The Composition of Decomposition: The Kusōzu Images of Matsui Fuyuko and Itō Seiu, and Buddhism in Erotic Grotesque Modernity

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The Composition of Decomposition: The Kusōzu Images of Matsui Fuyuko and Itō Seiu, and Buddhism in Erotic Grotesque Modernity

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“What looks like meaningful, divine suffering to one person often looks like brutal, preventable violence to another.”

1. Introduction

In Buddhist culture, the young and beautiful female as corpse has often been presented as a sight of soteriological potential, a demonstration of the illusions of beauty, permanence, and identity coherence. A series of paintings by Matsui Fuyuko 松井冬子 (b. 1974) is only the most recent example of the genre known as “kusōzu” 九相図 (Pictures of the Nine Stages [of a decaying corpse]) (henceforth kusōzu), which depicts the subject. Some half-century earlier, Itō Seiu 伊藤晴雨 (1882–1961) had also produced a substantial corpus of kusōzu. This essay examines the ways in which these artists treat the theme and how the work of Seiu and the visual culture of his time are discernible in the art of Matsui. Matsui distinguishes her series from the genre as it is generally understood by presenting the nine states of decomposition as the results of nine motives for suicide. This, in addition to a number of other aspects of her work, makes the series considerably different from its purported model, and links it to an alternative cultural genealogy. To show this, I will summarize the general understanding of kusōzu as it has been presented so far in scholarship, and will discuss the erotic and grotesque aspects of kusōzu, before introducing the works of Seiu, with a brief explanation of eroguro エログロ (“erotic-grotesque”). I will then consider interpretations of Matsui’s series based on a connection with premodern kusōzu and position it within modern Japanese visual culture. The somewhat extensive introduction serves to support my suggestion that Matsui’s visual influences, which I locate in the cultural history and images of anatomical dissection, the nude in Japanese art, and of self-mutilation/suicide, are all what we might call, if not Buddhist “corpse contemplations,” “dismemberment contemplations” of one kind or another. By reconceiving the genre within this broader category we can release it from a hermeneutics that confines it to a “religious” framework. Other works of her oeuvre support this, and help to shift interpretation of her kusōzu series away from the contention that

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2 At the time of writing, the series is still in progress.
3 The kusōzu is also called a kusō mandara 九相曼茶羅 (nine-stage mandala) and, as a pictorial representation of the human realm in the rokusō-e 六道絵 (picture of the six realms) genre, it is called jindōkusōsuじん道九相図 (picture of the aspect of the impure human realm).
4 Hereafter referred to as “Seiu,” his artist’s name.
it is a simplistic reworking of Buddhist imagery. The origins of this “contemplation of dismemberment” are to be found not only in Buddhist thought and practice, but in the aesthetic of the grotesque, which was properly developed in Japan, especially as eroguro, during the modern period and which engages all three visual influences— anatomical dissection, the nude in Japanese art, and self-mutilation/suicide—mentioned above. Thus, we find a convergence of Buddhist ideas and visual culture with those of the grotesque, a convergence that helps us to reappraise both. I additionally propose that even though the types of gazes prompted by the subjects of depictions of bodies of the dissected, of the nude, of suicide, and the grotesque (as a general visual aesthetic), and the functions of those gazes appear to be significantly different, they in fact present similarities with those ideally galvanized by the katazoe. The main similarity is in the treatment of unstable boundaries and [dis]memberment. The types of gazes also present comparable anxieties concerning the act of looking.

Through examining Matsui’s paintings in the contexts of the western nude/classical body in Meiji-period Japanese academic art, anatomical dissection, suicide, and the aesthetics of the European grotesque and Japanese eroguro, I show that the strongest influence on her work is late nineteenth-century to mid-twentieth-century Japanese culture, particularly the “interwar period” of the 1920s and ’30s, and the immediate post-war period, a period in which Seiu was active.5

The reason Matsui’s influences can be found here is because the period was one of development of new ways of viewing the body and death, which included interest in, and aestheticized, various types of dismemberment. Moreover, these interests and aesthetics are motifs of modernity in this period rather than those of a backlash against it, which complicates understandings of her art that present it as a harmonious fusion of east and west, tradition and modernity. Matsui’s work and its influences also provide an excellent demonstration of Anthony Giddens’s suggestion that modernity is not a destruction of tradition but a negotiation between the two. It also coheres to some extent with John D. Szostak’s observations on “anti-bijin” 美人 nihonga 日本画 (“Japanese painting”) portraiture of the 1910s and ’20s in his study that also investigates “modern” versions of “traditional” subject matter and addresses the grotesque aesthetic identified in them.6

Appraisal of Matsui’s work can be divided into two types. On the one hand, her use of nihonga techniques and materials and of “traditional” Japanese subject matter is lauded by the art establishment and popular critics as a revival of these forms and contents. Her art is similarly celebrated for the way it mixes nihonga and yōga 西画 (“Western painting”) techniques and themes. The ongoing promotion of art that achieves this combination (in specific ways) is evidence of the sustained appeal of the policy expressed in the compound term wakon yōsa 和魂洋才 (“Japanese spirit, western technology”) employed during the late nineteenth century. Matsui is regularly featured on educational programs made by NHK (Japan Broadcasting Corporation) and her work has been exhibited at the Yokohama Museum of Art and San Francisco’s Asian Art Museum. Engaging with “traditional” figures, a collaboration saw motifs from her paintings used as patterns on kimono obi by the celebrated Yamaguchi Genbee 山口原兵衛 (b. 1948).

On the other hand, her work is also situated within the modern eroguro and gothic genres, and is often exhibited alongside both Japanese and non-Japanese works that celebrate these aesthetics, for example at Gallery Naruyama, a Tokyo-based gallery that has represented her. Her work also features on websites of often unsettlingly violent materials that appeal to enthusiasts of S&M and other subcultural fetishes. Matsui’s art, then, appeals on two levels simultaneously since it is implicated both in a high culture that promotes officially sanctioned national identity and in subversive subcultures. Two additional levels her work occupies are the

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5 This is not to disregard the connections to late twentieth-century art both Japanese and non-Japanese, such as works by Aida Makoto, Hans Bellmer, and Joël-Peter Witkin, that Matsui cites in her own doctoral dissertation and in interviews, but rather to draw to the surface a collection of submerged and largely overlooked influences. See Matsui Fuyuko, “Chikaku shinkai to shite no shikaku ni yotte kakeui sareru tsukaku no fukahi” (PhD diss., Tokyo University of the Arts, 2007). There are also some significant links with postwar sado-masochistic images, but these will, for the most part, be put aside in this paper.

6 Bijin literally means “beautiful women” and pictures of them (bijinga 美人画) were portrayals of their appearances and customs.

7 Szostak mentions Giddens in his introduction. My definition of “grotesque,” however, completely differs from Szostak’s. He employs the word as an adjective meaning “repulsive” in terms of marked divergence from beauty norms; mine is both broader and more specific, as explained below. John D. Szostak, “Fair is Foul, and Foul is Fair: Kyoto Nihonga, Anti-Bijin Portraiture and the Psychology of the Grotesque,” in Rethinking Japanese Modernism, ed. Roy Starrs (Leiden: Koninklijke Brill NV, 2012), 352.
(ostensibly) religious and secular, which may be correlated to the high/low-culture dualism mentioned, a point to which I will return. Art historian Yamamoto Satomi’s somewhat defensive insistence that “because of her command of the delicate sensitivity enabled by Nihonga techniques and materials, Matsui Fuyuko’s works never strike the viewer as merely bizarre or in bad taste, regardless of what their motifs may be,” hints by its apparent necessity at the potential for charges that might be brought against the odd co-existence of the elements we find in her works. Furthermore, it upholds the divide between “high” and “low” cultures. The assumption underlying this paper is that the distinctions between religious and secular and between high and low culture are neither simply drawn nor self-evident, and that the grotesque, the essence of which is “the sense that things that should be kept apart are fused together,” can be a reminder of this.

2. Scriptural origins of the kusōzu genre and Japanese kusōzu

The liberating power of the female body viewed as a grotesque corpse may be traced to an episode in the biography of the Buddha. Upon renunciation of palace life, he views the sleeping women of his harem, and by peering at them as bereft of beauty “unconscious, with their garments spread out unfastened . . . as if they were dead,” he apprehends the deceptive nature of appearance. In canonical Buddhist texts the contemplation of the sight of real cadavers in the process of decomposition is prescribed by the Satipatthāna Sutta (The Foundations of Mindfulness Sutra) where “The Nine Charnel Ground Contemplations” are found. It is also presented in the Aṅguttara Nikāya (The Numerical Discourses) and in the Mahāpiṇḍarī Pāramitā Sutta (Discourses on the Greater Wisdom Sutra) by Nāgārjuna (ca. 150–250) as a means to attain insight into the truth of impermanence. It is Tendai founder Zhiyi’s 智顕 (538–97) 《摩訶止觀, Discourse on Mahayana Meditation and Contemplation》 of 594 that formulates the contemplation as a practice.

No gender is specified for these morbid objects of meditation, but the explanation that a “pan-Indian tendency to hold women responsible for the arousal of desire,” as given by Elizabeth Wilson, is persuasive enough. She holds that both Buddhist and non-Buddhist

15 T.191, 46 121 122–16a and 122 10a–15a. Xuanzang’s 玄奘 (602–644) translation of Abhidharmakosāla Daibibasharon 阿毘達磨大比婆沙論 (The Great Abhidharma Discourse, 100–150 CE) also outlined the practice, and the Tendai monk Genshin’s 澤辯 (942-1017) influential Ojō yoshū 貞女要典 (Essentials of Salvation, 985) drew upon this.
16 In the Mahadukkhandha Sutta (The Greater Discourse on the Mass of Suffering), however, a decomposing female corpse in a charnel ground is used as a method of demonstrating the removal of attachment to material form. Bikkhu Bodhi and Bikkhu Nanamoli, Teachings of the Buddha, 185–84.

9 Interestingly, here it is form, rather than content, that determines the affiliation of a work to one or other culture level. Here, as long as certain materials are used and certain techniques are executed well, the work cannot as a whole be “bad taste.”

hrist texts that describe women as corpse-like beings painted up to tempt and to deceive led to the female gendering and sexualizing of the corpse in many post-Ashokan narratives and images. As such, the service performed by the image of the female in these tales is ostensibly twofold. It functioned to evoke disgust and horror and thereby to nullify (hetero)sexual desire, reinforcing vows of celibacy. At the same time, it worked to wrest practitioners free of delusional attachments to the physical body that, according to Buddhist doctrine, is but a composition of aggregates, and can be seen more widely as a depiction of "the structures of the [Buddhist] renouncer’s moral world, especially its ephemeral and intrinsically dissatisfying nature." In Matsu’s paintings of the disaggregated female corpse created in the early twenty-first century and modeled on earlier “Buddhist” presentations of the image, the second basic function remains operative, which accords with the artist’s intention. The former, probably just as prescriptive as the latter, is subverted by Matsu: that there is a gendered, eroticized, and titillating element to kusōzu, even or rather central to the images of the stages of decomposition and desecration, is fully acknowledged. Matsu’s renditions of kusōzu exploit the pornographic mechanism they share that turns on the exhibited process of beauty, exposure, degradation and ruin within a gendered hierarchy. It is my contention, however, that these functions, and many other key aesthetic and conceptual aspects of her images, emerge, as mentioned, within a surprising network of recent practices, artistic influences, and symbols. Before addressing these, I will discuss her initially more immediate inspiration and model, kusōzu in Japan. This description and discussion will help to show how she draws upon the model, and also how the model itself is already a fertile site for the grotesque and eroguro to evolve in part because it is already open to viewing and interpretation beyond what is prescribed.

Mentions of fujōkan 不浄観, meditation on transience (mujō 無常) through contemplation of the impurity of the body, appear in Buddhist sutras that had been imported from China to Japan, and in Japanese literature from around the ninth century. There is no direct evidence that fujōkan was practiced in Japan with real corpses, but textual descriptions and visual aids survive as evidence of surrogate meditation tools. For example, the Hokke gengi 華華玄義 (Profound Meaning of the Lotus Sutra, a sixth-century Tendai treatise by Zhiyi who taught the previously mentioned Maka shikan) categorizes meditation on a corpse as a beneficial practice and prescribes “making a space [bōsha 房舎] or a painting zuga [図画]” for the purpose. Zen monk Musō Soscki 無双寂石 (1275–1351) is reported to have made and meditated on a portrayal of the nine stages of corpse decomposition at the age of thirteen. In medieval Japanese Buddhist narratives, fujōkan was a potent literary theme as well, coming to denote the impermanence of romantic attachment; but in the extant visual representations (which far exceed the literary ones) the corpse is almost always female, and the portrayal far from romantic. The following discussion is intended to foreground the key characteristics of kusōzu in Japan, including the gendered body in it, and to indicate the related instability of the divide between sacred and secular concerning the function of the image and the type of viewing it invites. This will lead us into the modes of viewing that become more prominent in certain areas of early twentieth-century culture, with which Matsui plays in her own versions.

3. Gender, Image Function, and Ways of Seeing

Kusōzu have maintained a grip on spectators for many centuries and exercise a persistent allure for recent scholars of art history and Buddhist culture. In Japan, the paintings appeared from the early thirteenth century onward in the form of hanging scrolls and handscrolls. Their subject spread widely in the form of woodblock printed books from around the seventeenth century, signifying a shift to a lay and popular audience. For images of transience, the marked longevity and, in printed form, relatively wide circulation they enjoyed is ironic. Like the practice of meditation on a corpse, they were ostensibly intended as meditation aids. However,

18 Wilson, “The Female Body as a Source of Horror and Insight in Post-Ashokan Indian Buddhism,” 95.
19 Such surrogate pictures are found elsewhere, such as in the Central Asian Toyuk grottoes.
20 T.1716, 35,727 26a-28a.
22 Pandey, “Desire and Disgust,” 197.
23 Its appearance as a literary trope in Japan is rare; in India it was employed far more often. Pandey, “Desire and Disgust,” 196.
Yamamoto notes that, at least during the Muromachi period (1392–1573), handscrolls of the theme seem to have been popular among the upper classes and that, while the careful record of their production dates indicates they were used for specific Buddhist rites, the combination of Chinese arts and Japanese poetry they showcase indicates that they may have been used on a "semi-secular, semi-religious occasion" like a Buddhist-related linked-verse meeting. A citation in a seventeenth-century fan design by Tawaraya Sōtsu’s (fl. early seventeenth century) of one stage of corpse disintegration from a Kamakura-period (1185–1333) rendition also suggests that the content was not strictly confined to a monastic meditation context and that it may have been well known. Two dogs were depicted from the corpse, likely for their lively poses.

The slide (or, rather, the false distinction) between religious and secular is already evident; we will find it again in the twentieth-century kusōzu renderings and their receptions. Kaminishi Ikumi also takes pains to avoid positing a stable function for the images and distinguishes between the ways in which Tendai, Zen, and Pure Land monks, as well as laypeople, all used the images. A multiplicity of functions emerge, including solitary meditation, group sermons focusing on impermanence and/or female impurity for the purpose of conversion, and broadly, as representations of the human realm. Kaminishi likens the process in which social and cultural factors produce interpretations of the nine-stage decomposition to a "whisper down the lane" game whereby the "original meaning" is replaced with issues and problems concerning the female gender.

Contemplation of the nine aspects of either a real or depicted corpse was called kusōkan 九相觀 (or fujōkan) (the broader category of the contemplation of impurity). The images displayed a single cadaver—almost always female—decomposing in nine stages (with occasionally a preceding, living state shown), gorged on by wild dogs and crows, and finally reduced in the ninth stage, called "disjointing," to skeletal dismemberment. The bodies are sexualized: aside from the gendering and exposure of the body, the parts revealed and consumed by the scavengers are the genitalia, often the breasts, and sometimes the (exposed and culturally eroticized) neck. The Shōjūraiōgi 聖観来迎寺 painting, jindōfujōsozu 入道不浄相図 (Painting of the Impure Aspect of the Human Realm) from the late thirteenth century (figure 1), is the earliest example of a painted kusōzu and shows the decay of the gradually exposed body depicted in stages from distension to disintegration into dust, and surrounded by canine and avian predators. The paintings do not necessarily accord precisely with textual precedents either in terms of imagery or the order in which the disintegration is shown, but the Kyushu National Museum's Kusōzu kan 九相図巻 (Picture Scroll of the Nine Stages) from the early fourteenth century (the earliest extant standalone kusōzu) largely conforms to the description by Zhiyi in the Maka shikan. Zhiyi’s stages are as follows: chō 腸相 (distention), esō 壊相 (tearing), kechizō 血塗相 (bleeding), nöransō 腦髄相 (rotting), shōsō 青殻相 (discoloration), tansō 噪相 (being scavenged and consumed), sansō 散相 (scattering), kotsusō 骨相 (white bones), and shōso 燃相 (bones burnt to ash). An extra stage of newly dead is often added in the paintings.

Let us consider the issue of gender in these images since it is significant in understanding kusōzu as expressive of a grotesque aesthetic. As mentioned, post-Ashokan Indian Buddhist narratives gendered the corpse female, and a woman is depicted here even though the Maka shikan does not specify a female corpse. In Japan, the setsuwa 説話 tale genre too presented it unequivocally as female. Even in Six Realms mandala paintings the human figure, switching sex as it passes over the "bridge through life," is transformed into a woman in the depiction of the death stage, where


25 Sōtsu’s motifs are drawn from the Kyushu National Museum kusōzu emaki 九相絵巻 (Picture Scroll of Poems on the Nine Stages). The fan is part of a fan-decorated folding screen (sennō hantaku byōbu 布面装付屏風) at Daigoji, Kyoto. See Yasumura Toshinobu, “Mottō: Katachi yokereba subete yoshi,” Geijutsu shinchō, April 2014, 51, 55.

26 Kaminishi, "Dead Beautiful," 514, 521.

27 Hereafter referred to as “the Shōjūraiōgi kusōzu.”

28 This is one of a set of paintings that depict the rokuudō (six paths of transmigration) described in Genshin’s Ojo yoshū where Zhiyi’s Maka shikan is mentioned. The set is said to have originally belonged to the imperial palace. See Nakano Genzō, Rokudōke no kenkyū (Kyoto: Tankōsha, 1989), 295-8.


30 See, for example, the thirteenth-century collections Hoshinshō by Kamo no Chōmei 舟尾明 (1155-1216) and the Kankyo nō tomo, mentioned above.
she appears in a wasteland as food for dogs and crows. This scene is the most affective of the kusōzu stages. I propose that this scene cannot ideologically accommodate a male body because the gendering and eroticization of the tool of enlightenment is aimed at a spectator seeking to experience the very opposite—closed and contained life—in their own body. If this were not so, a male body would be just as apt a subject in these images as a female one. Still, there are exceptions. A late-Edo-period series in five hanging scrolls kept at Saiganji in Kyoto shows a male corpse. Nonetheless, the male corpse is presented together with a female one, and while the presence of the male is unusual, and therefore of interest, the immediate impression is that these are a couple. Since the image indicates a heterosexual connection it does not ultimately subvert the significance of gender in kusōzu as it has so far been discussed. This is not to say that the viewer was always a heterosexual male. Viewers of etoki at temples during the Obon period were of both sexes, and an Edo-period printed picture book, Ninin bikuni (Two Nuns), by Suzuki Shōzan 鈴木正三 (1579–1655) shows two nuns observing a corpse that is presented in decomposition stages in the style of kusōzu. Yet they are mourning, in contrast to the non-monastic male figures in the tale, who also view a corpse. But these are exceptions to the rule.

In the 1651 Butsudōji picture scroll, a male spectator appears—notably, an aristocrat rather than a monk. The "kaimami" of this male figure is indicative of the slippage, which Yamamoto has noted, between sacred and secular in kusōzu. Kaimami is a particular type of viewing—literally "through the fence peeping"—and it is a signature of the aristocratic, ro-

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31 Examples can be seen in the many Kumano kanjin jikai mandara (Visualization of the Heart and Ten Worlds of Kumano) paintings. These were paintings related to pilgrimage at the sacred site of Kumano. They depicted the ten realms of rebirth as well as a bridge-like path along which a human figure progresses in age toward death.


34 Yamamoto, "Death and Disease in Medieval Japanese Painting."
makes it pointedly amenable to interpretation as a "grotesque" body. Kanda and others note that such landscape elements cannot be located in scriptural sources but rather draw on the eleventh-century *kusōzu* (九相模 poem) attributed to Kūkai. This is relevant to the discussion since the nature of the landscape as well as its position in a territorial configuration of urban, wasteland, and mountainous elements are aspects that produce meaning for the *kusōzu* female body.

The type of landscape depicted in the paintings suggests the links between *fujōkan*, the female nature of the corpse, and sexual desire. The arboreal landscape of all seasons in the late-thirteenth-century Shōju Raigōji *kusōzu* is, as Kanda describes, a metaphor for transience and attention to the mutability of the seasons, and their distinguishing characteristics are hardly unusual in Japanese art as a whole. Yet with its pervasively dark, dull coloring it serves also, she evocatively states, "to convey the gloomy atmosphere of these defiled domains tainted by violence, illness, torture, misery, and a zoo of evils." However, the addition of landscape should be noted not only in terms of content (the symbolism of trees, plants, and flowers) but also in terms of position. Both aspects are a means of signifying boundaries (or lack thereof): between unbounded nature (female, animal, flora, the viewed, the territorially peripheral/marginal) and bounded human (male, the viewer, territorially central). The previously mentioned *Kankyo no tomo* is a story of a monk who practices *fujōkan* on a corpse, relies for its narrative power on the description of places and their relative positions. The monk vanishes from his mountain temple each night, returning dispiritedly in the mornings. Both his absence during the night and his forlorn expression are read by other monks as evidence that he is visiting, in the foothills, a woman from whom he is unhappy to be separated. However, upon being followed, it transpires that he is visiting the Rendaino 鎮台野 region (present-day Kita Ward, Kyoto), where many cemeteries were located, to contemplate an exposed corpse. In the assumptions of the monastic community, the locations of the moun-

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35 Charlotte Eubanks notes this in her analysis of a tale about the contemplation of impurity in *Kankyo no tomo* and remarks on the presentation of the disintegrating female body as a spectacle.

36 Kanda, "Behind the Sensationalism," 34-5. The setsuwa tales may be supposed to have provided the landscape images as well, though these landscape elements also drew heavily on Chinese and Japanese poems that described the nine stages with correlating landscape, plant, and animal images.

37 Ibid., 31.

38 Ibid.

taintop and its foot, day and night, life and death, are
gendered sacred/male and profane/female.\(^40\) Through
this series of oppositions, sex with a woman is tied for
the male to the trope of “visiting” a corpse. Although no
landscape is described pictorially, designated sites and
the distance between them are an effective means of
transmitting meaning. There is an emphasis on a pure
center and the distance from it. Likewise in the paint-
ings and prints, the female corpse, rendered as increa-
singly and ultimately boundary-less (decomposing) and
as merging with its marginal environment, contrasts
with an outer (often implied) territory that is delineated
by imposed and artificial borders: the territory of life,
centrality, and health from which it has been cast. In
threatening to join with it through physical transforma-
tion (disintegration), the female image also hints at the
threatening to join with it through physical transforma-
tion (disintegration), the female image also hints at the

The aesthetic trope of “the unbounded” is of central
importance to the Japanese literary and visual iterations
of fujōkan and kusōzu, and later, as I show, to the “gro-
tesque” in modernity. This is why kusōzu resonates with
eroguro. As I have suggested above, “the unbounded” is
expressed through the female, the landscape, and their
iconography and positions. Identifying the trope of the
unbounded helps to explain why these images have re-
mained powerful: they are carriers of the grotesque—
the conceptual and artistic aesthetic of the threat to
boundaries. In the post-Ashokan literary narratives of
female corpses as meditation objects as explored by Wil-
son, “grotesque figurations of the female body are in-
strumental to men who seek total closure [as a physical
and mental ideal promoted by monastic training]. Such
closure is out of the question for the body that serves as

is, on the contrary, and largely as a result of its sexed
and gendered nature, an affirmation of one’s own “total
closure.” Bernard Faure has noted that in some con-
ceptions “the ideal body of the Buddhist practitioner
was a closed body, without ‘outflows’ (a metaphorical
designation for defilements),”\(^42\) and that the physical-
ity of this sealed state was/is difficult or impossible for
women.\(^43\) The unclosed body in the Buddhist tradition
is presented as both soteriological/enlightening, and as
a “spectacle.” Indeed, by being exposed and viewed it is
ipso facto a spectacle. We have already observed that the
depiction of non-monastic viewers makes the image a
spectacle. Connotations of titillation and low culture in
the term “spectacle” are, as we will see, apposite too in
kusōzu and in literary descriptions of fujōkan from the
beginning of the twentieth century onward.

Visual Culture, and in Itō Sei’s Work

Given the persistence of the genre, the apparent ab-
ence of kusōzu from the Meiji period (1868–1912)
ward seems anomalous, as Yamamoto has pointed
out. It had enjoyed relatively consistent production
from around the thirteenth century onward. Painters
of the Kamakura period produced the works already
mentioned, and the subject matter was taken up by
the Edo-period lineage of Kanō painters, specifically, Kanō
Einō 狩野永正 (1631–97), as well as by Kikuchi Yosai
菊池照斎 (1788–1878) and Kawanabe Kyōsai 河鍋暁斎
(1831–89).\(^44\) Yamamoto offers as possible reasons
for the Meiji-period neglect of the subject the rapid
modernization of Japan, which necessitated discarding
as artistic subject matter certain subjects deemed
inappropriate, and the increased quarantining of death
itself from post-Meiji everyday life. Additionally, we
can assume that, although Buddhism itself came under
attack, the de-emphasis on kusōzu was a result of an
alignment of Buddhist art with Greek and Roman art
in the attempt to put Japanese art on a footing with
Western art, as appropriate to a modern power (indeed,
to push it into that new category). But clearly, only a

\(^{40}\) At this time, women were excluded from mountains, which had
been made the sacred sites of Buddhist temple complexes and
were homes of mountain gods. For a recent treatment of this
and the scholarship that focuses on it, see Lindsey E. DeWitt, “A
Mountain Set Apart: Female Exclusion, Buddhism, and Tradition
at Modern Ōminesan, Japan” (PhD diss., University of California,
Los Angeles, 2015). At some sites the ban remains today.

\(^{41}\) Wilson, “The Female Body as a Source of Horror and Insight in
Post-Ashokan Indian Buddhism,” 92; my italics.

\(^{42}\) Bernard Faure, The Red Thread: Buddhist Approaches to Sexual-

\(^{43}\) Ibid., 58-62.

\(^{44}\) Yamamoto, “Matsui Fuyuko, Kyūshū de kusōzu o miru,” Geijutsu
shinchō, October 2012, 115.
certain kind of Buddhist art became Japan’s “classical.”

The apparent disappearance of kusōzu then, appears to mark a sudden break between the premodern and modern—and this contributes, no doubt, to the common linkage of Matsui’s work with the earliest premodern examples of the genre. On the other hand, however, Yamamoto does identify aspects of the works of novelists such as erguro writer Yumeno Kyūsaku (1889–1936) and Mishima Yukio (1925–70) as kusōzu-inspired. She also introduces nihonga painter Nakamura Gakuryō 中村岳陵 (1890–1969) as proprietor of a fourteenth-century kusōzu painting. Upon his son’s departure for the battlefield during the Pacific War he displayed it, informing the young Tanio that he would likely end up “like this” (but that this potential fate was nonetheless a thing of noble beauty).45 This is the painted hand-scroll, mentioned above, that is kept at the Kyushu National Museum today, and the work upon which Matsui most closely bases her series. Yamamoto presents these instances of kusōzu “inspiration” as anomalies in a period from which the genre had largely disappeared. To the list may be added the work of Tanizaki Jun’ichirō 谷崎潤一郎 (1886–1965), who details a fujōkan practice of corpse contemplation in his 1949 novella Shōsha Shigemoto no haha 少将滋幹の母 (Captain Shigemoto’s Mother), and, more generally, the writings of Edogawa Rampo 江戸川乱歩 (1894–1965), both discussed below.

Yet there are also notable and unexamined variations of the kusōzu found in the art of Seiu which I present here as an essential aspect of the development of this genre. An illustrator, painter, theatre reviewer, and historian, Seiu was a significant figure in popular Tokyo culture of the early to mid-twentieth century. In many ways he represents a development of the shunga 春画 (“spring [erotic] pictures”) and yōreiga 幽霊画 (“ghost pictures”) genres after Tsukioka Yoshitoshi 月岡芳年 (1839–92), and produced work that represents a stage of the flow and development of these two genres into pictorial and photographic pornography in Japan. The work of those who took up these genres was a product of negotiation between the suppression of sexual material and changes in society, technology, and media (such as the growth of visual journalism). One among them, Seiu occupied a prominent position in the early stages of erguro and he remains popular today among S&M enthusiasts with the dubious title of “father” of Japanese rope bondage (縛り/shibari) and pornographic magazines. He is known best as a semeshi 貴め繪師 (“artist of [scenes of] torture”). The content of his work appealed to the earliest erguro and pornographic magazines and he was employed as an illustrator by, among others, Kitan Karabu 奇譚クラブ (Bizarre Stories Club), a post-war magazine publication that specialized in S&M. Its output was vast and, along with newspaper illustrations, paintings, ink works, and theatrical stage props for entertainments in Asakusa (where he was born and lived), he produced illustrated books on Edo and Tokyo customs. He was a compulsive compiler of images and information about all kinds of objects from lampstands, kites, and tea-trays to street signs and children’s games, and an enthusiastic recorder of the spectacles and sideshows (misemono 見世物) of the city. Visual technologies such as kaleidoscopes, zoetropes, shadow puppets, and cinema fascinated him. The larger and better-known part of his work, however, was his portrayal of women being tortured, usually rope-bound—for him a seemingly inexhaustible subject that he presented in mitate-e 見立て絵 or “intervisual” portrayals of seasonal customs, scenes from popular theatre, and episodes from “history” and literature. The tortured women in his works were almost always presented as spectacles, with an audience depicted for the publically displayed bodies. When an audience is not provided by direct depiction, montage-like composition guides the viewer. Two pictures in his book Rongo tsūkai 論語通解 (Explanation of Text, 1930), for example, present the violation and consumption by dogs of women hauled from their graves juxtaposed with a parodic spectacle: a Buddhist priest conducts an etoki of a huge painting of a vagina to a congregation of phaluses.46 The scene of scavenging by dogs is a reference to kusōzu (and the depiction of animals aroused by viewing human “sexuality” recalls shunga motifs), while both pictures reference Buddhist practices. Seiu’s more fully developed kusōzu paintings similarly present the disintegration of women’s bodies as forms of spectacle and as sexual assaults, and his work is an important ex-


47 ibid Seiu, Yasuda Korekushon 5; Rongo tsūkai Jigoku no onna (Tokyo: Ginza shokan, 1930), n.p.
ample of the way in which kusōzu, already associated with necrophilia,48 merged with the violent, sexual imagery of eroguro.

Rakujō 落城 (Fallen Castle; hereafter Fallen Castle; figure 2) is a hanging-scroll painting of a sadistic scene of female torture, likely from around the 1950s.49 It appears to parody a type of Shuten dōji 酒吞童子, a demon known for killing and eating noblewomen, painting that had begun around 1522 with the rendition of the theme by Kanō Motonobu 賀野元信 (1476–1559).50 In this famous tale, Raikō 豪(1587–1630) and his warriors save kidnapped daughters of noble families from the eponymous cannibalistic demon. Keller Kimbrough has suggested that the charnel scene introduced in Motonobu’s work was understood by its Edo-period audience as a kind of kusōzu.51 Seiu’s painting shows five warriors and their leader in a rocky outcrop. A castle hovers in the misty background, and the middle ground is occupied by women in progressive states of undress, roped to trees and rocks. Instead of saving the women, the warriors are thrashing, stabbing, and sexually assaulting them (figure 3). In the lower register a bleeding and bloated corpse lies in the ravine, being consumed by dogs and observed by one of the warriors. Here, several of the most gruesome stages of fujōkan are combined, and the contemplator is a non-monastic. The explicit inclusion of the kusōzu scene in Seiu’s apparent parody of Shuten dōji would support Kimbrough’s proposal, but it also demonstrates the development of the reception of this genre: it has slipped into the genre of eroguro. In fact, Fallen Castle can in its entirety be considered a mitate-e rendering of kusōzu, where the gradual exposure of the living female bodies from their clothing replaces the disintegration of the dead body, where the males carry out a purposeful destruction that is presented as the inevitable work of nature in kusōzu, and where the contemplator of the (final) corpse is non-monastic, and

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48 See, for example, the tale of Rājadatta in the commentary to the Theragāthā. See Wilson’s discussion in “The Female Body as a Source of Horror and Insight in Post-Ashokan Indian Buddhism,” 86.
49 In the collection of Tarō Fukutomi. A photograph is published in Geijutsu shinchō, April 1995, 14, with a detail of it on page 15.
50 Kept in the Suntory Museum of Art in Tokyo.

visibly as rapacious as the dogs that accompany him.

Seiu was plainly interested in kusōzu: a complete series appears on one page in Bijin ranbu 美人乱舞 (Beautiful Women Dancing Wildly), his 1932 collection (figure 4). The female figures are lightly sketched in ink and blue color, and summarily rendered in terms of iconography. A gradual bloating indicates the progression but no image of the rotting and opening of the body is included, and while a single crow stands for the consumption scene, instead of pecking at the fleshy body it perches by the totally disintegrated skeleton. Two passages that describe the meaning of the genre according to the cavalier artist are embedded into the sketch:

There is a [type of] picture called a kusōkan that depicts the appearance in death of Ono no Koma-

chi. It was the motive of Sākyamuni [Buddha] to awaken ordinary people to the skin-deep beauty of so-called beautiful women. But generally speaking, those (both stupid and intelligent) who look just want to XXXX those [beautiful] women. Hey, let’s just live—since we can’t guess the future!

The kusōzu scene of scavenging/consumption (tansō 食相) appears in another painting (figure 5). It is my opinion that this painting is, in its entirety, kusōzu mitate-e, though it has never been classified as such. It is part of a set that was commissioned around 1951 by Matsui

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52 The ninth-century poet famed for her beauty with whose identity the kusōzu figure came to be associated by the early thirteenth century. See Chin, “The Gender of Buddhist Truth,” 296–306.
53 In the original text, two triangles appear to connote “intercourse,” which I translate as four Xs.
Rebellion. The painting bears the delicate liveliness of stroke that characterizes Seiu’s work, the skilled portrayal of contorted bodies, as well as attention to background detail. It is in the same vein as Fallen Castle: the scene is a craggy wasteland, it purports to be a depiction of a war atrocity, and women are shown hanging or fallen from trees, attacked by birds and dogs, and here, by snakes as well. A male is portrayed as the perpetrator of violence. There are nine female bodies in total, surely parodying the nine stages of disintegration. They are arranged as fully dressed in the upper right in gorgeous kimono with hair done up in the shimadamage Edō-period topknot style that Seiu favored, through stages of bondage to a tree branch in the mid-left section, to several prostrate states in partial or complete nakedness. One woman is subjected to a biting dog between her legs, echoing the depiction in Fallen Castle of forced cunnilingus by a warrior; both recall the Shōjūrōgōi kusōzu as well as the consumption of female bodies in Shuten dōji by the unwary warriors, and the above-mentioned depiction of necrophilia. The line of women zigzags down the scroll ending at bottom left, where a corpse scavenged by crows and dogs lies. Seiu probably saw no contradiction in selecting parts of kusōzu to arrange into his works; however, he was clearly aware of the Buddhist connotations of the genre, as his kusōkan text shows, and since this is one of a set of ten paintings of women being tortured in different ways it seems highly probable that he conceived the set itself as a grand-scale kusōzu. One anomalous painting in the set, a rather simple picture of an oiran courtesan, supports this suggestion. It likely opened the series, just as a living beauty sometimes began a kusōzu series, heightening by contrast the impending disintegration.

Although production of kusōzu indeed seems to have decreased, these examples may be considered evidence of the resilience rather than the withering of a subject that was officially discarded but survived in the subterranean domain of ephemeral and subsersive media, including that of Buddhist temples, continuing to exert influence on the imagination. What does seem clear is that kusōzu were not being produced for ostensibly unequivocal “Buddhist” purposes (such as meditation or for conversion/edification narratives). The factors that Yamamoto proposed as related to kusōzu during and after the Meiji period are persuasive: the gothic/grotesque novelists, the beautification of (female) death, particularly suicide, and war experience. All three of these are concerned with

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54 Matsui Daei, present head priest of Ryōsenji. Interview by author, Ryōsenji, Izu, August 3, 2014. Matsui had a personal connection with Seiu through his wife’s hometown temple parish in Chiba, and the relationship between the two is attested by a conversation between them in the 1951 inaugural issue of Amatôria magazine, an eroguro publication.
In Japan, previous and contemporary endeavors at rendering the unclothed human body were “in the realm of the particular and the sensual,” as Jaqueline Berndt puts it, such as those, indeed, of anatomical illustrations and models, the sensationally revealed bodies of temple or street fair spectacles, and “living dolls” (iki ningyō 生き人形) (all three of which were often one and the same). The ideal nude was a rejection of the realistic flaws of the human body.

There are two principal ways in which the early Japanese nude is (counter-intuitively) connected with these two “lower” culture renderings, and in fact more fundamentally to the grotesque. One way is a result of the above-mentioned attempt to purge the “divine” aspects and the other is a result of some of the types of European influences in the works of Meiji- and Taishō-era sculptors and painters. What we see here, again, is that Matsui’s work is not only or even predominantly a product of a combination of two distinct “Western” and “Japanese” cultures. It is a product of the early-twentieth-century formation of identity, the negotiations with European culture that this involved, and a subculture that was produced from it. Setting aside for a moment its cultural specificity, Mary Russo’s comparison of the classical and the grotesque bodies in European culture is relevant here. She writes: 58

The images of the grotesque body are precisely those which are abjected from the bodily canons of classical aesthetics. The classical body is transcendent and monumental, closed, static, self-contained, symmetrical, and sleek; it is identified with the “high” or official culture of the Renaissance and later, with the rationality, individualism, and normalizing aspirations of the bourgeoisie. The grotesque body is open, protruding, irregular, secreting, multiple, and changing, and it is identified with non-official “low” culture. 59

The (official) fading out of the “kusōzu body,” if it can be so termed, is perhaps unsurprising then, because the

55 Dōshin Satō, Modern Japanese Art and the Meiji State: The Politics of Beauty (Los Angeles: The Getty Research Institute, 2011), 264–65. However, in later eroguro, especially in its postwar phase, the nude is imbued with religious meaning, particularly that of martyrdom and punishment.

56 The dead body could now be opened, observed, mapped, and had no supernatural element.


58 It is also useful in comparing with the “closed” body of the viewer that is constituted by the “open” body of the kusōzu subject, which Wilson described.

original “grotesque” is anti-classical and anti-ideal. The term itself originally derived from “grotto-esque” or “grottesco” and its origins are found in Nero’s Domus Aurea (“Golden Palace”), an imperial Roman villa and its rooms—(mis-)perceived as “grottoes” because underground—excavated in Rome during the fifteenth century. The structure was originally vast, labyrinthine, and filled with lavish manmade land- and waterscapes. “Grotesque” denoted, in the Renaissance, the style of Fabullus’s decorative wall and ceiling frescoes that were discovered there, a major feature of which was the fantastical, playful, and ornate fusion of human body parts with those of plants, birds, animals, fish, cameos, and architectural motifs, or hybrid entities such as hippoc- riffs and winged Victories. Such bodies contrasted with the classical, perfect, whole and bounded body. This “grottesco” appealed to Renaissance artists (and later to Neoclassicists of the late eighteenth century) and was mainly employed in architectural ornamentation, frescoes, framework, and illuminated manuscripts, its application indicating it was materially marginal, and borderline in form, content, and function, just as its place of origin was submerged and otherworldly.

The original palace and its decoration has seemingly little to do with the later uses of the term “grotesque”: Bakhtin’s carnivalesque, unbounded body, Kristeva’s abject, or Ruskin’s complex elaboration of the aesthetic (indeed, the term has come to umbrella a variety of expressive modalities). It may be suggested, however, that the grotesque as signifier of monstrosity is related as much to the unnatural fusions found in the “grotto” interiors as to the position of the grottos themselves. Grotesque monsters are, after all, inhabitants that emerge from dark, sinister, buried places. For example, both Gothic architectural ruin and grotto are related to the atmospheric power on their evocation of a former place of origin was submerged and otherworldly. For example, both (Gothic) architectural ruin and grotto are related to much to the unnatural fusions found in the “grotto” interiors as to the position of the grottos themselves. Grotesque monsters are, after all, inhabitants that emerge from dark, sinister, buried places. For example, both (Gothic) architectural ruin and grotto are related to

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cultural channel. If this is so, one can also suggest that in late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Japan the classical, ideal body was itself, paradoxically, monstrous and grotesque. This means that Japan’s grotesque differs significantly from its Western predecessor, and this was produced through a confluence of other literary, visual, and historical phenomena. Additionally, it was in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that a preoccupation with the female corpse in visual culture became evident in Europe in relation to developments in science and medicine. There is a bifurcation when it comes to how this visual vocabulary of the broken body developed: we find that the kusōzu, as part of a grotesque aesthetic, is articulated in a twilight language, while the dismembered body becomes part of official visual culture (as well as part of subculture). It is precisely these reappearances, and the double cultural positioning in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that inform Matsui’s work and to which she succeeds.

6. Kusōzu and the Erotic-Grotesque

Through visual analysis and elaboration of context these strands of influence can be teased out of Matsui’s work. The binding theme of Matsui’s kusōzu series is suicide and it informs a number of her other paintings, such as those that depict Aokigahara 青木ヶ原, a real forest notorious as a site of suicide. Its role in her kusōzu series is less obvious and we must turn to her own written commentaries to find the intended meaning: the series is illustrative of a series of suicides, each for a different reason. There are also motifs of pregnancy, anatomical dissection, artificial landscape, and Christian figures. These, along with the interest in suicide, differentiate her work from premodern kusōzu, and contribute to a visual statement of boundary transgression that is at root grotesque.

Before giving specific examples, a summary of the development of this aesthetic is necessary. Eroguro nansensu エロゲロナンセンス (the “nansensu,” or “nonsense,” component has today been more or less discarded) is a term used to describe a mass-culture decadent artistic and literary sensibility that originated around the late 1920s and early ’30s in Japan, the “interwar period.” Described as “the prewar, bourgeois cultural phenomenon that devoted itself to explorations of the deviant, the bizarre, and the ridiculous,” its subject matter included the first Japanese forays into the genres of detective and mystery fiction, as well as pornography, news, graphic art often presented as montage, and articles on sexology and anthropology. Elements of these were often melded together. The word gurotesuku グロテスク held similarities to its western counterpart. In the first issue in 1929 of the popular magazine Ryōki garaka 獇奇華刊 (Curiosity-Hunting Pictorial), which published this sort of material, the characters 好色的 (kōshokuteki or erotic) and 怪奇的 (kaijiteki, meaning difficult to explain or repulsive in appearance), and written as a compound, are glossed in katakana script as erochikku gurotesuku. Ryōki (“curiosity-hunting”) itself is described in a 1931 dictionary of new slang as orengeikku nansensu, or “trash literature and art concerned with what was conceived of as perverse and improper desire, but mixed too with themes of detection and mystery.” The work of author Edogawa Rampo exemplified the eroguro. Leftist intellectuals of the 1920s and ’30s considered it an effect of urban modernity, providing ever-higher and stranger stimulation to the bored urban dweller/consumer. It is possible to trace the sensibility, though not the term that later describes it, back to the muzan-e 無残絵 (“pictures of cruelty”) of Tsukioka Yoshitoshi, previously mentioned, and before him to Utagawa Kuniyoshi 歌川国芳 (1798–1861). Suzuki Sabadī flips the origins somewhere between these designations, in the period immediately following the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–05. Greg-


ory Pfugfelder’s definition of the three-part term is useful.\(^6\)

Each of the three elements implied a perversion, as it were, of conventional values. The celebration of the “erotic” (ero) in its myriad forms constituted a rejection of the Meiji dictum that sexuality was unsuited for public display or representation unless it conformed to the narrow standards of “civilized morality.” The elevation of the “grotesque” (guro) betrayed a similar disregard for prevailing esthetic codes, with their focus on traditional canons of beauty and concealment of the seamier sides of existence. Finally, the valorization of the “nonsensical” (nansensu) signaled a discontent with the constraining nature of received moral and epistemological certitudes.\(^7\)

As eroguro developed away from a Taishô-period efflorescence, especially in its post-war manifestations, it grew dark, perverse, and increasingly centered on eroticized boundary violation, dismemberment, fusion with nature, and simulacra, and it was expressed in many ways in nikutai bungaku 肉体文学 (“flesh literature”). The latter, as Douglas Slaymaker and others have shown, was conceived in its time as an expression of (often sexual) bodily liberation in defiance of the kokutai 国体 (body politic) to which its proponents felt the Japanese (male) body had been sacrificed during the Pacific War. But it inevitably oppressed the female body in its own liberation.\(^8\) In many ways the manifestation of eroguro in the post-war period was a resurgence of its earlier character, as Suzuki indicates, and its appearance in both periods was as resistance to an imposed morality.\(^9\) In both periods, it was clearly an expression of resistance to bodily (particularly sexual) norms, but should not be considered an expression of the liberation of “natural” sexuality. Indeed, commentators, historians included, who claim it to be so dehistoricize it and obscure the constructions commandeered by the genre. The present-day manifestation of eroguro as it has developed in Japan (and elsewhere) since the end of the Pacific War might be described in English by the compounds porn-horror or torture-porn.

A perfect example of the combination of suicide, classical body, and artificial landscape is found in Tanizaki Jun’ichirô’s fake Nero palace in his short story Konjiki no shi 金色の死 (The Golden Death) of 1914. The story was based on The Domain of Arnheim (1847) by Edgar Allan Poe, whose gothic and grotesque work was an influence on Tanizaki, and both of which in turn fed into Edogawa Rampo’s 1926 Panoramatô kitan パノラマ島奇談 (Strange Tale of Panorama Island). Rampo revered both writers. All three stories feature constructed landscapes that are at once astonishingly beautiful and horrifying; the aesthete inhabitants of those in Tanizaki and Rampo’s works both die in glorious suicides, at the heights of ecstasy in their artificial paradises. These two tales seem to draw on the Domus Aurea as the constructed and palatial paradise par excellence; Rampo’s paradise was partly populated by people fused surgically with animals: the Roman decorative fancies come to life.\(^10\) Tanizaki’s mansion is filled with replicas of famous works and monuments of Western culture, statues of nude women, centaurs, and at its center, Rodin’s Eternal Idol.\(^11\)

Tanizaki’s production of sadomasochism-themed fiction makes him much a part of this evolving subculture. Tanizaki was also interested in kusozu, and he depicted the corpse meditation in his novella, mentioned briefly above, Shôshô Shigemoto no hana, a 1949 work written in the Occupation period (1945–52) that explores a number of eroguro obsessions. Here, fujôkan is performed by a layman (again, the monastic figure, implied or explicit, is absent) who visits a “changeling ground on the edge of a moor;”\(^12\) the end point of a journey from the center of town through increasingly ruined residences to a peripheral wasteland that is described

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6. Which, incidentally, maps quite well onto Bataille’s definition of the “informe” that was an important part of his theories on disgust.


11. Tanigawa Atushi discusses this story, drawing attention to its links with Rampo, Mishima, the body, and suicide. Tanigawa, Haikyo no bikaku, 80–101.

in sequential, detailed stages, making use of the distance that is conceptually and often visually or literally evoked by kusōzu and necessary to their power. Unlike those ideal monks of the past— the implied audience of kusōzu or practitioner of fujōkan—Tanzákī’s character eventually admits he finds no enlightenment, nor can he forget the woman he loved and whose memory he sought to erase through female-corpses contemplation. Before long he loses himself in wine instead of graveyards, and replaces his sutras with poetry. Here, we are once more far removed from the conventional or ideal fujōkan, and in the realm of dark sexual desire.

Exploration of the eroticized dismembered (military) body in Edogawa Rampo’s 1929 short story Imonushi 蜥蜴 (Caterpillar) is also exemplary of the eroguro aesthetic (the disintegrating military body in the short Edgar Allan Poe story, The Man That Was Used Up (1839), doubtless an influence). Reception of Rampo’s story during the Pacific War changed and it was banned by Japanese authorities in 1939 for its unpatriotic depiction of a quadriplegic veteran: Matsui explores a question that occupies these two writers in her “Iya karai akkon wa kōsaku shite mōjō ni hashiru” no tame no shasei jishakazu: Shishi setsudan 『ややかるい圧痕は交錯して網状に走る』のための写生勝分図: 四肢切断 (Sketch for Light Indentations Mingle and Run in All Directions, Anatomy Chart: All Four Limbs Cut Off, 2008): where is humanity located in the body? The only sign of it in the remaining collection of organs is a section of nose. Toward the end of the Allied Occupation, and with changes in censorship laws, mutilated bodies and even fetishes images of seppuku 切腹 (ritual self-disembowelment) were depicted in early S&M magazines, but the cast was an all-female one. One figure whose work features in early issues was Seiu, previously discussed. Seiu’s intense reworking of Yoshitoshi’s Ōshi Adachigahara hitotsu no ie no zu 奥州安達が原ひとつの家の図 (The Lonely House at Adachigahara in Ôshū)—a reworking that remains renowned as instrumental in the development of the visual culture of rope bondage and S&M, and to which I return below—is testament to his admiration. Rampo was a fan of Yoshitoshi too, and knew and his work. The Edo-era gothic horror expressed in the works of Yoshitoshi was revived in the post-war period: films with supernatural themes like Ugetsu monogatari 雨月物語 (Tales of Moonlight and Rain, 1953) and Yabu no naka no kuroneko 彼の中の黒猫 (The Black Cat in the Grove, 1968) were explicit critiques of war and related gender issues. It may be that the literal ruination of much of Japan, particularly the structures and infrastructure of its urban spaces, as well as the historically military connotations of seppuku contributed to the darker eroguro of this period. Full exploration of this suggestion, however, is well beyond the parameters of this paper. More to my interest here is that Matsui’s work indicates a wide network of associations with eroguro, an aesthetic that resonates with kusōzu as a “Buddhist” genre, and through which the kusōzu of Seiu and Matsui find expression.

7. Matsui’s Kusōzu Series

The previous extended exploration into the history of kusōzu, the socio-historical position and literary examples of eroguro, and the introduction to Seiu’s times and his kusōzu were necessary for identifying Matsui’s precursors and her interaction with them. As mentioned, the fourteenth-century Picture Scroll of the Nine Stages is frequently cited as Matsui’s model. Spectators are notably absent, in contrast to some premodern versions we have considered and to Seiu’s mitate-e. Also in contrast to the latter’s proclivity to narrativize kusōzu, Matsui returns to the format of a lone body presented in distinct stages. I will draw out some of the ways in which her work resembles and diverges from the Picture Scroll of the Nine Stages, paying special attention to the sitting and portrayal of the body, the flowers and animals depicted with it, the proposed audience, and the explanations provided by Matsui herself. I will use as supplementary material several other of her works that she does not include in her kusōzu series: Shūkyoku ni aru itai no sanzai 終極にある異体の散在 (Scattered Deformities in the End, 2007; figure 6), Gō 構想 (Conception, 2009; figure 7), and Inkoku sareta shi-shi no saidan 陰刻された四肢の祭壇 (Engraved Altar of Limbs, 2007; figure 8), along with Sakurano shita...
Matsui’s series is not depicted in a single painting; each stage of disintegration is a discrete piece and, as of December 2013, five have been produced, though not in order. I discuss them in order of production. The earliest of the series, *Jōsō no jizoku* (Keeping Up the Pureness, 2004; figure 10), while the resemblance is slight, appears to correspond to the sixth stage (*nōransō* 腹瀉相) of the Kyushu National Museum scroll, mentioned previously. The naked subject is supine and locks milky eyes with the viewer. A dark, smoky pool of black hair spills onto the ground around her head. A flower garden blooms around her jubilantly, an Ophelia-like floral grave. So far, so conventional. But strikingly, the body is sliced open from upper chest to lower abdomen, revealing a neatly stocked cabinet of innards: the unspooled caterpillar-like intestine and dislocated ovaries are positioned outside. Also on exhibit is a fetus, a display that Matsui states is representative of the contrast of “aggressive pride in the womb” and “revealing the source of self-harm,” or “a destructive action for the purpose of defense.”

In an interview she explains:

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78 Ibid., 128.
79 Yamamoto, *Kusō o yomu*, 240. Matsui intends to complete the series with a tenth piece showing the subject prior to death (Naruyama Akimitsu, Gallery Naruyama. Interview with the author, Tokyo, July 12, 2015).

80 Matsui, *Becoming Friends with All the Children in the World*, 200.
According to anatomical reports, women are inferior to men when it comes to the development of organs other than the uterus. . . . I decided that I wanted to depict a woman flaunting herself in the form of an objectively viewed, anatomical body.

Yūko Hasegawa, the interviewer, explains that the figure is herself responsible for her cut-open stomach, that the work is also aimed at potential rapists, and that the fear and pain associated with femaleness as victimhood is now a source of strength. In sum, she is a powerfully masochistic figure, rather than the passive kusōzu

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corpse; she has taken her own life in a kind of seppuku in order to proudly display her biological difference and power. The immediate source for the central female figure here is Matsui’s drawing of a life model, possibly combined with self-portrait. Both resemble, in terms of pose, the Kyushu corpse, but in other respects the body markedly differs from the stage of the kusōzu series to which it seems to conform, because the torso is cleanly cut, and is marked by an “exquisite precision” of the like that Edo-period “Dutch Studies” (rangaku 西學) enthusiast Sugita Genpaku (1733–1872) admired in the first western medical text he encountered. The open body is less seppuku imagery and more anatomical model, specifically Clemente Susini’s (1754–1814) Anatomical Venuses, and other gynecological waxworks popular in eighteenth-century Europe, which displayed reproductive organs and fetuses. These in turn bring to mind the dissection drawings of Da Vinci, a major stylistic and technical influence and inspiration for Matsui, as a cursory look at her work attests. The similarity with anatomical models abruptly shifts the viewer away from the kusōzu discarded female corpse as signifier of food for wild birds and beasts and tool of liberation for ascetic practitioners. It moves it instead toward a new signifier of body as tool of anatomical instruction connected to autopsy and dissection: a distinctly modern, western view of and function for the dead body. That Matsui draws on motifs of western art (the classical body, Ophelia, Venus) and of Renaissance art and modernity (Da Vinci, anatomical dissection) is coherent within her oeuvre as a whole and within the scheme of the grotesque she takes up and develops. Like the dismembered classical body, the opened, dissected body too is as grotesque as it is modern. Indeed, the original meaning and aesthetic of “the grotesque” is, at base, hybridity, and hybridity is made possible by cutting, dismembering, and rearranging (fuwake 腹分); this latter term was originally used in Japan to signify anatomical dissection. I will devote the remainder of the discussion to the boundary state that Matsui achieves through the opened bodies that she portrays, the significance of both European and Japanese anatomical models in the portrayals, and the way these models relate to eroguro, through discussion of the rest of her series.

In the second piece in Matsui’s series, Narihai no sakeme 成灰の裂目 (Crack in the Ashes, 2006) the body we observed in the first piece is overturned and lies face down on the ground. Similarly spread out, her abundant hair dissipates like smoke into a corner of the

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82 Matsui, Becoming Friends with All the Children in the World, 79.
In the third painting, the body is rigid, resembling a single column of smoke.” Matsui writes of this work. “The heart has legs seems to have been chipped away at.

In the third painting, Osei wa karada o saranai 懋声は体を去らない (The Parasite Will Not Leave the Body, 2011; figure 11), we appear to be back at the original location, and the positioning of the body is almost identical to that depicted in Keeping Up the Pureness. The relocating and positioning of the corpse is in line with that of older kusôzu images, suggesting its deliberate pose and display as a spectacle. The seventh stage, in Tenkan o tsunagiawaseru 転換を繋ぎ合わせる (Joining the Conversion, 2011), is explained as a suicide driven by the desire to simply rest from an exhaustion caused by personal conflict with reality, and the eighth, Shishi no tôitsu 四肢の統一 (Unification of the Four Limbs, 2011), illustrates the complete casting off of humanity and fusion with the earth.86

Translucent, periscope-like ghost flowers, irises, lilies, and peaches: these flowers and fruits, and others portrayed in the series, evoke the floral renderings of Ito Jakuchû 伊藤若冲 (1716–1800) and other painters of the Japanese canon. Similar influences are seen in the later The Parasite will Not Leave the Body, where maggots that swarm over the body in the shôsô 青薊 phase of older models masquerade as impossible Jakuchû-like snowflakes, an unrealistic imagery when we clock the jarring of season, for the flowers tell us it is summer. Likewise, the flowers in Matsui’s series reveal a revolting side: all are fully opened, wholly ripened, and heavily sagging, on the verge of rotting indecently into a “garish withering,” as George Bataille describes such a state in his writing on “disgust.”87 The lilies in Keeping Up the Pureness are shown in cross-section displaying their reproductive organs88 like a representation of the anatomy through dissection, and as if in

85 Matsui, Becoming Friends with All the Children in the World, 200.

88 C.B. Liddell, “Pinpricks in the Darkness: The Beautiful and Disturbing Art of Fuyuko Matsui,” http://www.culturekiosque.com/art/interview/fuyuko_matsui.html (accessed December 14, 2016). Unlike the human, however, female lilies contain both male and female organs, and visibly display both stamen and pistil. Matsui’s rendering of flowers as genitalia is evident in some of her other works, such as her 2015 Kôzatsu zu 狩猎圖 (Interbreeding), and is acknowledged in the portrait painting of her by her contemporary Suwa Atsushi 鈴澤敦 (b. 1967) in Hana o taberu 花を食べる (Eating Flowers, 2011), in which she holds a withering lily between her lips. Pictured in Fukuzumi Ren, “Suwa Atsushi intabyû,” Bijutsu techô, February 2012, 83. Lilies are often purposely displayed alongside her work when it is on display at Gallery Naruyama.

Figure 11. Matsui Fuyuko, Osei wa karada o saranai 懋声は体を去らない (The Parasite Will Not Leave the Body), 2011. H. 50cm, w. 80cm. Color on silk. Hanging scroll. Collection of Matsui Fuyuko. With permission of Matsui Fuyuko and Editions Treville.
sympathetic resonance with the portrayed female, just like the small, igneous shunran 紫蘭 orchids and festering chrysanthemums in Crack in the Ashes. 88 By way of these affinities, the flower and the woman each become a part of the other. Also, because she is pregnant, this fusion resembles the imaginary of the rural woman who, in departing her home for the mountains to hide an illegitimate pregnancy, was conceived of as having merged bodily with the site. This trope, suggested by Yanagida Kunio and discussed by Rebecca Copeland, cast the female body as “dangerous, ravenous, haunting the borders of society.”

In growing around the opened body of the human subject, the flowerites the “ grotesque” in its original aesthetic sense, its Bakhtinian “transgression” and merging, and the instability of boundaries. The weak boundary here—between body and plants (and earth)—is not the only unstable border the fully bloomed and wilting flowers convey. They also capture the instant just prior to falling, a moment of clinging to life before being separated from the plant. Hair, a recurring motif, is expressed in the same way. In Unification of the Four Limbs, under a full but wan moon the wind-swept strands of black hair caught in faintly brushed tree branches confirm the final separation from the body of the boundary site mentioned above. Matsui describes it as “a kind of boundary site:” “once it’s separated from the body it’s seen as something disgusting.”

To the boundary states expressed by Matsui’s work we can add pregnancy itself, or the fetus as an ambiguous “dismember.” In Insane Woman Under a Cherry Tree, a ghostly figure holds a fetus to her mouth, seemingly either on the verge of consuming or having just vomited it. Matsui explains this image as an act of vomiting, and she widely regards the depiction of regurgitation as a model. He also produced a set of three paintings of women consuming fetuses. 89 Matsui’s expulsion of the fetus subverts these images of women, since it is an uncannily direct illustration of the grotesque: Ruskin, bewailing the “ grotesquerie” produced by Raphael, an artist quite capable of creating “superior” whole bodies rather than dismembered and re-membered ones, called it “an unnatural and monstrous abortion.” On the other hand, Insane Woman evokes Beauty (Bijin zu 美人図), an eighteenth-century painting by Soga Shōhaku 曹我蕭白 (1730–81), 90 himself a forerunner to eroguro, that depicts a distraught woman consuming—perhaps—a love letter. The mitate-e-ike intervisuality Matsui constructs creates a sophisticated dissonance for the viewer. For those familiar with the eroguro of Yoshitoshi and that of the later Seiu, along with certain folktales, plays, and motifs upon which their work is based, the dissonance is further pronounced. Both artists produced images of women consuming fetuses. In Yoshitoshi’s enduring The Lonely House at Adachigahara in Ōshū, the fetus inside the belly of a woman suspended upside-down is about to be extracted by the hag Onibaba 鬼婆 for use as an elixir. Seiu depicted this too, notoriously using his own pregnant wife as a model. He also produced a set of three paintings of women consuming fetuses. 91 Matsui’s expulsion of the fetus subverts these images of women, since it is an image intended to allow inner pain, and perhaps a “dismember” or “ parasite” (recalling the title of one of her kusōzu paintings) a physical and visible form.

Vomiting is also a form of self-dismemberment. In contemporary eroguro manga, vomiting is a relatively popular motif. According to Bataille—and to Hans Menninghaus—in his study of disgust as an emotion, it is a kind of self-mutilation, an act that demonstrates an ambiguous boundary. In addition to the comparisons already drawn, Matsui’s Insane Woman bears compelling similarities to Kanō Hōgarī’s 狩野芳里 (1828–88) Hibo Kannon zu 悲母観音図 (Merciful Mother Kan-non, 1888), in which the titular bodhisattva holds a fetus encased in a filmy uterus-like bubble that drops down toward the earth. This is echoed in the image of the womb-enclosed fetus dropping from the mouth of Matsui’s woman. It is not unlikely that she is drawing

88 Matsui, Becoming Friends with All the Children in the World, 200.
90 Matsui, “Rongu intabū,” Bijutsu techō, February 2012, 43.
92 Matsui, Becoming Friends with All the Children in the World, 198.
93 Kept at the Nara Prefectural Museum of Art, Matsui, however, cites Shōhaku’s Yagishita kijō zu 曹我萧白 以没女図 (Ogress Under a Willow Tree, eighteenth century) as recipient of homage here. Matsui Fuyuko, Matsui Fuyuko II (Tokyo: Éditions Treville, 2008), n.p.
conscious on this famous work, just as her contemporaries, photographer Yanagi Miwa (b. 1967), draws on older works related to her genre (for her, that of bijin) as well as academic heritage. And both Matsui and Yanagi are re-casting canonical works by artists connected to the prestigious schools they attended. Here then, in a number of ways, Matsui produces an arrested moment of transition that is captured in both the picture and in the genre itself—a liminal status much more nuanced than the tradition-modern combination by which her work is often characterized, and is close to Bakhtin’s grotesque as “body in the act of becoming.” The ultimate site of liminality is, of course, the corpse itself.

Returning to the flowers, Matsui remarks that these unnatural flowers represent “a paralysis caused by an overload of fake experiences of beauty”; the surfeit of simulacra can cause a fear that the fake will render the real inferior. Like the (often unsymmetrical) mirror images that occupy much of Matsui’s work, there is for her a monstrosity in perfect beauty. Here too her work seems to draw on the “original” European grotesque, for the Domus Aurea itself was a lush yet artificial paradise, decorated with the intertwining of floral beauty, incongruous decor, and its suicide body have, as we have seen, more of the Japanese eroguro aesthetic in them. Although snakes are not normally a feature of kusōzu (certainly they play no part in the scripturally described practice or any premodern literature or art related to kusōzu), a snake slithers through the ribcage and eye sockets of the skeleton in Matsui’s Joining the Conversion. Snakes are to be found as signifiers of female jealousy in premodern visual and literary culture, and in popular religious texts; in Edo-period depictions of female torture; in “freak shows” of the early to mid-twentieth century; and frequently in the S&M magazines of the postwar kasutori culture, a commercial, ephemeral subculture that flourished in the postwar period. The snake winding through the eyes of the skull here recalls both Dokuro to tokage (Skull and Lizard) by Kawanabe Kyōsai as well as an ink piece by Seiū of a snake winding through the eye of a skull, one of a series of ghost paintings, and probably inspired by Kyōsai.

The final stage of Seiū’s Shimabara Rebellion, discussed above, features a snake slithering toward a ribcage, and he added the snake to the group of better-known scavengers, the dogs and birds. His own penchant for such an addition most likely derived from his interest in Edo-period torture and punishment, including “snake torture” (hebizeme). What is perhaps the most arresting section of a kusōzu series in its conventional form, that of the body being consumed by dogs and birds, is conspicuously absent in Matsui’s set (so far). But one might take Scattered Deformities in the End as a variation of this stage. A naked woman flees along a forest path, pursued by a bloodthirsty dog that tears hungrily at tendrils of flayed flesh ribboning behind her; birds of paradise peck viciously at her streaming hair. In motion even as her limbs are disintegrating, she is up and running toward (or perhaps, resistant, away from) her death. Haloed by a light that illuminates the green fronds of the trees, her translucent white skin is suffused as if shining out from some inner source. With her uplifted face and eyes set on something beyond the confines of the picture and invisible to the painting’s viewer, she appears as a martyred saint whose spirit is dissociated from the trauma of the body, from its searing, widening wounds.

A number of key motifs of the kusōzu are present here: the isolated body of a naked female with long black tresses; parts of the flesh split open to expose sinew, muscle, and organ upon which dogs and birds feed; and the wild, natural environment. Yet it is different too, mainly in its presentation of the body as alive during this process, which makes the path of death not

96 My Grandmothers cites the subject of Lip Rouge by Okamoto Shinsō 岡本権堂 (1894–1933). Yanagi graduated from Kyoto City University of Arts, as did Okamoto. Matsui is from the similarly highly regarded Tokyo University of the Arts. The university museum holds the Kanō painting in its collection. See Szostak, “Fair is Foul, and Foul is Fair,” 98-83.
97 Matsui, “Chikaku shinkei toshite no shikaku ni yotte kakusei sarenu tsukaku no fuuki,” 53.
98 Matsui, Becoming Friends with All the Children in the World, 25, 145.
one of gradual, natural decomposition as in the *kusōzu*, but a torturous ordeal. Her portrayal shares much with that of Seiu’s. The attention to anatomical accuracy is also notable. The flayed areas of the body—strips of skin that become far more elaborate and even fabric-like in *Engraved Altar*, where the body is wrapped in a ragged flesh robe hemmed with intestines in a grotesque parody of the padded hem (*fukiwata*) of a kimono—visually cite the anatomical illustrations by Jan van Calcar (ca. 1499–1546) for Andreas Vesalius’ album *De humani corporis fabrica*. These showed classically proportioned corpses walking sturdily amid pastoral landscapes and ruins, trailing raggedy coats of skin, occasionally holding the torn strips apart like stage curtains to reveal the inner structure of their bodies. These, and other Western anatomical pictures of the period, are noted for their presentations of the subject as fully alive, and as showing their own internal organs without any pain. However, significantly, it is primarily males shown in this way, whereas the depiction of the female anatomy is limited to a recumbent corpse subject to dissection, womb exposed—such a figure shown prominently on the cover page of *De humani corporis fabrica*—and a torso. Likewise, later anatomical waxworks of females lie on their backs, and are covered in flesh (both of which contribute to what Jordanova recognizes as a “sleeping beauty” eroticism). Matsui uses these “anatomical Venuses” in *La Specola* for her studies. Males were not so, they are “upright muscle men” or “truncated male torsos.” The subjects of Matsui’s *Scattered Deformities and Engraved Altar* are subversive in this way too (in addition to the way they upturn the “consumption of fetus” model). Finally, the transcendental ecstasy and ethereality on the face of the female subject of the Matsui paintings, and the eye contact of subject with viewer in *Keeping up the Pureness* hint at a kind of willing and joyful, even martyr-like submission, an impression reinforced by Matsui’s description of the opened torso and abdomen as an act of “flaunting” through suicide. This apparent agency of the subject in Matsui’s work is suggested by the mutually reinforcing confluence of conventions of anatomical depiction; expressions of religious ecstasy or martyrdom; and *kusōzu* ideas around exposure as salvation.

Although seventeenth- and eighteenth-century European anatomical models influence the figures portrayed in Matsui’s *kusōzu* and many of her other works, the native interpretation, practice, and depiction of anatomy are also factors at play. Dissection and surgery were introduced into Japan by Dutch doctors in the Edo period. Kanzō (Chinese medicine), widely used before this, did not require incision of the body for the purposes of healing, and it was in part because of this that both the popular and professional visual culture of anatomy caused much horror to its audience. According to Timon Screech, dissection for the purpose of anatomical understanding was perceived by many as “a literal *shítai sarashii*” (死体晒し), the public exposure and slicing of a criminal’s body after death. In fact, criminals’ corpses were used for medical inquiry. *Kusōzu* bodies might be compared to those of offenders, and via the connection with medicine both the *kusōzu* body and the criminal body can be associated with the anatomical body in Edo culture. *Kusōzu* pictures converge with both the visual language of anatomical representations and the aesthetic of the grotesque. First of all, in the premodern paintings the landscapes are lonely wastelands—sites where bodies were (in reality) discarded, often unburied. These bodies were especially those made impure not only by death itself, and by potentially contagious diseases, but were also marked by death of a certain kind (the social disgrace of an execution, for instance, or perhaps the isolated death of a person who lacked familial support). During the Edo period, if not earlier, the exposed corpse was by definition the criminal one. It was considered permissible to posthumously punish a criminal’s body through physical violence or exposure (for example, the previously mentioned *shítai shirashii*). Perhaps a parallel with the exposed, mutilated criminal exposed for the benefit of others, and a similar discourse existed in Japan, but the discussion this deserves is beyond the parameters of this paper. See, for example, Shufen Liu, “Death and Degeneration of Life: Exposure of the Corpse in Medieval Chinese Buddhism,” *Journal of Chinese Religions* 28 (2000): 1–50.

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103 Ibid., 45.
104 There is evidence of desire by some nuns and aristocratic women in medieval China of having their bodies posthumously

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80 *Kusōzu* is also notable. The isolated death of a person who lacked familial support. During the Edo period, if not earlier, the exposed corpse was by definition the criminal one. It was considered permissible to posthumously punish a criminal’s body through physical violence or exposure (for example, the previously mentioned *shítai shirashii*). Perhaps a parallel with the exposed, mutilated criminal exposed for the benefit of others, and a similar discourse existed in Japan, but the discussion this deserves is beyond the parameters of this paper. See, for example, Shufen Liu, “Death and Degeneration of Life: Exposure of the Corpse in Medieval Chinese Buddhism,” *Journal of Chinese Religions* 28 (2000): 1–50.

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104 Ibid., 101.
105 Ibid., 101.
106 Ibid., 100.
and that of the female of kusōzu can be found: already blameworthy for inciting male desire, she could then be further abused through exposure and then violation by animals, performing a similar role of distinguishing profane and sacred/social. Wilson has drawn attention to post-Ashokan texts that tell of practices of physically inscribing punishment on the offending body parts of women, and then displaying these for the edification of the monastic community. Secondly, format indicates a link between kusōzu and the visual culture of anatomy. In its presentation as a series, the former is linked to early anatomical illustrations since these were most often formatted as handscrolls, and for the same reason as that which guided the serial formatting of the Buddhist image: to best lead the viewer through a sequence of stages of dismantlement.

These points should be kept in mind: Matsui’s kusōzu corpses evoke motifs informed by a “modern” treatment of discarded, expedient corpses (which nonetheless induced horror in general perception), and their use in anatomical study and dissection. At the same time, however, we also find an explicit rendering of the kusōzu in the modern paintings by Seiu that connect it to male sexual desire and corporal punishment of the objects of that desire. Where these converge is in the idea and practice of the punishment of the criminal corpse. In fact, a convergence of the three is displayed in an early nineteenth-century illustration by Utagawa Toyokuni (figure 12). This is of a medicine shop and a sign that shows what appears to be a kusōzu-like female corpse being operated upon (or cut up, or violated, depending on the visual culture through which one perceives) by “Dutch” doctors. Toyokuni’s illustration also shows an anatomical doll (dō-ningyō 錫人形, “copper doll”). As a figure that “flaunts” her anatomy, the figure in Keeping Up the Pureness resembles these anatomical models. They were produced from the mid-eighteenth century onward, and were figures holding their torsos open to expose their anatomy for the purposes of education—and spectacle. Seiu also made an illustration of a life-size female anatomical doll with an opened torso and abdomen. Perhaps what is being produced in this period cannot strictly be called eroguro, which dates from the 1920s or so, except in the descriptive sense. But once in the realm of eroguro, again a confluence of these very same motifs is utilized in a story by Rampo. A medicine shop owner in Rampo’s 1925 story, Hakuchohō 白昼夢 (The Daydream), is revealed to have murdered his wife but to be getting away with the crime in broad daylight by presenting her body as a “wax mummy” in the

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110 This is something in which Seiu would have been interested, having authored a book between 1946 and 1952 on the history of criminal punishment in Japan, as mentioned above.
112 Pictured in Geijutsu shinbō, April 1995, 52. Name of owner not provided.
window of his pharmacy. Before an entire crowd the man confesses his crime in the guise of an entertaining story: he gives evidence transparently, yet simultaneously obscures it through his presentation of confession as fiction and victim as waxwork anatomical model. In these ways Hakuchūmu presents the essence of the grotesque by fusing what is normally distinct, and demonstrates the camouflage of the socially taboo by the socially acceptable: an entertaining yarn is the confession of a brutal murder and an anatomical model its material evidence. This both caters to and critiques the consumer’s appetite for sensational eroguro material of the time, a dual effort discerned in other of Rampo’s works, as Driscoll has pointed out.114 Similarly, in Rampo’s Majū 肉鬼 (Blind Beast), published six years after Hakuchūmu, department store managers admire shop window mannequins sold to them by a murderer who has assembled them from the dismembered parts of his victims. Murder and the grotesque in both cases produce “modernizing effects” (to paraphrase Driscoll),115 since the anatomical model that signified advanced western medicine denoted modernity in the Edo period, as the department store window display model did in the Taishō period, but both carried undertones of violence and the dismembered (female) body. Once again, the grotesque and the modern appear as flipsides of each other.

This Edo-period perception of penetration of the body’s boundaries, the presentation of it using a female body, and the display of the exposed and opening female body in kusōzu, are assembled in Matsui’s kusōzu. The opened abdomen of Keeping up the Pureness can now be read as both self-disembowelment (seppuku)—according to Matsui’s explanation—and anatomical dissection. It only slightly resembles the stage of kusōzu in which the body is opened, but it is intended to function in a comparably soteriological way. Like other of her works, there is a self-exposure for the sake and salvation of the viewer, but the masochism of this is claimed as a last-resort demonstration of power as well as a way of communicating with “potential rapists.” The portrayal of female seppuku and of the resulting mound of viscera is a highly charged eroguro image today, exemplified in the extreme work of manga artist Uziga Waita 氏賀Y太 (b. 1970) and the zines and fetish-club shows of S&M performer Saotome Hiromi 早乙女宏美 (b. 1963). Matsui presents it rather more delicately in her pencil drawing Conception (fig. 7), which she developed into the 2013 painting Ayatori jōzu 給取女圖 (String Figuring [cat’s cradle] Woman). A young naked woman sits comfortably on a chair casually unspooling her guts, perhaps parodying the triumphal completion of an ideal seppuku, in which a samurai would pull out his innards. Certainly the subject of seppuku as punishment, ideal or honorable military suicide, and its changing meanings, requires more attention here. But it is worth pointing out at least that the visual culture of female seppuku arose in postwar eroguro publications. As the image appears in present-day eroguro and S&M subculture, it is the latest manifestation of the confluence of seppuku with eroticized female self-sacrifice and exposure. Yet Matsui’s suicides are not acts to be celebrated. She writes that “failed suicides are the result of a dissociated part of the self stepping in: if the greater part of the self is hatred . . . then the dissociated part will be at least a little warm and loving, and it is this part that comes in to prevent suicide.”116 This psychological explanation of her work introduces the final issues I wish to address here: the significance of viewing and the function of visual representation.

8. Conclusion

Fuse Hideto’s essay on Matsui’s oeuvre indulges the potential for a catalogue of work at any time in its development to be arranged freely into a kind of story, much like a personal collection, regardless of the artist’s intentions.117 And he creates (as I have) a narrative kusōzu by including paintings not stated as kusōzu stages by Matsui, as well as counting some works such as those of “dogs, snakes and flowers . . . as decorative elements in the periphery of the Kusōzu.”118 Certainly her work in

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113 Driscoll, Absolute Erotic, Absolute Grotesque, 216-21. The façade of entertainment conjured up by both the storyteller and Rampo himself is further adorned by the marching-band singing of soldiers stationed in Manchuria that parades by as the man reaches the climax of his confession; the resounding drums accompany his speech as they fade out. It may also have been an implicit critique of the imperial ambitions of Japan.
114 Ibid., 158.
115 Matsui, “Chikaku shinkei to shite no shikaku ni yotte kakusei sareru tsūkaku no fukahi,” 52.
117 Ibid., 22.
its entirety can be said to be deeply informed by issues of boundaries and their dissolution, and we have come to identify this interest in premodern kusōzu as, in fact, invested in the modern aesthetics of eroguro, and the negotiations that eroguro operates with premodern imagery and modernity itself. Her own references to rape in connection to her kusōzu figures must be viewed in the context of the modern kusōzu discussed above that depict sexual assault. Matsui describes her paintings as talismans, and in this sense they may be considered extraordinarily compassionate works. They are meant to horrify and to dissuade, in part through, she says, a sharing of pain that is normally utterly confined to one’s self and is thus inexpressible,119 as Elaine Scarry has discussed. The figures shown in her works can be seen as “surrogates” or “purifying agents,” “enabling those who look at them to avoid actual injury to themselves,” and to help the viewer, including the “potential rapist” to understand the (suicidal) agony of the other.120 “I want the audience to see my works in order to help them get rid of the evil from their bodies.”

Yamamoto remarks that Matsui’s portrayals of exposed human organs “show us our true power to look unflinchingly at the truth without turning a blind eye to suffering and agony,”121 and they do reflect a Ruskinian understanding of the “grotesque” image. Ruskin (as well as Wolfgang Kayser in his 1966 work) presented such portrayals as a way of engaging playfully with terror in order to exorcise it on both individual and cultural levels.122 In this sense again, though, Matsui’s images share common ground with the ostensible function of early kusōzu: salvation of the one through the revelation/presentation of the grotesque reality of the other. This also reflects one side of the perennial conventional argument surrounding images of sex, violence, horror, and pornography;123 an argument that has also attended kusōzu: do disturbing images offer transformation and liberation to the viewer (often this investiture of liberation is extended to the portrayed subject as well), or do they legitimate and reinforce essentialistic understandings of the portrayed (and the viewing) body? The argument rests on opposing models of catharsis and articulation, both of which assume psychoanalytical ideas of ‘the beast within,’ ideas that, . . . see repression as a constitutive feature of human development, the mechanism through which we are constrained to overcome the (anti-social) desires of infancy. The primary focus for this repression is sexuality, and horror, in a variety of ways, acts as a channel for expression of the repressed affect. In so doing it sustains order, whether by cathartic release of otherwise threatening urges or by reinforcing acceptance of repressive taboos presumed to be essential to social survival.”124

Kusōzu collapse the two sides of the question: the liberation of the viewer relies upon the essential grotesqueness of the female body. It may be proposed that the various frames of reference through which I have viewed Matsui’s works prompt similar processes of gazing. Meditational practice related to kusōzu images (but not necessarily practically or in reality) aimed for a kind of “equilibrium” in the face of the disaggregated body (even if meditators ostensibly also sought recognition of the [Buddhist] self there). Philomena Horsley in her study of medical students of anatomical dissection, observes that their “challenge is to find, and keep their equilibrium amidst the mess of the dismantled body. . . . [I]mmersive factors are deemed necessary to disengage from any unsettling emotional and social associations of the corpse.”125 The images presented in the genre of body-punishing horror that find their roots (in Japan) in the eroguro aesthetic that Matsui shares also aim at the closure of the (male) body through con-

119 Matsui, Becoming Friends with All the Children in the World, 169.
121 Matsui, Becoming Friends with All the Children in the World, 125.
122 In both Modern Painters and The Stones of Venice. This is only one aspect of Ruskin’s multivalent theory of the grotesque.
123 Arguably, these are not mutually exclusive.
126 Matsui may not wish her work to be classed as pornography or of sharing in its aesthetic; in her doctoral dissertation she condemns the sexualized portrayal of women found in the work of Aida Makoto 会田猛 (b. 1965). See Matsui, “Chikaku shinkei tashite no shikaku ni yotte kakusei sareru tōzoku toto, no sukahi,” 56–7. Although her art crosses many categories, it may occupy the category of contemporary eroguro, as I have indicated.
temptation of (that is, contrast with)127 the unbounded and ruptured (female) one. These three frames are not adversarial: they converge in what might be expressed as "eroguro-dissection- BUSUZU," making them, indeed, extraordinary sights that themselves offer to the present-day viewer and scholar too the challenge of maintaining equilibrium and retaining empathy and shock appropriate as ethical meter, but without taking on the burden of suffering as a martyr or an identification that psychologically scars. Elisabeth Bronfen presents a valuable discussion of this problem in Over Her Dead Body, observing the gender-divided responses to paintings of dead women, and pressing the choice scholars must make in their treatment of these and similar images.128 The image is implicated in its own lack of boundaries, in that it remains potent over the centuries; in other words, it remains to be resolved. Here, the concept of the uncanny works to describe the process I have proposed, by which an image might survive even when not immediately recognizable, and also to capture the core commonality between the representational contexts in which it appears. Bronfen's explanation of the uncanny, though made in reference to a quite different cultural sphere, is useful here. "The uncanny," she writes, "always entails anxieties about fragmentation, about the disruption or destruction of any narcissistically informed sense of personal stability, body integrity, immortal individuality."

Commentators and audiences tend to laud Matsui's mastery of the traditional (subject matter as well as the nihonga style and technique), her earlier training in Western oil painting, and her reworking of the former in the contemporary Japanese art scene. This reading, however, unproblematically juxtaposes and presents a historical narrative and hermeneutics of influence that links tradition to (post-)modernity and results in an elision of key loci of influences situated in the late-nineteenth- and mid-twentieth-century marginalized visual cultures of Japan. It also acquiesces with a dominant view of modern Japanese culture (which I think can be extended to apply to contemporary culture as well) as being "an interplay between external Western influence and a reactive 'native' consciousness, which in at least the better instances culminates in a turn back to the tradition."129 This misses the importance of counter-influence and the complexity of the way in which subjects, aesthetics, and so on are received into a culture primed to receive them in specific ways, and it runs the risk of reifying Japanese tradition in distinction to "Western" tradition. Without by any means discounting Matsui's conscious use of the Buddhist model, I have disagreed with this approach, and it is the influence of a marginalized culture—eroguro—to which I have drawn attention in this essay. While Matsui's work is lauded as a successful meeting of East and West in technique, style, and (sometimes) subject matter, it proves a disconcerting encounter to witness. The "Western" and "Eastern" allusions are both to violence and cruelty, and to the morbid aspects of Buddhism and Christianity (ecstasy or martyrdom). Nihonga, Japanese painting originally developed to present authentic Japanese identity in contrast to Western influences, is employed, rather, to depict "lower-class" fare (Bataille's "base material")—violence; death; the supernatural—and thus departs from sanctioned subject matter. There is an uneasiness evoked by Matsui's subverted use of Meiji-era Japanese ledgers of Western modernity that simultaneously undermine the claim they make: anatomical records taken in a direction in their visual portrayal that is beyond any educational or medical purpose (and toward grotesque spectacle related to cadaver mutilation) or a classical body, already a dismembered and grotesque thing, born prematurely disfigured from excavations. Her combination of the Buddhist kUSUZU, European renaissance art and its classical body, anatomical models, and the erotic-grotesque that began at the end of the nineteenth century and has flourished as a subculture up to the present day, is an accurate capture of the contradictions that attend, or are inherent in, the modernity that is incarnated in her work.

127 Barbara Creed writes that "viewing the horror film signifies the desire not only for perverse pleasure (confronting sickening, horrific images being filled with terror/desire for the undifferentiated), but also a desire, once having been filled with perversity, taken pleasure in perversity, to throw up, throw out, eject the object (from the safety of the spectator's seat).” Barbara Creed, The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis (London: Routledge, 1995), 10. My italics.
129 Bronfen, Over Her Dead Body, 113.

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NOTE ON ABBREVIATION


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