

Meiro Koizumi

English



Battlelands

At the end of the World War II, under the occupation of the Allied countries, Japan was re-formed as a democratic state. One event that symbolized this reformation was the making of a new constitution, known as the “Peace Constitution.” The most notable aspect of this new constitution is Article 9, in which Japan renounces all future war and its national military forces. This pacifism was a reaction against the brutal militarism of Japanese imperialism, and all the aggressions, losses, and destructions caused by it, and it was welcomed by the Allied countries, by other Asian countries, and by the Japanese people.

Throughout the Cold War era and since, Japan has not entered into any direct military conflict. Not one soldier’s life has been lost. There are no recorded killings by soldiers at home or abroad. Since the 1990s Japan has only deployed small numbers of troops for peacekeeping operations, generally unarmed or lightly armed forces. Pacifism has become a big part of Japanese identity, and it has contributed to the nation’s economic strength over the past 70 years. Japanese people are proud that we have kept peace for the last seven decades, and the foundation of this national pride in pacifism is the Peace Constitution.

But of course, this condition of peace was made possible by two important factors. First, the border between Communism and capitalism was established within the Korean Peninsula, so Japan does not share a direct border with a socialist country. The second important factor is, of course, the presence of US forces in Japan. There are many US military bases located throughout the country, as Japan was a base for the United States to fight both the Korean War and the Vietnam War. On a human level, peace in Japan was sustained by the physical risks that US soldiers were ordered to take in Asia Pacific regions. This situation is now changing due to Japan’s economic decline since the 1990s, the end of Cold War, China’s economic growth, and the unstable political and military situation of North Korea. How long we can maintain the Peace Constitution is now in question, a debate and topic of discussion frequently heard in news and politics.

This is the context in which I have been making my artworks over the last ten years. I have made multiple projects specifically related to the history of kamikaze pilots as a way to test the limits of my liberal thinking and my love for pacifism. I believe in the importance and value of the Peace Constitution, but at the same time, I recognize that human societies have



been formed and survived through the aggressive instinct to protect one’s family or clan against all possible enemies. So through my artwork I ask myself and viewers questions, such as, “Would you sacrifice your own life to protect your country if a war broke out, or if you felt your family or community was under threat, or if you felt that you needed to protect another person?”

One of the biggest lessons I learned when making my works about kamikaze pilots was that each soldier made a personal choice to sacrifice his life for his country. In other words, the kamikaze pilots I studied were very proud to volunteer to give their lives for a bigger cause and the common good. It was never the case that they were forced to make such an extreme choice through a military order. Rather, they truly believed that they were making up their own minds in choosing to sacrifice their lives, a choice seen as one of the most personal, private, and sacred. The suicide missions would not have worked if thousands of young people were forced into them. The choice by each soldier had to be voluntary and personal to him. But of course these “personal choices” had long been conditioned by the military, society, politics, education, and the culture of that time. For example, in literature and philosophy, death was romanticized, and dying for others was considered beautiful, authentic, traditional, and brave. Young children were also educated to respect the Emperor and to serve him, no matter what was asked. So, while each soldier chose to give his life for his country, the decision was partially the result of a strong societal conditioning. Making choices of this kind will always be multilayered and complex. These kinds of decisions are central to the situations faced by recent veterans of the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars and are central to my current project.

From what I have heard through my interviews with veterans from Iraq and Afghanistan, each believed in the great causes of these wars. They felt that the threat of terrorism was real. They believed in justice. And they volunteered to become soldiers in order to save their families and friends. These soldiers are specifically of the generation that was finishing their high school years on September 11, 2001. So when they were asked to make choices about their future, they chose to become soldiers and to serve their country with good and faithful intentions. But of course, such personal choices were also conditioned by politics, the media, and the culture in which they were brought up.

Stories of strong heroes who struggle or sacrifice their lives for others, for their communities, for peace, and for their country are widespread. These stories are tragic and beautiful. You can find such stories everywhere in film, television, and literature. We love superheroes, and we love to consume their stories and images. But in reality, humans are not built very strong. Humans are quite fragile physically and psychologically when pitted against the weapons of modern technological warfare. According to Dave Grossman’s *On Killing: The Psychological Cost of Learning to Kill in War and Society*, only 2 percent of soldiers do not feel guilty after they kill someone during an act of war. This means that, for the rest of the 98 percent of soldiers, killing another human being is always a traumatic experience, one that torments them for the rest of thier lives. With the advancement of neurological research over the past decades we are beginning to better understand how memory works. According to such studies, memory is never a static thing. It is always rewritten in our minds as we recall it, and as we retell it. The stronger our emotional memories are, the better we remember certain events. When negative emotions are too strong, such memories become sources of trauma. We





cannot control these memories. Triggered by smells, sounds, or images, the original scenes of the trauma come back to our consciousness as flashbacks. When we are attacked by these flashbacks, our hearts beat faster, we sweat, we panic, we lose control of our consciousness, and we are forced to relive the specific moments of traumatic events again and again. It is very common for military veterans to suffer from such flashbacks. They force them to go back to a scene or scenes from war, when they were exposed to violence and unbearable stress. Veterans repress such memories in their daily lives in order to readjust to being home. But traumas are engrained in the brain and body so strongly that it is not easy to get rid of them. Even when veterans try to forget them, their bodies remember. This is all part of our survival instinct and impossible to control. Moreover, the experience of being on the battlefield involves putting one's body in a space outside of our normal moral system, the one in which the lives of the others have to be respected. To be in battle is to expose oneself to a context of extreme violence—the violence needed to kill one another. The stressful experience of being in such an environment completely rewrites one's value system, one's morals. Once soldiers return back to their homelands, it is not easy to restore their original moral system.

As a consequence, many veterans suffer from the gap between the stressful reality of the war zones and the peaceful reality of their homelands. They lose their patience easily, they cannot control their anger and other negative emotions, they become violent, reckless, they lose their concentration easily—they become different people from who they were before going to war. And they suffer from feelings of doubt regarding the society they are serving and if it is really recognizing the risks and sacrifices they have taken for their community and country. They also suffer from doubts about whether they were cowards or not, whether they were true heroes on the battlefield. They question whether the choice of becoming a soldier was the right one. They ask themselves if the choices they made in the stressful war zones were correct. And they often question themselves about the cause of death of their friends and comrades, and if they were somehow responsible.

From my interviews with veterans, I found that they and their comrades all experienced these flashbacks and resulting anxieties to varying degrees when they came back from the war. Some managed to live with such memories and to readjust well enough to fit back into the society. But many others are still suffering and having a hard time readjusting. Some see therapists, some got divorced, and others still cannot maintain stable jobs. In the worst cases, some have committed domestic violence, and some have committed suicide or killed others upon their return home. These veterans often say that more soldiers have died back home than in Iraq or Afghanistan. The difficult thing about Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is that we cannot see it. If a soldier loses a limb or has obvious scars, it is easier for us to see their suffering, and it is easier for them to prove that they are hurting. But PTSD is a psychological problem. Veterans cannot prove it visually, so they have to prove it verbally. But the twist is that many veterans say “I came back alive with all my limbs,” and “the ones who died or the ones who lost their limbs are the true heroes,” and “compared to them, I am not a hero, I am

not enough of a hero to say that I suffer, to admit that I suffer from PTSD.” They are trained soldiers, which means they are supposed to be strong. They cannot allow themselves to become weak human beings. It is against their moral code. And some even think that others are faking PTSD in order to get a higher pension. These are the true anxieties of these soldiers. So it is difficult for the community to recognize the reality of PTSD.

Video is a medium that can make visible a stream of consciousness, one that can represent the complexity of multilayered physiological states in tangible form. Our world and human beings are too complex for us to fully grasp. The world is never simple, and humans are never simple. Each of us is a mixture of good and evil, and the world is a mixture of black and white. The world is ambiguous, and humans are ambiguous. Video dissects, selects, edits, and rearranges the elements of our ambiguous and complicated world so that we can perceive its complexity without having to simplify it. Video rearranges the world, so that this density becomes tangible. I therefore see great potential in this medium when I am dealing with psychological problems like PTSD. I am hopeful that it can help us understand the true state of problems and hardships without simplifying them. And by giving forms to the invisible scars of veterans, I hope that it reduces their stress and anxiety, and that it can become an opportunity for this community to recognize and understand their situation outside of the traditional value system of heroism.

Within the military system, awarding medals is the only way for soldiers to get recognition for their sacrifices and bravery. But these decorations only recognize traditional acts of heroism. Struggle and weakness are never recognized. With my artistic practice I try to provide another way to recognize their sacrifice. Instead of highlighting soldiers' heroism, I try to honor their fragility. This project embraces weakness and the non-heroic. Instead of highlighting the excitement of the battlefield, I record banal and ordinary images of these veterans taken in their daily environments. It is an attempt to create another kind of image of war. More abstract, more psychological, and without drama. It is an attempt to recognize the weaker side of this culture that is defined by heroism.

We cannot simply deny heroism, since it is tied to human nature, our will to survive, and our desire to protect other human beings. Heroism is also based on innocence, the beauty of self-sacrifice, and on good will. And it is deeply connected to our desire to live in and to create a more peaceful world. This heroism within a contemporary context is also connected to global capitalism. Today's wars and conflicts are deeply linked to the economic dynamism of capitalism and the nation-states that support it. However, in most of Western nations and developed countries, including Japan, the daily lives of the people feel far from the harsh realities of battlefields. War is something experienced from a distance, through media. It is understood as happening somewhere very far away physically or as something that has happened a long time ago, as part of history.

But there have always been wars and conflicts around the globe, and more and more it seems these conflicts are



reactions against the economical disparities created by global capitalism. As long as we are participating in this way of life and modes of production, I think we can never feel innocent. We don't see the conflicts firsthand, but we are all very much responsible for them. We want to put the guilt on the big global corporations, on the rich, and on politicians. But we are also the ones who benefit from this system. We are the ones who live peacefully in our comfortable environments, in our protected homelands. Behind these protections and this sense of security is the violent system of global capitalism, sustained by the dream of spreading democracy and the value of “freedom.” Just like heroism, it is hard for us to deny the value of freedom, as it is the most valuable quality for democracy. But at the same time, it is obvious that fighting for democracy and freedom is also fighting to protect the global economy.

This project allowed me for the first time to travel to several cities across America. I came away feeling that the United States is still very much a dreamland. The project took me to Miami, San Francisco, San Diego, and Oakland. Each city has scenic areas where you can encounter beautiful bodies of water, open skies, and sublime sunsets. The houses in these cities are large, streets are wide, cars are huge, portions of food are vast, and rich people are really rich. I was left with a sense of overwhelming wealth in every sense. But at the same time, of course, I saw poverty in each context, on the peripheries of each city. I witnessed many homeless people walking around downtown areas, run-down areas of the suburbs, and low-income neighborhoods. Just as we in Japan have been taught and have imagined since we were kids, America appeared under my exoticizing gaze as truly founded on the notion of the American Dream, this “dream project” that professes that everyone has an equal chance to succeed in life. But the gigantic gap between the successes and failures of these dreams was also very clear. The journey exposed me to both the bright side of such a big dream and to many of the nightmares behind it.

As a Japanese person, I tell myself that I am not a foreigner to this dream project or uninvolved or not implied within it. I also take part in it and the systematic violence involved in sustaining it. The fantasy of Japan's peace and prosperity is only possible through the United State's pursuit of freedom and fight for democracy. In Japan we pretend that we are an innocent and peace-loving people, but our fantasy is sustained by the American youths making the “heroic” choice to risk their lives for democracy and freedom.

Perhaps the goal of this project has been to help us recognize that we are all taking part in this big dream project, and to recognize that the violence of war does not only exist in Iraq and Afghanistan nor in the memories of veterans, but within our comfortable daily lives, our culture, our economy, our desires, our instincts, our beautiful souls, and our good will. We pretend that we are innocent but we are not. We are receiving full benefits from the violence involved in these wars. Our “dreaming” is predicated on the sacrifice of these young people. It's always the young who take on this heroic role. Heroism is a trick. Heroism is a trap. There is no easy way out of this trap. There is no easy way to undo this trick. How do we wake up from this nightmare? Perhaps by forging a new dream, trapping people within it, and tricking them into waking up from it.

Meiro Koizumi
Artist

Meiro Koizumi: Battlelands
March 23–September 2019

Meiro Koizumi

b. 1976, Gunma, Japan; lives in Yokohama, Japan

Battlelands, 2018

Digital color video, with sound

Courtesy the artist, Annet Gelink Gallery (Amsterdam),
and MUJIN-TO Production (Tokyo)

Meiro Koizumi: Battlelands is organized by PAMM Chief Curator Tobias Ostrander. This exhibition is presented by Bank of America with additional support provided by Knight Foundation.



Biography

Meiro Koizumi attended the International Christian University, Tokyo; Chelsea College of Art and Design, London, as well as the Rijksakademie van Beeldende Kunsten, Amsterdam. Recent solo exhibitions include Annet Gelink Gallery (2017), De Hallen, Haarlem (2016), Arts Maebashi, Maebashi (2015), Kadist Art Foundation, Paris (2014), Museum of Modern Art, New York (2013), Centro de Arte de Caja de Burgos (CAB), Burgos (2012), Art Space, Sydney (2011) and the Mori Art Museum, Tokyo (2009). He participated in numerous group shows such as the Experimenta's 5th International Biennial

of Media Art, Melbourne (2014), 8th Shenzhen Sculpture Biennale, Shenzhen (2014), Tokyo Opera City Art Gallery, Tokyo (2014), MSGSU Tophane-i Amire Culture and Arts Center, Istanbul (2013), Pinchuk Art Centre, Kiev (2012), Hara Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo (2011), Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo (2011), Liverpool Biennial, Liverpool (2010), Media City, Seoul (2010), Shanghai MOCA, Shanghai (2008) and many other. His works are included in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art, New York, Kadist Art Foundation, Paris and the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam.

Images

Meiro Koizumi, *Battlelands*, 2018. Digital color video, with sound.
Images courtesy the artist



1103 Biscayne Blvd.
Miami, FL 33132
305 375 3000
info@pamm.org
pamm.org

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