

Angels Will Make Life Hell*

On Shuichi Nakahara

*paraphrase of a poem from the book *Forms* by Yona Wallach

Shuichi Nakahara was born in Tokyo during World War II, a second child and first son to a dominant and influential father, a painter and fashion designer, and an actress-singer mother. Both developed brilliant careers when still in their teens.

His conflict-ridden soul was silenced in the week he turned 60. His thin and agitated body, the field of play for contradictory forces, some of them destructive, collapsed.

As a youth he learnt painting from his father, and it was assumed that he would grow up to become an artist, yet it was history and reading books that were his great love up until the end. As one who grew up under the shadow of the bomb, he developed a great sensitivity to social injustice and was a socialist and an idealist. His anarchist leanings made him a zealous opponent of the empire.

In 1969 he arrived at Kibbutz Dalia with a group of Japanese students, he stayed for four years, learnt Hebrew, and began a 35 year romance with the kibbutz and with Israel.

There are two groups of works shown in this exhibition – paintings from his final years in Tel Aviv and photographs taken in the kibbutz in the 1970s and in Tokyo (at the high school he had attended when young) in the 1980s. It is not easy to connect these two groups: glowing, monochrome abstract paintings on the one hand, and on the other, photographs full of love for and identification with young souls at the start of their life journey.

At the beginning of his book *Empire of the Signs*, Roland Barthes names as “Japan” a system that he creates from a number of features isolated somewhere in the world. In this way he builds Roland Barthes’ Japan. I intend to build Shuichi and his work from my observations in a similar manner, with no pretense to understanding the Japanese soul, an entity about which he was highly sensitive.

Tsurumi Shunsuke, a contemporary Japanese philosopher, read widely by Shuichi, claimed in an interview that true cross-cultural communication is formed when people flounder in the gap between languages. According to him, such struggle gives birth to language that is full of life. He supports the option of using a mother tongue's sensitivities in a new language rather than trying to adopt it and lose one's identity. This is the way to produce wordsmiths who enrich the language. An intense power comes, in his opinion, from the fact that the languages overlap with one another. He also advises against imitating the speed of native speakers: don't try to speak faster than the speed at which you're comfortably in command of the language, so that your thoughts go into the words you speak.

Shuichi zealously guarded his right to be Japanese in Israel, to talk slowly, floundering, convoluted Hebrew which was molded by Japanese thought patterns. He refused to accept verbal phrasing from others. So he was able to refer to a group of people in a room as *nof* (landscape), he loved the words *zulat* (the other) and *hadadi* (mutual) and in his mouth they turned out to be new, with a deflection of meaning. His actual existence was the new thing convulsing, wanting to be born, through either a meeting or a collision of two cultures so foreign to each other.

While he was at Kibbutz Dalia he took many photographs and set up a darkroom where he could print them. His favorite subject was "youth" and he captured young boys and girls in different activities – making music, singing, talking, gathered around a counselor, reading, working in the field, marching as a group, camping. In these photographs depicting places and times so familiar to every Israeli, Shuichi's viewpoint and the intense concentration invested in attending to the appearance of the right moment extracts from every situation the serious and the meaningful, and brings about absolute alienation. We get a kibbutz that is complete grace and positive human tuning directed at creation. The kibbutz never looked so Japanese – through the use of simple geometry, in which the figures are placed in complete harmony within the space, he creates momentary temples to youthful dreams, to the latent potential of "being a young person."

Later on he will complete the picture with photographs of Japanese youths, when he returns for long days of observation at the high school where he

studied, and where every student is the young Shuichi with life still spread out before him.

The photographs are clear life-shaping stories with every experience and activity noted down as a *lekach* (another word he loved – in English, “moral lesson”) and as studying, equipment for the long journey. The kibbutz and the school are seen as hothouses that work in wonderful synergy with the needs of the young soul. The expanse holds and protects but also allows each and every individual to find their niche, to practice their freedom and to develop their talents. Even “Pile of Friends on the Grass” looks like a meeting of individuals in a space that opens and adapts itself to the needs of each and every one. The figure of the teacher or the educator appears in the role of *sensei* – a spiritual teacher in the full meaning of the word.

Throughout his life Shuichi was a complete romantic, if we agree that “Romanticism is...youth, life, the exuberant sense of life of the natural man, but it is also pallor, fever, disease...the Dance of Death, indeed Death itself...It is the confused teeming fullness and richness of life...turbulence...conflict, chaos, but also it is peace...harmony with the natural order...It is the ancient, the historic...ancient roots and the old order...Also it is the pursuit of novelty, revolutionary change...it is intoxicating dreams...solitude, the sufferings of exile, the sense of alienation, roaming in remote places, especially the East, and in remote times...It is energy, force, will, life, *étalage du moi*; it is also self-torture, self-annihilation...it is also dandyism, the desire to dress up, red waistcoats...it is *ennui*, it is *taedium vitae*...It is the convulsion of great empires, wars...the crashing of worlds. It is the romantic hero – the rebel, the damned soul...” (Isaiah Berlin, *The Roots of Romanticism*).

It is hardly surprising that one of the figures he most admired was Lawrence of Arabia who arrived in the Middle East and founded deep friendships with Arabs with the intention of being assimilated into their life style and helping them politically. He, like Shuichi, “was from childhood far more interested in history than in any other subject” and developed an obsessive interest in ancient castles. Like Shuichi, his mind was fevered and his dreams were fed by sinking into books. In a letter to his mother, Lawrence wrote: “You know, I think, the joy of getting into a strange country in a book: at home when I have

shut my door and the town is in bed – and I know that nothing, not even the dawn – can disturb me in my curtains: only the slow crumbling of the coals on the fire: they get so red and throw such splendid glimmerings.... Why does one not like things if there are other people about? Why cannot one make one's books live except in the night, after hours of straining? And you know they have to be your own books too, and you have to read them more than once. I think they take in something of your personality, and your environment also – you know a second hand book sometimes is so much more flesh and blood than a new one....”

When, about seven years ago, Shuichi arrived to live in Tel Aviv he brought around 2,000 books with him that he constantly read and reread. With the book held close to his nose, for he was shortsighted, he was capable of reading for five or six hours straight.

Love of reading and solitude also appear in the *Tsurezuregusa* (Essays in Idleness), a Japanese classic written in the fourteenth century – “The pleasantest of diversions is to sit alone under the lamp, a book spread out before you, and to make friends with people of a distant past you have never known,” And also: “I am happiest when I have nothing to distract me and I am completely alone.”

In his work, and especially in his paintings, Shuichi moved as a romantic through the codes of Japanese aesthetics. The Western romantic position is one that overflows every phrase, every gesture, with meaning. It believes in expression, in art expressing turbulent and deep inner feelings. The Japanese way, according to Barthes, is one that creates signs that do not point toward any kind of reality, empty signs that celebrate their mere appearance. In this sense, Japanese art and the Japanese meaning of existence are “writing” – the drawing of letters that create an emptiness of language. Shuichi's paintings are made of many layers, accumulated through a succession of expressive gestures, some of them violent, in a manner that is unpredictable. Incisions in the upper layers testify to the process and reveal the history of the making. But the final glowing product that stands calmly in its clear geometry seems to have swallowed and concealed the process. The viewer stands in

front of a shining surface that testifies only to itself, the red cuts on the yellow surface appear eventually, as an elegant calligraphy that does not reveal any distress.

The paintings built as a square inside a square are reminiscent of sets of Japanese boxes, one inside the other down to emptiness. Roland Barthes claims that “it is no longer the temporary accessory of the object to be transported, but itself becomes an object; the envelope, in itself, is consecrated as a precious though gratuitous thing; the package is a thought.... Yet, by its very perfection, this envelope, often repeated (you can be unwrapping a package forever), postpones the discovery of the object it contains—one which is often insignificant, for it is precisely a specialty of the Japanese package that the triviality of the thing be disproportionate to the luxury of the envelope.... Thus the box acts as a sign: as envelope, screen, mask...the very thing it encloses and signifies is for a very long time put off until later, as if the package’s function were not to protect in space but to postpone in time...thereby the object loses its existence, becomes a mirage: from envelope to envelope, the signified flees...what the Japanese carry...are actually empty signs.”

The paintings are vigilant actions, adding layer upon layer, covering upon covering, a growing magnificence that eventually hides and obscures all memory of motive or meaning. The square at the center of the paintings, actually the only image in them, is just an echo of the paintings’ square format, it has no perspective, so the painting cannot be thought of as space and no viewpoint can be associated with it. Thus Shuichi relates to the canvas as a box and as he works he covers the sides as well. In the narrow space that is created between the front, the sides, and the wall, hides the reverse side of the canvas which is a kind of additional painting or poem: signatures in three types of alphabet – Japanese, Hebrew, and Latin; different dates that relate to the duration of the process and its completion; and occasionally, touches of paint that cling to the frame.

Barthes claims that “the West moistens everything with meaning, like an authoritarian religion which imposes baptism on entire peoples.” His reading of Haiku poetry rejects the Western reading that gives it poetic emotion or depth or concentration or silence. He argues that it defies interpretation and

the only thing to say about it is to repeat it, since the work of reading which is attached to it is to suspend language, not to provoke it.

When Shuichi first came to my home in Tel Aviv, sitting on the couch, he raised his shirt and said: “we have no hair.” If we accept Barthes’ observation that Haiku is not a rich thought reduced to a brief form, but a brief event which immediately finds its proper form, then Shuichi’s words are a very short and perfect Haiku.

Shuichi was a clear example of the type that in Jungian and alchemic literature is called *puer aeternus* – eternal youth, characterized by an idealistic, provisory life style, lacking patience for the monotony of everyday life. This is the winged or flying youth best exemplified by Peter Pan. According to Marie Louise Von Franz he will usually choose flying or mountain climbing, which Shuichi did a lot of, as his main sport. Hidden in these activities, she says, is the powerful seduction of death.

In one of the photographs a young boy from the kibbutz is lying on his back at an angle that causes a slight dizziness in the spectator, holding up a model airplane in the upper edge of the frame. That same boy, called Gilito, became a pilot, but Shuichi chose alcohol as his main means of aviation, which caused him to fall repeatedly. In one fall, about two and a half years ago, just like Lawrence, his friend from the books, whose plane crashed above Cairo in 1919, he fractured his ribs and pierced a lung.

In his book *The Psychoanalysis of Fire*, Gaston Bachelard calls alcohol “fire-water.” Among its characteristics connected to the unconscious he ascribes to it the ability to hold a great power within a small volume, and argues that since it radiates heat to the whole person from the pit of the stomach, it proves the convergence of inner experience and objective experiment. The alcoholic unconscious, he goes on to say, is a profound reality, it does not just stimulate mental potentialities, but creates them. It incorporates itself with that which is striving to express itself. Bachelard states that alcohol is a creator of language, it enriches the vocabulary and frees the syntax. However, at the same time, the unconscious cannot admit that a quality as characteristic and as marvelous as inflammability can totally disappear into the depths of the body. The conclusion is that whoever drinks alcohol may burn like alcohol.

Bachelard gives a list of eighteenth century rumors about spontaneous human combustion, a terrible punishment for alcoholism.

Are Shuichi's shining paintings in yellow, orange, and red an irresistible attraction to the seductive and annihilating heat of the Land of Fire?

Nurit David, 28.3.2004