



'La Vie', 1997, above.
Below: kamikaze
pilots, 1941

Sayonara, Mr Blue Sky

*His Paris grave bears only his Buddhist death-name...
An intrigued Charles Darwent goes in search of the
kamikaze-pilot-turned-abstract-artist Kenji Yoshida*





this month at London's October Gallery, carry the same title: *Sei-mei, or Life*.

I should say here that these works were made between 1964 and February 2009, when Yoshida, finally and appositely, became Blue Sky. (His wife, Hiroko, now Cloud-Flower, had died in 1986.) Which is to say that Yoshida, like hundreds of other would-be kamikaze, came through the war alive, thanks mostly to the fact that, by 1945, the Japanese didn't have the planes to fly young pilots to their targets.

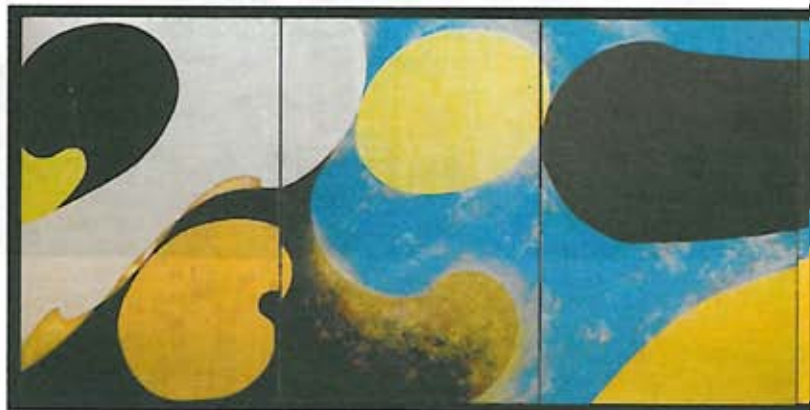
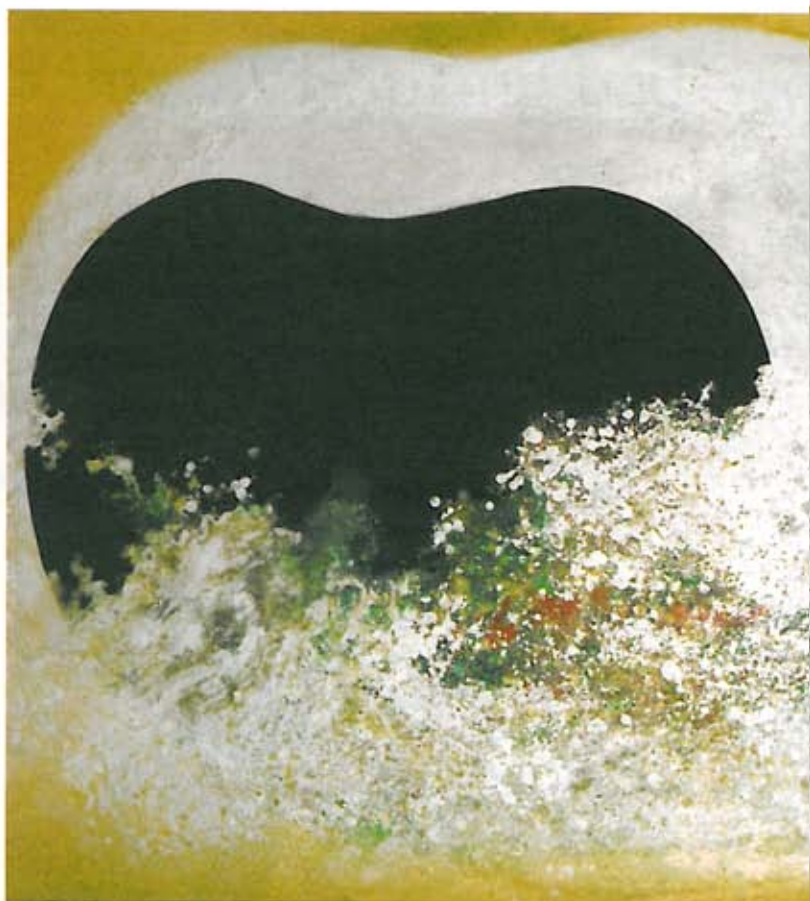
Like all these survivors, Yoshida had to live on with the knowledge that he owed his life to Japan's loss, to the dreadfulness of Hiroshima and Nagasaki; that he was marked, invisibly but indelibly, with a small taint of dishonour. (If you can find it, watch *Wings of Defeat*, 2007, a documentary by the director, Risa Morimoto. After half a century of silence, Morimoto's beloved uncle confessed to her that he, too, was that contradiction in terms, a living *gakuwashi*.)

To the end of his life, Yoshida insisted that, had he been sent on a suicide mission, he would have crashed his plane into the sea to avoid killing others. (Dozens of his fellow kamikaze did the same.) In the event, he made reparations in his own way, by making pictures. Demobbed after the war, he returned to Osaka and to painting and teaching art. He met and married his wife, had the daughters Kiyoko and Yoko, who now stand at his graveside, marking, in Shinto tradition, the first anniversary of his death. And then, in 1964 and at the age of 40, he left all this behind and moved to Paris.

The question of why, and why Paris, has intrigued me for a year now. Like most people, I'd only vaguely heard of Yoshida until I wrote his obituary in *The Independent* last February. That an 84-year-old painter of such talent, whose work had opened the British Museum's new Japanese galleries in 1993, who had died in the middle of a big, one-man show at Unesco, should have been so unfamiliar, so little hyped, was mysterious enough. That he should have managed to achieve this anonymity not in Osaka but in Paris, was even odder. Six months after his death, I stood in Yoshida's studio in a concrete block in the 15th arrondissement, watching the harvest of his life and career being packed away. It was there that the story unfolded.

Seven years before Yoshida's move to Paris, his exact contemporary, Kazuo Shiraga, a member of a group called Gutaï, had suspended himself by a rope from the ceiling of a gallery in Osaka and, dressed in a red Pinocchio suit, kicked paint around a sheet of paper lying on the floor. The repercussions of this were enormous, and not just at home: when Allan Kaprow staged his first "happening" in New York two years later, in 1959, he acknowledged his debt to the Gutaï. If you were an artist leaving Japan in 1964, then Manhattan was where you headed for. (Among those who did so was that well-known Fluxus artist Yoko Ono.) You didn't go to Paris, whose days as the world capital of art were long over.

But then Yoshida didn't see himself as a world artist; he was a Japanese artist working in the world. His training under Masaru and another *sensei*, Hayashi Kiyoshi, had included instruction in the art of Japanese woodblock printing. Arriving in Paris, Yoshida



'Don't take up a rifle,' Yoshida was told, 'take up painting'

went straight to the fabled Atelier Dix-Sept in Montparnasse, set up by an English surrealist, Stanley William Hayter, in the 1930s. For two decades, the studio had been the most important place anywhere for abstract print-making. Miró, Picasso and Kandinsky had all done work there, as had Alexander Calder and Marc Chagall. By the mid-1960s, those days were gone. Teaming up with a group of like-minded Scandinavians, Yoshida was given a study grant by the government of Norway - Japanese audiences would always ignore him as, for the most part, did French ones - and the city of Paris allotted him a workspace. He moved into the tiny

On a raw day in February, a group of mourners stands at a grave in Paris's Montparnasse Cemetery. A handful of Westerners apart - a well-known film actor, a smattering of art-folk, me - all are Japanese. Tentative, bobbing, these bow to each other, to a pair of middle-aged women and to a slab of granite incised with two *kaimyo*, or Buddhist death-names: Blue Sky and Cloud-Flower; husband and wife, the women's dead parents. Montparnasse Cemetery is full of people (Beckett, Baudelaire, Simone de Beauvoir) who led extraordinary lives and, as often as not, died extraordinary deaths. Few, though, can have seemed less likely to end up here than Blue Sky, known in life as Kenji Yoshida (above in his Paris studio, 1973).

Six thousand miles away and seven decades earlier, Yoshida, a teenage conscript in the air wing of Japan's Imperial Navy, had been chosen for his corp's highest honour: to train as a *gakuwashi*, a young eagle, in a crack new force known as the Divine Wind, or kamikaze. The war had not, as the Emperor was later mildly to concede, developed to Japan's favour. From the summer of 1944, US bombers, flying from China, began to hit her factories. In January 1945, they switched to showering Japanese cities with incendiaries, burning their wooden streets like straw. On 13 March, it was the turn of Yoshida's home town of Osaka - a particularly vicious attack, in which 10,000 civilians died in a night.

If honour and imperial *esprit de corps* had not fired the young eagle to crash his plane into a US ship, then rage might have done the trick. But Yoshida was always an unlikely kamikaze. An art student when the war broke out, his *sensei*, or master, Furukido Masaru, had begged him not to fight. (Imprisoned in the war for his pacifist beliefs, Masaru died in a camp.) "Don't take up a rifle," he said, "take up painting." As things turned out, the option wasn't open to his young student. *Gakuwashi* didn't volunteer, they were volunteered. Failure to take up the honour meant the choice between execution for cowardice or committing hara-kiri. One way or another, the 19-year-old aviator was going to die, which is why nearly all of his paintings, on show

YOSHIDA IMAGES PHOTOGRAPHED BY JONATHAN GREET COURTESY OCTOBER GALLERY, LONDON

Clockwise from left: 'La Vie', 1979; 'La Vie', 1997; and 'Inochi to Heiwa (Life and Peace)', 1996



apartment (two small rooms and, up a couple of steps, a north-facing studio) where his wife would eventually join him, and where he would live and paint for the rest of his life.

And his art? Maybe that answers the question of why Paris rather than New York, the odd decision to join a sinking ship. The thing that strikes you about the work stacked and shelved in the soon-to-be-empty studio at 49 rue Procession is its consistency. In pretty well all of Yoshida's pictures is a shape – I'd call it organic, though that's not quite the right word. Let's say "elemental". At times, as in the 12-panel installation that travelled around British cathedrals between 2000 and 2003,

that shape is precise: a series of discs, laid in black on gold leaf or gold leaf on black, like something from an Edo panel. And then, again and again over 40 years, the form suddenly mutates into abstraction or experiment, into inchoation or two parts. The shape is always there, though, as is the craft behind it – the gilding and calligraphic force, the skilled manipulation of paint. For all its mutability, Yoshida's art is about tradition, not novelty.

And, in its abstraction, it is about sending out a message. Yoshida, taking up French at 40, never learnt it well. His English was non-existent. Yet people who knew no Japanese – among them an ex-Japanese prisoner of war

introduced to Yoshida at Norwich Cathedral in 2003 – came away from meeting him sure that they had spoken. And so with his art.

I have a friend, a scientist doing sharp-end work with stem cells, who sees, in the shape in her own Yoshida work on paper, the exact form of a zygote at the moment of its division. To the actor Jean-Marc Barr, one of the mourners at Yoshida's Paris graveside, the art is about a lost integrity, an old-fashioned courage. Barr, half-French, half-American and the long-standing star of films by Lars von Trier, got to know Yoshida as a widower, a skinny old man with a white beard, alone in a foreign city. "I have a small paint-

ing of his, and I go to it when I want to get in touch with my solitude," Barr says. "It's a good solitude, an affirmation that, in spite of everything, life goes on, that it's worth living. When I look at Yoshida's work, I see my father. Like Kenji, my dad was in the Second World War. There was a kind of morality to that generation; a kind of resilience. That's really what his work tells me." Then, like the other mourners, Barr bows to Blue Sky's grave and turns away. ■

Kenji Yoshida: A Celebration of Life is at the October Gallery, London WC1 (020 7242 7367, octobergallery.co.uk) from 15 April to 5 June