



YURI SHIMOJO

BARNSTORMERS

Yuri Shimojo thinks of herself as a Gypsy, wandering the globe. In 2007, she bought a piece of land in Hawai'i where she plans to build her house, and spends time between Hawai'i, Japan, Costa Rica and New York City. Balancing the city with nature, she explained: "That's my yin and yang. I need both."¹

Born in 1966, which she explained is the year of the fire horse, into an eccentric avant-garde family, she describes her mother as a social butterfly and her father as a dentist with ambitions as a vaudeville comedian. Her grandparents, parents right down to Shimojo herself had each been greatly drawn by Japanese traditional performance art, such as Noh and Kabuki theater, as well as the practices of the tea ceremony and flower arranging. Her unconventional upbringing was published in her 1997 autobiography *Tiny Scribble*, reprinted in Japan in 2007. For the artist, what she came away with was *wabi-sabi*, or what she calls perfection of imperfection.

In 1988-1989, Shimojo came to live in the U.S. for the first time, but it wasn't until 1997 that she remained for a longer duration. At that time she found herself in the Williamsburg neighborhood of Brooklyn, where she met neighbor David Ellis, who invited her to collaborate on a piece he was filming with the Barnstormers—their debut DVD *Apostrophe*. She has been traveling between continents continuously ever since, as well as working on collaborations with individual artists from within the collective.

Shimojo's works often depict fluid, large-scaled butterflies in transformation; sexualized oversized flowers and organic womb-like plants growing from walls; or owls spinning admixed with sumi ink lines and blue and purple circles. She explained: "Poppies are hairy and toxic, pansies look like my Pekinese dog, orchids are too much, moths are spirits, owls are ancestors from [the] future." These symbols inspire her and churn with an emotion she describes as: "So x-rated, so dramatic, so creepy horror."²

Her work *Conclusion* (2004) exhibits her ability to use a controlled palette of red and black, and to bring motion into her work through simple brushstrokes. The sumi ink swirls of fine lines climb up toward and engulf the red sun-like disc at the apex of the work, seeming to enclose it, sculpture-like. In *Grow* (2004), a red disc is also encircled, but instead, it seems as if it is emanating from smoke-like swirls of sumi ink, reaching out into the sky. The work *Chrysalis* (2005) shows the emergence of a detailed butterfly. Its wings are still folded, no doubt just emerging from its cocoon within a paper-thin flower. The abstract flower petal that encircles the insect overwhelms the page, flowing from ringlets of vines that curl from and veer off the page. Pods and petal formations drip blue and red into vegetation-like abstraction. In her pieces *Blue Heel* (2005) and *Blue Jay* (2005), a plant-like swirl grows with a single delicate blue-striped feather dangling from its stem. The works portray the many sides of nature as beautiful, yet grotesque; serene, yet ominous.

¹ Yuri Shimojo, email interview by author, December 24, 2007.

² Ibid.



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1
Conclusion, sumi ink and shu ink on paper, 15" x 23", 2004.
Courtesy of the artist.

2
繭 - Chrysalis, sumi ink and Gansai Japanese watercolor on paper, 22" x 30", 2005. BLK/MRKT Gallery, Los Angeles.
Courtesy of the artist.

3
Better Tomorrow, sumi ink, house paint and charcoal on the gallery wall, 8' x 15', 2004. Supreme Trading's Annex Gallery, New York.
Courtesy of the artist.

4
First Lady Be@rbrick, acrylic on vinyl, 2005. GBE at Passerby, New York.
Courtesy of the artist.

5
Grow, watercolor on paper, 15" x 19", 2004. Atlantic Avenue Art Walk, New York.
Courtesy of the artist.

6
Owl 1, sumi ink, watercolor and gouache on paper, 9" x 12", 2004. Carlos Irizarry Gallery, Puerto Rico.
Courtesy of the artist.

7
Blue Jay, sumi ink, watercolor and gouache on paper, 15" x 29", 2005. Dyezu Experiment, Tokyo.
Courtesy of the artist.

Unlike Godzilla and Godzookie, the Barnstormers' membership increased until the numbers swelled to 25 to 30 artists and, according to Ellis, no longer sought new artists to join the group due to the logistical difficulties required for such a large group to travel and create collaborative pieces. Unlike Godzilla and Godzookie, Barnstormers create both individual as well as collaborative works of art, and it is this collaboration that serves as a key focus of the collective's activities. Some of their work included murals in both Cameron and Williamsburg, Brooklyn, such as their participation with the Altoids Wall of Fame project. However, unlike artists Huang and Arai who painted murals as a part of CITYArts from 1972 to 1978 that dealt with political issues from labor to housing on the Lower East Side, the Barnstormers' murals tended to carry the urban iconography of their own personal creations. Many of their murals were painted in a hybrid urban style heavily influenced by the legacy of graffiti artists, developing distinct writing and graphic styles admixed with the idea of *mons* (*kamons*) or family crests in Japanese and Hawai'ian traditions. Still interested in bringing a dialogue through art to the communities where they have painted, unlike more representational murals painted through CITYArts, the Barnstormers' murals on the barns in the tobacco fields did not necessarily reference historical or social narratives. Instead, the artists fashioned improvisational freehand images such as an airplane amid a field of music speakers in an orange sky, a hybrid tiger-cow enveloped by clouds, abstract shapes, swirls, waves, a polka-dotted chicken, the large head of Ganesh in multicolor house paint on a barn wall.



1
Mural collaboration for the "Salvage and Assemble" exhibition at Space Gallery in Portland, ME, 2006. Collaboration with Yuri Shimojo, Mike Houston, Chuck Webster, and David Ellis.
Courtesy of Yuri Shimojo.

2
Mural collaboration with Barnstormers and Inkheads, house paint and stenciled on the brick wall, 2004. Berry Street, Williamsburg, New York.
Courtesy of the Yuri Shimojo.

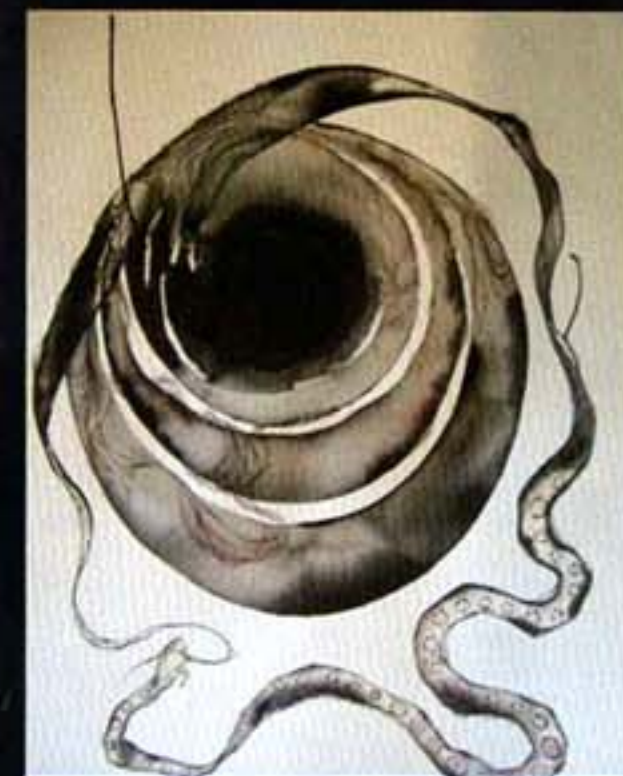
3
Mural collaboration with Yuri Shimojo and Doze Green, acrylic paint on wood panel, 2007. Conch Records, New Zealand.
Courtesy of the Yuri Shimojo.



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BARNSTORMERS
PAGE 244



L-R
蛇 - Snake, sumi ink and Gansai Japanese watercolor on paper, 22" x 30", 2005. BLK/MRKT Gallery, Los Angeles.
Courtesy of the artist.

Black and blue 1, sumi ink and watercolor on paper, 22" x 30", 2004. Transport Gallery, Los Angeles.
Courtesy of the artist.