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Tsuchi: Earthy Materials in Contemporary Japanese Art. By Bert Winther-Tamaki.
Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2022. 320pp. ISBN 978-1-5179-1190-4
Jennifer Coates

Environmental issues, and human responses to environmental damage and challenge, have lately been at the center of a number of studies of Japanese arts, media, and culture (see for example Furuhata 2022; Fujiki 2022; Marran 2017). Bert Winther-Tamaki offers a timely consideration of the role of the environment in Japanese art practices since 1955 using the key concept of *tsuchi*, or earth. What may at first seem a slightly eccentric approach to bringing together a variety of works ranging across installation and performance art through ceramics, sculpture, architecture, and even anime evolves into a nuanced and fascinating study of a single motif or material that artists have approached in radically different ways and with diverse results.

It is quite hard to discuss the topic of earth or ground without falling into accidental wordplay, and indeed the book is written with a humour that is also reflected in the many rich excerpts and illustrations of artists' words and works. Yet the overall point is a serious one: that artworks focusing on or created using earthy materials such as soil, clay, and sand, give us a unique insight into the troubled relations between humans and our environment, as addressed by artists who see the world and our place in it in provocative, disturbing, and inspiring ways.

Having approached the topic of this book as something of a curiosity, this reader was quickly convinced by the value of focusing on *tsuchi* to uncover a productive throughline of discursive arguments and emotional responses around the issues caused by the heavy impact of human living on the planet. In particular, early chapters on the historical attitudes to earth in Japan and on ceramic arts as emblematic of "earth flavour" build towards truly original and useful readings of more mainstream artistic texts such as Miyazaki Hayao's anime *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* (1984). Winther-Tamaki perceptively observes that the Sea of Corruption in Miyazaki's film correlates to the ambivalent emotions expressed by artists working with soil in the same decade, who "seesawed between embracing and recoiling from" the reality that restoring the planet to "purity" would necessitate the removal of its human inhabitants (p.152). Such attention to situating environmental concerns across "high" and "low" art (or across popular and high culture boundaries) gives important context for scholars of both anime and art history.

Alongside the voices of Japanese artists, non-Japanese creators, curators, and collectors are also heard extolling the perceived unique relation of Japan and Japanese people to soil, land, and environment. From Walter Gropius, who praised the Japanese insistence on beauty in everyday life with "a note of exoticism" (p. 4) to Theaster Gates, who invented a fictitious Japanese potter as part of an elaborate exhibition that exposed "the unquestioning acceptance of an essential correspondence between Japanese racial identity and Japanese earth flavor" (p. 222), these views from outside Japan demonstrate the role of earth and nature in common stereotyping about Japanese aesthetics and sensibilities.

As this range of examples indicates, the book covers a lot of ground (as it were) in ranging across disciplines, moving through media, performance art, photography, ceramics, and sculpture, and including non-Japanese commentary as well as Japanese discourses on *tsuchi* over more than seventy years. It is therefore not a criticism but rather a testament to the persuasive nature of the author's argument that this reader wished there had been space to address some pre-war and wartime examples of *tsuchi* discourse as well as the postwar discourses and artworks studied here. In particular, Itami Mansaku and Arnold Fanck's joint film project, released under the title *Aratashiki Tsuchi* in Japan (1937) would make an

excellent case study of the role played by the concept of *tsuchi* in wartime discourses of colonialism and settlement.

Winther-Tamaki ends by suggesting that *tsuchi* may be the next in a long line of Japanese terms that expand beyond the boundaries of the Japanese language to become commonly understood outside Japan, following photographic terminology such as *bokeh* or wellness-associated phrases such as *shinrin-yoku*. Based on the convincing earthy line that the author traces from popular media to avant-garde art, and his identification of earth and soil at the heart of many global understandings of Japanese culture, it seems surprising that it isn't already one of our many Japanese loan words.

Tsuchi demonstrates the value of tracing a single concept across a range of art practices and time periods, drawing attention to the formative role of this often unseen or unacknowledged base material from which much artworks and creative practices emerge. The book also offers a timely reminder of the need to go back to basics somewhat in order to develop a nuanced understanding of the pressing ecological problems we face today. Observing Japanese artists grappling (sometimes literally) with the earth communicates not only the immediacy of the dangers of any challenges to the environment that we depend on, but also the role of human agency in those challenges. *Tsuchi* depicts our entangled relationship with the material that constitutes our home, that is present in our tools and utensils, and that makes possible and yet also obstructs the creation of human habitats through analysis of artistic works and contemporary discourses. In this respect the book goes beyond contributing to the fields of Art History, Media Studies, or Japanese Studies to offer a nuanced picture of a global issue.

Works cited

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Biographical note

Jennifer Coates is Senior Lecturer in Japanese Studies at the School of East Asian Studies, University of Sheffield. She is the author of *Making Icons: Repetition and the Female Image in Japanese Cinema, 1945-1964* (Hong Kong University Press 2016) and *Film Viewing in Postwar Japan, 1945-1968: An Ethnographic Study* (Edinburgh University Press, 2022) as well as a number of journal articles and book chapters on cinema and audiences in postwar and contemporary Japan.