Ōura Nobuyuki (b. 1949)
Japan
I
From the series: *Holding Perspective* (1982-1985)
1982-83, Shōwa period (1926-1989)
screen print, lithograph
77.15 x 57.5 cm
Museum purchase: R. Charles and Mary Margaret Clevenger Fund
2002.0032.01

Essay by Annie Kroshus

In 1986, Ōura Nobuyuki participated in a group show at the Toyama Prefectural Museum of Modern Art in Toyama, Japan. In this exhibition, he debuted ten lithographs from his series of fourteen, titled *Holding Perspective*. The series incorporates a variety of images from Asian, American, and European cultures. In addition to the conglomeration of images, each print prominently features the Japanese Emperor Hirohito (1901-1989), who reigned in the Shōwa era (1926-1989), through a very tumultuous time in history, including World War II (1939-1945). The controversial juxtaposition of Emperor Hirohito with certain imagery was so upsetting to some viewers that Ōura Nobuyuki's *Holding Perspective* was removed from the exhibition. Upon first glance, this work may seem more political than religious. However, there are two different types of religious significance in the work *I* (Roman numeral one): the Buddhist imagery that serves as the background for the print and the ideology of the Emperor as a divine being.

The *Holding Perspective* prints feature an array of different imagery, including traditionally clad Japanese women, the mushroom cloud of the atomic bomb, female nudes, Buddhist imagery, furniture, anatomy diagrams, and references to historic Japanese prints. Many of the works in *Holding Perspective* include parts of famous photographs by American Surrealist artist Man Ray (1890-1976). Man Ray is often associated with Western art historical movements

including Dadaism (1916-1922) and Surrealism (mid 1920s). While Dada ideology embraced the elements of chance and chaos, Surrealism would evolve to unite the worlds of fantasy and reality. Working in a variety of media, including painting, drawing, sculpture, assemblage, and film, Man Ray's photographs often challenged the viewer by placing well-known imagery into absurd constructs. Ōura Nobuyuki pays homage to Man Ray's style by not only creating absurd visual combinations of his own, but also by using Man Ray's photographs in his work. For example, Man Ray's *Moving Sculpture* (1920) can be identified in the upper left corner of *I*. *Moving Sculpture* is a black and white photograph of linen blowing in the wind. The white cloth is dramatically set against the black background; the clothespins grip the fabric as it billows in the wind. Ōura has flipped the photo sideways in *I* and cropped it in the corner. The other three corners of Ōura's print feature black and white photographs referencing landscape, although none are as identifiable as Man Ray's *Moving Sculpture.*

The black and white photos placed at the corners contrast greatly with the brightly colored central image. Composed of lavender, green, yellow, red, and pink, the image resembles Tibetan paintings of the bodhisattva Vajrasattva, meaning the "Adamantine Being" or unbreakable. Delaying nirvana to stay on earth to assist suffering beings, the bodhisattva Vajrasattva is most often white with some of his hair piled beneath an elaborate crown while the remaining hair flows down his back and over his shoulders. In this image, Vajrasattva embraces his consort Sattvavajri. This sexual union is referred to as Yab-yum, meaning father-mother. The symbolism of Yab-yum refers to the unification of wisdom and compassion. Generally, Vajrasattva holds a vajra, a ritual object resembling a lightning bolt, in the right hand. In this image, Vajrasattva extends and opens his right hand toward the viewer. There is an eye in his palm, a Buddhist symbol perhaps referencing his ability to see all types of suffering. In his left

hand, Vajrasattva holds half of a vajra while Sattvavajri holds the other half. When placed together, the vajra becomes whole, much like the joining of two individuals, yet again emphasizing the Yab-yum relationship. The image of Vajrasattva and Sattvavajri likely would have been used for meditation and is not meant to be pornographic. However, combining this image with an image of the Japanese Emperor Hirohito adds a layer of complexity that perhaps caused many viewers to regard the composition as offensive and taboo, further fueling the controversy of Ōura's series.

The arms of Vajrasattva and Sattvavajri reach toward the circular gold frame resembling a bicycle wheel. The screen-printed wheel equipped with spokes and an axel likely references the Buddhist wheel, an important element of iconography in Buddhist art that is symbolic of the *dharma*, or Buddhist teachings. While the wheel plays in an important role in Buddhist imagery, it is also another opportunity for Ōura to reference another iconic artist from the Dada and Surrealist movements. In 1913, Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968) mounted a bicycle wheel to a stool, called the work a "readymade," and challenged the conventions created by the art world regarding what is and is not fine art. The presence of the wheel, and the indirect reference to Duchamp, further alludes to the ideas of chance, fantasy, and perhaps absurdity. The black screen-printed wheel contrasts greatly with the other elements of the background, including smaller images of bodhisattvas that flank the top and the bottom of the central image. The remaining background is decorated with flowers and clouds. Perhaps a more introspective assessment of the state of Asian affairs during the mid-twentieth century, Ōura's inclusion of Tibetan imagery could be read in a pan-Asianist way. Pan-Asianism, an important historical concept, refers to the mobilization of all Asian countries, thus presenting a unified front in order to compete with the growing industrial and capitalist powers of Europe and America. Ōura's use

of Tibetan imagery combined with the images of the Japanese Emperor Hirohito indicates this pan-Asian connection.

A black and white photograph of Emperor Hirohito partially covers Vajrasattva and his consort Sattvavajri. Emperor Hirohito does not stare directly at the viewer but gazes off into the distance with a stoic expression. This photo of Emperor Hirohito can be dated approximately 1933-1935. At this time, the Emperor was in his early thirties and is depicted wearing military dress, which included a high-collared jacket, decorated with medals and emblems. Photographs of the Emperor in military dress distinguished his high status and distanced him from Japanese civilians. Prior to the war, Emperor Hirohito was typically portrayed in this way. After the war, however, he is most often seen in civilian clothing. Images of Hirohito in Ōura's series highlight the dichotomy of the pre-and post-war construct of the Emperor.

The powerful images of the pre-war Emperor emphasize the significance of the Japanese term *arahitogami*, in which a human being is also considered divine. Additionally, *arahitogami* was a term of respect used for the Emperor. On August 15, 1945, the people of Japan heard the voice of the Emperor, someone that they revered as a god, for the first time. In a radio address, Emperor Hirohito announced that the war did not work out as Japan had originally planned, and in fact, had resulted in great tragedy. In this address, Emperor Hirohito was attempting to embody the suffering of the Japanese people during the war and related his own suffering to theirs. On January 1, 1946, several months after delivering the radio address, Emperor Hirohito denounced the *arahitogami* title. In the statement, the Emperor pronounced his changing role and his relationship with the Japanese people: "The ties between us and the nation do not depend only upon myths and legends…do not depend at all upon the mistaken idea that the Japanese are

of divine descent, superior to other peoples, and destined to rule them."[1] The Emperor was thus denouncing his deified qualities and embracing humanistic ones.

In *I,* the young, black and white print of Emperor Hirohito is partially covered by an image of a human brain. The brain covers the left portion of the Emperor's face and is almost the same size as the Emperor's head. To the left of the screen-printed brain, a green duplication partially obstructs one of the smaller bodhisattvas. While other prints in the *Holding Perspective* series also use images of anatomy, Ōura's purpose for using the brain imagery is unclear, but could reference the Emperor's thoughtlessness during the war, yet another reason that the *Holding Perspective* series was criticized for its negative portrayal of the Emperor.

Ōura Nobuyuki was born in post-war Japan in 1945. In 1976, Ōura moved to New York where he worked and eventually created the controversial series *Holding Perspective*. Although the series was made between 1982 and 1985, the parallels to the post-war period and the political climate of Japan at the time played a critical role in its reception to the audience upon its display in 1986. The 60th anniversary of Emperor Hirohito's accession to the throne was celebrated in 1985. In 1988, the Emperor's fragile state of health was reported via the media, thus beginning a period referred to in Japanese as *jishuku*, meaning a collective issuing of self-restraint. During this time, the media refrained from playing festive music and offering celebratory news because it was deemed insensitive.

The display of the *Holding Perspective* at the Museum of Modern Art in Toyama in 1986 was at the center of this conflict. Initially, the museum in Toyama purchased four of the works from the artist and hoped that the artist would donate the remaining six to the museum after the success of the show. However, once the series was displayed in its entirety, many viewers began

[1] Emperor Hirohito's January 1, 1946 address. Quoted in John W. Dower, *Embracing Defeat: Japan in the Wake of World War II* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1999): 312.

to complain that the work seemed to mock the Emperor. Word spread quickly about Ōura Nobuyuki's controversial series, and Japanese right-wing nationalist groups, who supported the Emperor and the role of the military during the war, verbally attacked the museum and pressured the curator to remove the works. Not wanting to receive bad press, and due to fervent criticism, the museum removed the four pieces they had purchased and returned the six they had borrowed back to the artist. Unfortunately, the controversy continued once the works were no longer on view. In 1993, the museum secretly sold the four acquired works from *Holding Perspective* to an anonymous buyer and then burned nearly five hundred copies of the exhibition catalogue that featured the series. Upon discovering this news, Ōura Nobuyuki filed a lawsuit against the museum to reprint the catalogues and to buy back the prints. The dispute between Ōura Nobuyuki and the Toyama Prefectural Museum of Modern Art was covered extensively and raises many questions about the artist's role in expressing personal opinions or beliefs as well as the role of the Emperor to the Japanese people. The lawsuit was eventually dismissed. In 2002, the Spencer Museum of Art purchased an entire set of fourteen lithographs.

Ōura Nobuyuki's *I* is associated with a religious context in the prominent display of the Buddhist bodhisattvas that seem to be Tibetan. The other and perhaps more subtle layer of religious content in this image is that of Emperor Hirohito. Exploring the ideology of the Emperor as divine and understanding the controversy that developed as a result of juxtaposing the Emperor's image with unrelated and, at times, taboo imagery, caused the *Holding Perspective* series to be removed from view in Japan. Ōura Nobuyuki's choice of images of the Emperor throughout various stages of life indicates the constantly changing notions of power structure in Japan. The Emperor as a whole stood for conventions and cultural history, yet the

placement and selection of imagery perhaps indicates that Ōura was rebuking this idea and challenging the ideology of tradition in Japan.

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