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Arakawa

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View of "Arakawa," 2019. From left: A Couple, 1966–67; Untitled (Webster Dictionary A & B), 1965; The Communicating Vases, 1964–65. Photo: Rob McKeever.

It's hard to get a read on the artist-architect Shusaku Arakawa (known mononymously as Arakawa). The notorious self-mythologizer is best remembered for the architectural fantasies he designed and constructed alongside his lifelong partner, Madeline Gins, ostensibly to help people live forever. But he died in 2010 at the age of seventy-three. "This mortality thing is bad news," Gins said afterward, only to pass four years later. Arakawa's admirers have been evasive about his transhumanist predilection, explaining it away as poetic metaphor. Did he really believe in eternal life? Or was he playing some kind of metaphysical joke?

It seems Arakawa continually delighted in keeping his intentions unclear. At the Gagosian exhibition of his lesser-known paintings from 1965 to 1984, some of his images read as cool, cerebral exercises. He wanted to capture "the condition that precedes the moment in which the imagination goes to work and produces mental representations." But then other artworks shimmied away from such recondite aims, revealing little jokes and moments of whimsy. Was he a deliberate Conceptual artist or a sentimental clown? You don't have to choose with Arakawa.

The show began with canvases from the mid-'60s, executed shortly after the artist moved from Japan to New York City. About four feet high and nearly six feet wide, *Tubes*, 1965, is paradigmatic of Arakawa's earliest approaches. On the far-right side of the picture is a schematic cylinder, drawn starkly in black marker, the word tube stenciled in caps beneath it. In the middle is a similar form, squeezed by an incurvate joint, a few of its lines highlighted by a De Stijl–style palette. Here, the words TWISTED TUBE start to bloom with color. Finally, BROKEN TUBE

on the left is a constellation of soft-edged, chromatic fragments, the painted phrase a beaming Crayola box of a signifier—a Saussurean Rainbow Brite!

By 1966, Arakawa's pictures had gotten larger, his naming game more elaborate. *A Couple*, 1966–67, is a diptych more than ten feet long that feels like an avant-garde connect-the-dots mashed up with a memory puzzle. A line drawing of a foreshortened window, suspended in a diagram of a room, appears at the top of both canvases. On the left panel, the chamber's furnishings and occupants are represented only by straight lines (corresponding to smooth-edged objects, such as a table) or wavy ones (to represent more organic forms, such as crumpled clothes) and a corresponding word or phrase—such as PLANT, BED, FOOT FOOT FOOT—with a skinny gray arrow pointing to it. The viewer is meant to fill in the blanks: There's the place where two heads lie, for instance, angled to watch a TELEVISION situated in a corner. In the right panel, the window is slightly ajar, revealing a glimpse of irradiating yellow. Instead of words, smeared numbers are rendered in excited blues, oranges, and reds. The two arcs representing HEAD, HEAD now merge into one, while the three FOOTS transform into a pair of squiggles. Aww, I eventually realized—the titular twosome are having sex! Or perhaps they're just sleeping in a tender embrace. Either way, sussing out A Couple was a sweet experience—so much more fun than pondering more iconic Conceptual works of the period.

Arakawa's compositions grew increasingly complex in the 1970s and '80s, when he favored formally frenetic surfaces: huge canvases striped with diagonal lines or a riot of arrows. But then he dramatically quit painting in 1990 to devote himself to his foundation for conquering death. If Arakawa's early efforts have rarely resurfaced since then, maybe it's because they were often hated—at least by several critics for this magazine, who slammed the paintings over and over again in the 1960s and '70s, complaining that they offered nothing new, had no critical stance, were "intellectually offensive," and, in sum, were "dandified" imitations of the era's Great White Men, such as Jasper Johns (one critic even went so far as to criticize Arakawa's "none too fluent" English). Hopefully, today, we've begun to escape the grip of those Great White Men and to consider adjacent practices not as aberrant derivatives but as valid alternative ways of making and thinking. The dandy is a figure of defiance, and the time has come to take Arakawa's games seriously, even as we laugh along with him.