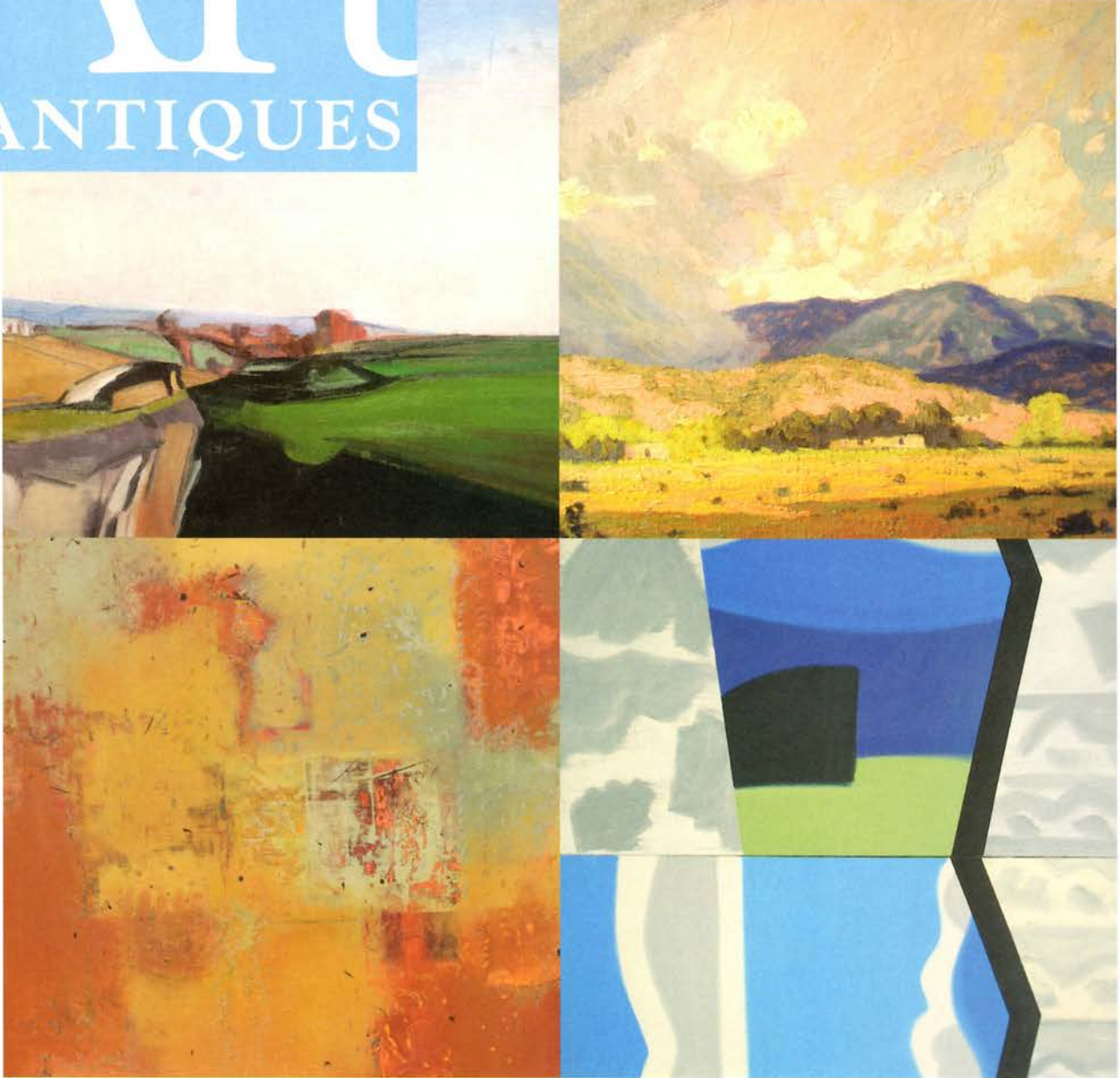


# Art & ANTIQUES

SUMMER 2014

FOR COLLECTORS OF THE FINE AND DECORATIVE ARTS



DAN CHRISTENSEN | OUTDOOR SCULPTURE | JAMIE WYETH | JAPANESE DECO



SANTA FE SUMMER

## ARTIST PROFILE



## Fishing Expeditions

AKIRA SHIMIZU PLUMBS CHILDHOOD MEMORIES AND TRADITIONAL JAPANESE IMAGERY TO FIND MATERIAL FOR HIS ART.

BY EDWARD M. GÓMEZ

*Guidebook, 1962-72,*  
collage, 15 x 18 1/2 inches.

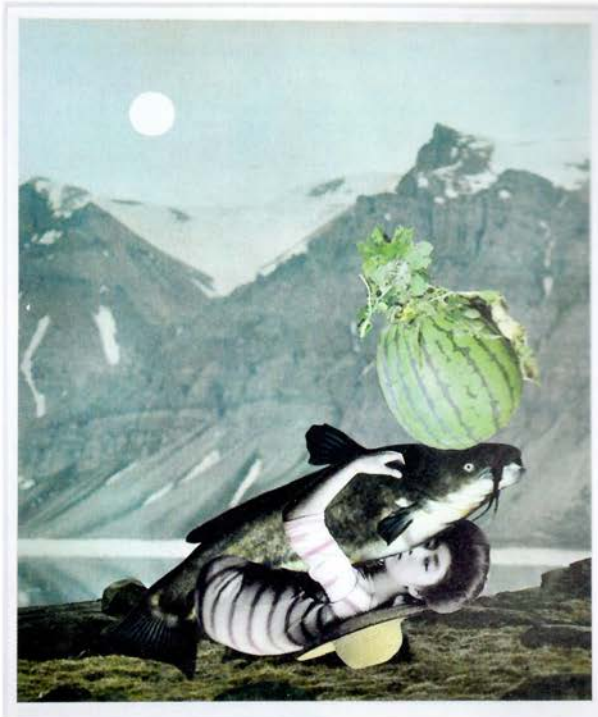
SOMETIMES the most evocative art emerges from the depths of memory, an endlessly abundant, though fugitive, source of creativity. As Vladimir Nabokov observed in his autobiography, *Speak, Memory* (1951), it is a repository that we all possess, in which the past may shift its shape and meanings but never really die.

Memory has been a potent force in the work of the Japanese artist Akira Shimizu, who was born in 1938 in Toyama, a coastal city in west-central Japan. The first-ever U.S. exhibition of his art, an abbreviated career survey, was recently on view at Pavel Zoubok Gallery in New York. Now based in Saitama, north of Tokyo, Shimizu has never forgotten his hardscrabble growing-up years near the Sea of Japan, whose roaring waters, he recalls, could be heard in the wintry darkness when families tucked themselves in for the night.

Fishing has long played a prominent role in the Toyama region's economic and cultural life. Its boats, colorful merchants, and life-nurturing harvests provided a lasting influence on Shimizu's worldview and art. So did indelible childhood experiences of wartime.



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Those events peaked in early August 1945, when American aircraft dropped incendiary bombs on his hometown and almost completely destroyed it.

The war and its immediate aftermath was a time of hardship, and in one recollection Shimizu often shares with visitors, he remembers stopping by fishmongers' stalls as a young boy and sinking his little hands into the mouths of *buri* (yellowtail) and extracting sardines that were stuck inside. "The *buri*'s sharp teeth would scratch my hands as I pulled them out," he told an interviewer in 2012, on the occasion of a retrospective exhibition of his work at the Museum of Modern Art in Saitama. "I would take them home to my mother, who would use them to make *surumi*." (*Surumi*, or fish balls, are commonly added to soups or grilled on skewers.) Speaking with *Art & Antiques*, he recalls, "There was so little food that three households had to share a single cucumber. At school, we made 'grass bread.'"

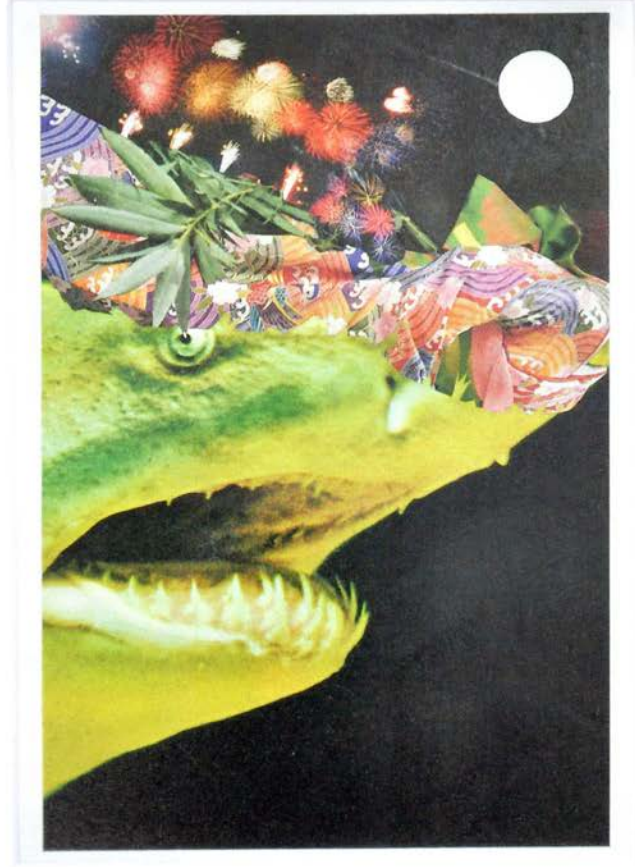
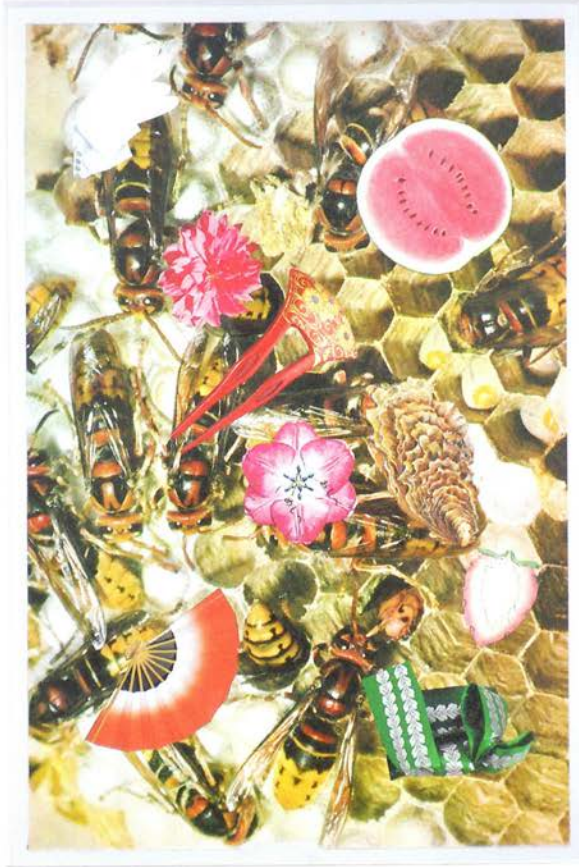
Shimizu's father ran a drugstore and cut hair; he died when Akira was five years old.

Clockwise from top left: *Melsen*, 1999, collage; *Sirahoneoroshi*, 1998, collage, 7.68 x 9.53 inches; *Himekama*, 1998, collage, 9.53 x 7.6 inches.

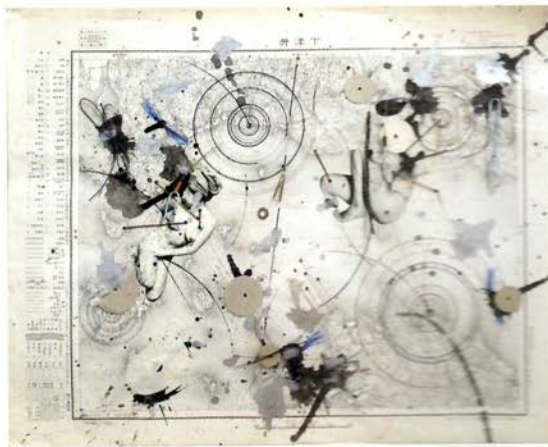




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Clockwise from top left: *Nimaijo*, 2011, collage; *Botannami*, 1998, 7.01 x 10.39 inches; *Guidebook*, 1962-72, collage, 15 x 18 1/2 inches. Facing page, from top: The artist with a collage from his *Guidebook* series; *Guidebook*, 1962-72, collage, 15 x 18 1/2 inches.

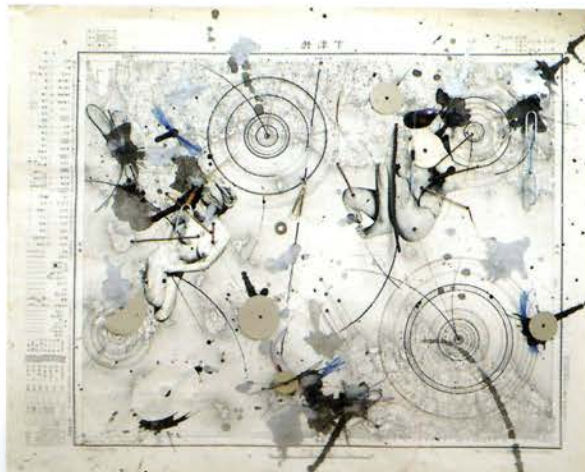


(It is no accident that barber's shears appear repeatedly in Shimizu's collages.) Years later, in 1958, Shimizu graduated from Kanazawa College of Art in Kanazawa, another coastal city southwest of Toyama. Heading north to Tokyo, which was rebuilding at a rapid pace, he found work at factories that did manufacturing jobs for larger firms. In his spare time, he visited contemporary-art galleries in the capital to keep up with developments in the avant-garde and became acquainted with the work of Japanese modernists who were leading its creative charge. Later he met and became friendly with some of those same artists. Among them is Natsuyuki Nakanishi, who, coincidentally, has a solo show on view in New York now, at McCaffrey Fine Art, through July 11.

By 1962, Shimizu had begun presenting his work in the annual "Yomiuri Independent" exhibition, a high-profile showcase for up-and-coming talents. That same year, he had a debut solo show at Tokyo's Muramatsu Gallery, where he displayed a mixed-media work incorporating printed maps, assemblage sculptures made with assorted industrial parts and metal scraps, and collages with photographic components.



Later, he created diverse groups of works, including his *Guidebook* series of collages, which layered cutouts of female forms from old, black-and-white girlie sheets over topographic maps of Japan; his pop-flavored *Colorblindness Tests*, painting-collages made with cut-outs from 1970s pin-up magazines; and his remarkable full-color collages, whose women in elegant *kimono*, insects, birds, fish, mushroom clouds and legions of shiny scissors combine and cavort in unlikely compositions that are as mysterious as they are compelling. Shimizu made the





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Clockwise from top left: *Untitled (From the Darkness)*, 1983, mixed-media assemblage, 6 1/2 x 3 1/2 x 2 1/2 inches; *Untitled (From the Darkness)*, 1991, mixed-media assemblage, 18 x 5 x 8 inches; *Untitled (From the Darkness)*, 1989, mixed-media assemblage, 11 1/2 x 18 1/2 x 2 1/2 inches.



first of these works for a book in collaboration with the famed choreographer Tatsumi Hijikata (1928–86), the founder of *butoh*, a form of modern dance. Also on view at Pavel Zoubok is a selection of Shimizu’s mixed-media assemblage sculptures, from small, wall-mounted talisman-like bundles of wire and spiky metal to larger, free-standing pieces that suggest spacecraft or buildings from a futuristic world.

In fact, the artist explains, all of his creations have been inspired by what he personally has seen or experienced, from the shapes of sea creatures to those of the metal scraps he saw while living and working in industrial zones during his early years in Tokyo. In this way, Shimizu notes, looking back, “the fundamental scaffolding of my way of making art, of my thinking is based on the circumstances that I lived through and sur-

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vived.” Emphatically, he adds, his work is not Surrealist. It is not an attempt to record or emulate dreams, an effort to plumb the depths of the psyche, or an exercise in impulsive, “automatic” art-making.

Zoubok, a longtime collage and assemblage specialist, notes, “What excited me about exhibiting this work was the opportunity to introduce the art world outside Japan to a singular figure in Japanese modernism. In Shimizu’s work, there is a confluence of traditional Japanese culture and classic modernist form, which makes for an important contribution to the evolving story of collage and assemblage.”

Shimizu summarized his creative approach as that of someone who “moves from the light to the dark, and from the dark to the light.” That is, of course, a vivid description of anyone’s activity when fishing in the deep waters of memory. To give it a form that teases the mind and provokes the spirit is to create what we call art. 🐟



*Guidebook*, 1962-72, collage, 15 x 18 ½ inches.