

Art, Politics & Spirituality

Crucifixion: A Japanese Story

By Junko Chodos, Artist
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I will never forget the peculiar statue I saw on the wall of my grandparents' mansion. It was when rampant fascism had accelerated its power in Japan and people finally started hearing the rolling sound of boots threatening their still yet peaceful lives. I was less than three years old, visiting my grandparents who were living in a beautiful mansion far away from Tokyo. There I saw a small statue of a man who was hung by his hands nailed on a piece of horizontally stretched wood, which was supported with another vertical piece of wood. His body was twisted in agony, his head hung down sideways without strength. But the most distinguished part of the statue was his rib cage. It looked as if each rib guarded strongly something precious in its cage and yet the wound on the surface of his rib cage, which appeared to have been made by piercing, made it look as if everything precious had already leaked away from it. It was a shocking and frightening little statue. How totally different a feeling did it evoke in me from the feeling that all the artifacts placed in the alcoves in the other rooms of the mansion evoked: the countless little porcelains and flower vases in which my grandmother arranged flowers, which looked like symbols of a peaceful life of their own.

But this statue of a half-naked man was different. It was obvious that the man had suffered the effects of brutality and cruelty. What was done to him? What exactly did people do to this man? Was he tortured to death? Was he executed? What did he do to

deserve this? And most of all: why on earth was such a horrible thing in this beautiful mansion?

It was a sudden crack in the ground under our feet, showing a glimpse of the depth of the gruesome, cruel darkness underneath our lives that



Topological Deformations of the Cross, No. 4 (1987). Mixed media on paper (12" x 9 1/8").

demanding our attention and reminded us that the everyday life we were having was not as peaceful as it looked. And yet the deep sense of sorrow that the statue radiated filled the entire room. I thought I saw something I was not supposed to see, but I could not wipe this image of the statue from my mind.

It was much later that I learned that the statue which I saw was called the crucifixion of Christ, and that my grandparents were Christians and the Japanese room on whose wall the statue was hanging was their little chapel where the foreign God was worshipped. They were the first young couple who converted to Christianity among all my ancestors, they were the first in a district where no Christian church yet existed. I heard that my grandparents had a difficult time because of their conversion even though when they converted, the persecution of Christians which had lasted 260 previous years had already been legally stopped long before as part of the new modernization revolution of Japan.

It was much later that I started seeing the implications of my grandparents having become Christians and realizing the intensity of it. Their ancestors had been court physicians to Shoguns for 17 generations. Their service started in 1603 when the first Tokugawa Shogun took leadership over all feudal lords in Japan, brought them under his rule and set out the new government in Edo. It ended in 1868, when the last Shogun yielded his

power to the Emperor and emptied his castle for him to occupy, when Edo became Tokyo and the modernization of Japan started.

Even though the rule of the successive Shoguns - the Edo period - is known as a most peaceful, culturally most flourishing period in the history of Japan, it is also known as the most terrifying period of persecution of Christians. The level of cruelty the Shoguns exercised was one of the most severe in the history of persecution of Christianity in the entire world, some historians say. And I realized that after the last Shogun lost his power, his most loyal doctor's first son became a Christian. My grandmother told me that her husband kept in his room one of the original wooden signs that the Shogun had put in the town square in the 17th century. The sign says that anyone who knows of a Christian should report it to the authorities. He could never forget the Christians who were cruelly executed, and the ones who kept their faith against torture, and survived and transmitted their faith secretly to the next generations. He identified himself with all of those Christians. He became the first doctor in our family who opened the door of his clinic to anyone of any status who needed his help —

including the ones who could not possibly pay any fees.

When I think of them now, I realize that my grandparents were spiritual exiles, a different kind of exile. They lived in the most outlandish spiritual world without removing themselves physically from their land. In fact, they lived among people who had no idea of what Christianity was. Holding a burning aspiration towards eternity in their mind, they were firmly rooted in their community. My grandfather lived a devoted doctor's life in the small town where their mansion was. He had never slept all through even one night - not once during his married life. Grandmother said, "There were always dying babies, he had to rush out and cross over the mountain to save them with his doctor's bag and a lantern in his hands."

Japan plunged into the war. The image of the cross which was engraved in me deeply at that time became internalized even deeper when I suffered from tuberculosis after surviving the war, after a long period of undernourishment which the war brought to all of us. I survived once more, I felt I embraced life and death by inhaling and exhaling through my lungs. Vulnerability and

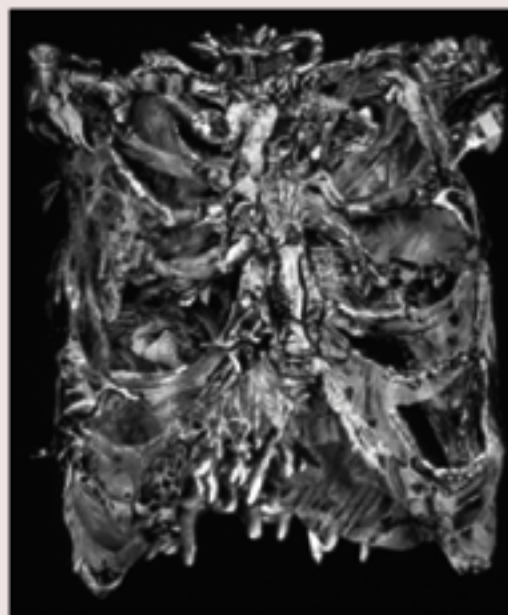
sacredness became inseparably one in my own rib cage.

I have often noticed that so many of my works are constructed with a cross as the basic structure and that the image of a rib cage occupies the center of the pictorial space, often without my being aware of it, often without any particular relevance to the theme of the painting.

I did create an actual rib cage in my art (see Relic (1984)) and I started the series of "Topological Deformations of the Cross" which consisted of 21 works (see Number 4, 1987).

As soon as two lines cross, the four regions of space they define become pregnant with meaning and start moving towards fulfillment. Their intersection defines a center which is something brand new in the formerly undifferentiated plane. Suddenly two contradictory movements start; one from the center outwards towards infinity and the other from infinity inwards towards the center.

What are the essential visual properties which conjure up the power of this symbol? What is the essential visual language to translate what my grandparents saw in the cross into a purely pictorial expression? These are the



Relic (1984). Mixed media collage on paper (11" x 9 1/8" x 2").

questions which go right to the core of creating art.

As an artist, my search for the mystery of the form of the cross is still continuing.

Junko Chodos (www.junkochodos.com) is a Japanese-born artist who came to America to live over 30 years ago. She has exhibited at many venues throughout the United States, Germany, and Japan. Her book, *The Transformative Vision of Junko Chodos*, won the Independent Publishers Art Book of the Year Award.