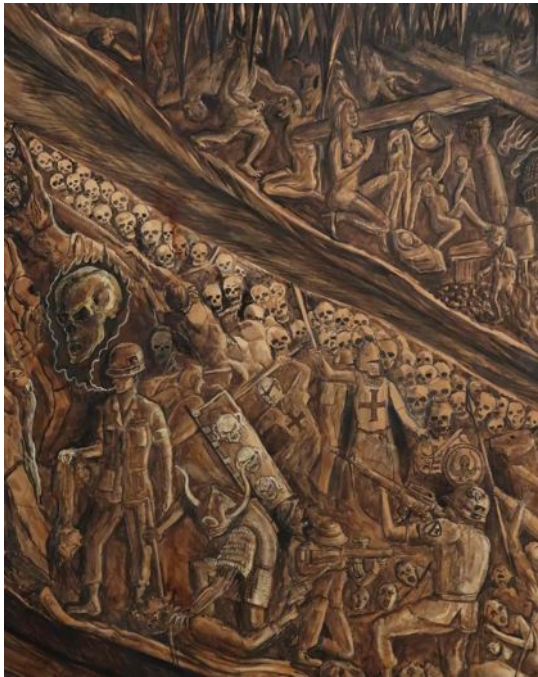
Hell is indeed a state of war. But at the same time my representation of Hell shows many other sins and evils of the world, which as a whole derive from men's greed. War also comes out of from greed.



The vaults of Hell are divided into bands, filled with all sorts of human figures.

In the vaults of Hell are represented bands with all the crimes and sins that plague humankind, divided into categories according to hellish circles. In the bands are present all crimes, from violent crimes such as murder and rape, to organized criminal organizations such as the Japanese Yakuza, Christian crusaders, or the American army. Indeed, currently the USA are

perceived as the world's standard-bearers of peace and justice, while the greed and militarism of the USA are the primary cause of much injustice and evil in our modern world.



Tell us something more about your idea of Hell. According to Dante, and in general according to Christians, Hell is a physical place to which the souls of the damned are condemned. What is ‘Hell’ for you?

I do not think that Hell is an otherworld place. Hell is our world, i.e. human life. Life is made of many unpleasant moments, starting from birth itself. All human beings are born crying, and very few die in peace and silence. The world and human history are nothing but one evil after another.

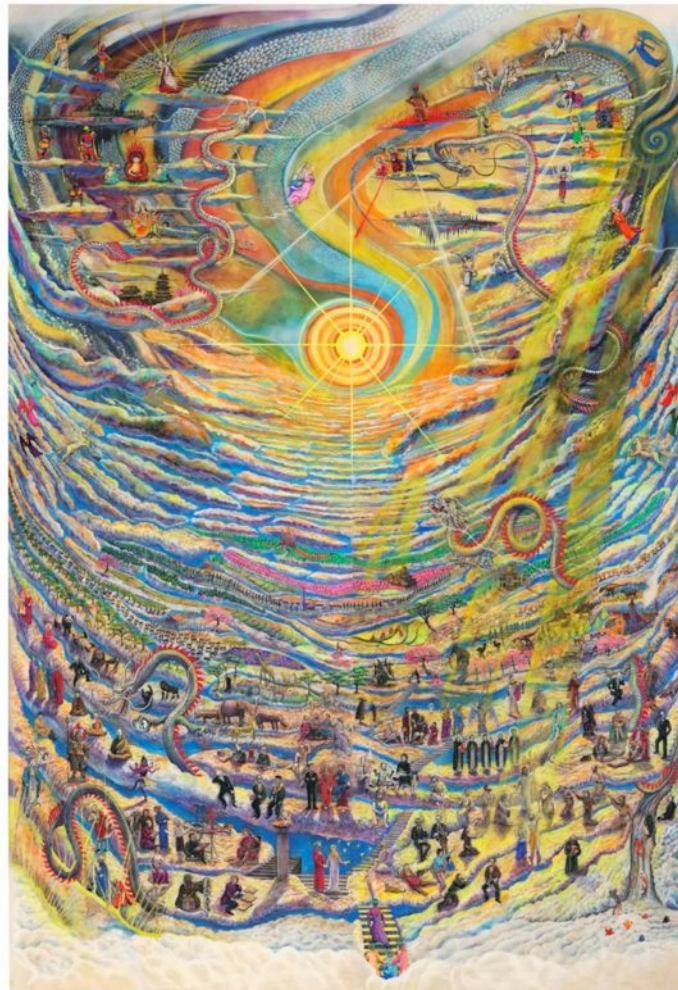
Is this idea of the world common in Japan?

No. Not many people in Japan share an idea of life as pessimistic as mine. It could be, of course, that my philosophy was influenced by my personal life, which since childhood was difficult and full of family hardships. My mother, suffering from congenital hip dislocation, was physically challenged, and had mental issues that heavily impacted her social interactions. My parents did not want people around to know about these mental issues, and as a child it was hard to see my mother showing heavy symptoms of disorders we could not talk about. My father passed away before we were able to face these matters, and I was left with conflicting feelings about my parents: love, of course, but also a sense of powerlessness and even anger. Only once an adult could I face and somehow elaborate these problems. Staying in front of my own children I could see the child I once was, and creating art I could release my old pain and express my feelings. Later in my life the Fukushima tragedy, obviously, also had a deep impact on my way of living. In this sense I feel very close to Dante, who had a difficult life.

Do you think that art can help in fighting the evil of the world?

I do not think that art is a weapon to fight evil. Instead, I see it as a cathartic means for the artist and its public. Personally, thanks to my art I was able to vent my inner pain and frustration. I felt the need to react with violence to all the evil that was happening around me, but I successfully channeled this feeling into art.

2018 - 2019
388 x 260 cm
パネル、水彩紙、アクリル絵具、パステル
Panel, watercolor paper, acrylic, pastel



天国篇
Paradise

Let's talk about Paradise: the Paradise we can see in your paintings is not the same as Dante's, and it is certainly not the Paradise described by Christian theologians. Instead, we can see persons and gods belonging to all kinds of religions, from pagan religions such as the Viking gods, to modern religions such as representatives of Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity. We can also see philosophers, writers, etc.

Indeed, Paradise is not a place linked to a given faith. It is a philosophical space, an otherworldly symposium where writers, artists and philosophers discuss the meaning of death,

and everything existing in our universe. Pondering these and other profound questions is what defines us as human beings.



Is there some religion or philosophy that inspired your view of Paradise as a place of choral and peaceful discussion?

On one hand Paradise represents my desire for a peaceful space for everyone. On the other hand the importance of an ongoing discussion about the meaning of our existence was presented to me by the books written by the writer and philosopher Akiko Ikeda [1960-2007, *N.D.I.*]. Ikeda dedicated many books to the deepest existential topics concerning humankind. She stated that the progress of our race has taken a wrong turn, and that our living has fossilized into permanent survival, with no possibility of spiritual growth. Nowadays all sciences, including medicine, are based on this distorted idea of life. Instead of promoting a discussion about our existence, thus providing deeper meanings to it, they merely focus on prolonging it as much as possible, as they equate life to physical survival. Ikeda's books encourage the readers to never cease to ponder over the essence of life. I started reading her books during a difficult moment in my life, and they inspired me to look into myself in a different way.

This is the reason why in your painting of Paradise there are so many philosophers? For example Leonardo, who is very similar to the way Raphael represented him in the Raphael Rooms of the Vatican Palace, is almost at the core of the painting.

Not only Leonardo: I wanted to represent Socrates, Plato, Wittgenstein, and many other Western thinkers. But at the very core of the painting stands Akiko Ikeda, who died in 2007. The whole composition is centered around her. I plan on making more paintings dedicated to Akiko Ikeda in the future.



ヴィドゲンシュタイン
Wittgenstein
32.5 × 12 × 11 cm



池田晶子
Akiko Ikeda
31 × 10 × 10 cm



What message would you like to give to the Italian and European audience through your art?

Art is a process that requires a long gestation. It takes a lot of work to complete a piece of art. Even so it is worth it, because visual art can communicate beyond national borders. I wish everybody would wonder about the deepest and most unsettling matters of life and death. Through my art I would like to encourage people of all nationalities to meditate on these matters.

What are your next projects? Will you continue your artistic research on Dante?

There are still many works to make following Dante's teaching. I intend to pursue this path for much longer.



荒地で泣き叫ぶ千葉ダンテ
CHIBA Dante Crying in the Wasteland
2012 - 2013



三つ首のケルベロス
Three-Headed Cerberus
2014 - 2015



黒い風
Black Wind
2014 - 2015

Do you have a final message for the Italian and European readers of this interview?

So far I have not been able to visit much of Europe, except for Poland. I would like to show my works to an Italian audience, in Italy, and I will do my best to make this dream come true. My biggest dream? Being able to see, one day in the future, an exhibition of my paintings held in Florence, Dante's hometown!

