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The Extraordinary World of Ray Yoshida

Curtis Carter

Marquette University, curtis.carter@marquette.edu

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Kohler Arts Center takes us inside the artist's life

By Curtis L. Carter

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In most instances, a viewer's access to an artist's mind and personal lifestyle is limited to his/her work itself or some critic's efforts to filter the artist's work through words and concepts. The occasional gossip that trails the artists who rise to the top, or whose work is controversial, may offer additional insight.

"Ray Yoshida's Museum of Extraordinary Values" (at Sheboygan's John Michael Kohler Arts Center until Feb. 2) offers a different approach. This exhibition presents a close look at the everyday living space in which Yoshida engaged in his creative endeavors. The artist's environment on display at the Kohler consists of the complete home collection Yoshida acquired and lived with in his Chicago dwelling. His aesthetic *ménage* includes Asian and African cultural icons, thrift store and popular culture treasures, as well as the prints, drawings and collages of American self-taught artists. In short, the exhibition reveals a litany of visual culture that extended way beyond the art school influences adapted by many contemporary artists.

Some 60 of Yoshida's paintings and collages shown in the context of his complete home collection invite viewers to compare the artist's own creations with the influences apparent in his personal collection. Especially important for his art is the influence of self-taught artists such as

Martín Ramírez, Joseph Yoakum and Karl Wirsum. In selecting these artists and related cultural artifacts, Yoshida aims to broaden the narrow canon of most Western art as it developed in the 20th century.

The collages and paintings for which Yoshida is known employ assorted mixed-media devices, including abstraction and conceptualism. At times, fantasy bordering on Surrealism and comic book inspired-humor dominates the images. Throughout all his stylistic variances, there is a consistency of form—almost classical—that brings clarity and order to the diverse imagery. For example, Apollonian rows afford structure to the pictorial arrangements of oddly shaped architectural elements, hairdos and unidentified objects.

Of Japanese descent, Yoshida, was born (1930) and died (2009) in Hawaii. As an influential teacher at the Art Institute of Chicago, he became a mentor and participant in the Chicago Imagist School along with Jim Nutt, Ed Paschke and others. While happening in the 1960s at the same time as Pop art in New York, the Chicago Imagists were broader in scope. They embraced a Giorgio di Chirico-like Surrealist sensibility, with references to Asian and African cultures that the Pop artists did not pursue.

Yoshida's works hang in major collections across the nation, including the National Museum of American Art in Washington, D.C., the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in Philadelphia, the Art Institute of Chicago, the Chicago Museum of Contemporary Art, the Madison Art Museum and Kohler, among others.

For more information, visit jmkac.org.