

ART

by Jean Charlot



13 oils by a Wahiawa man

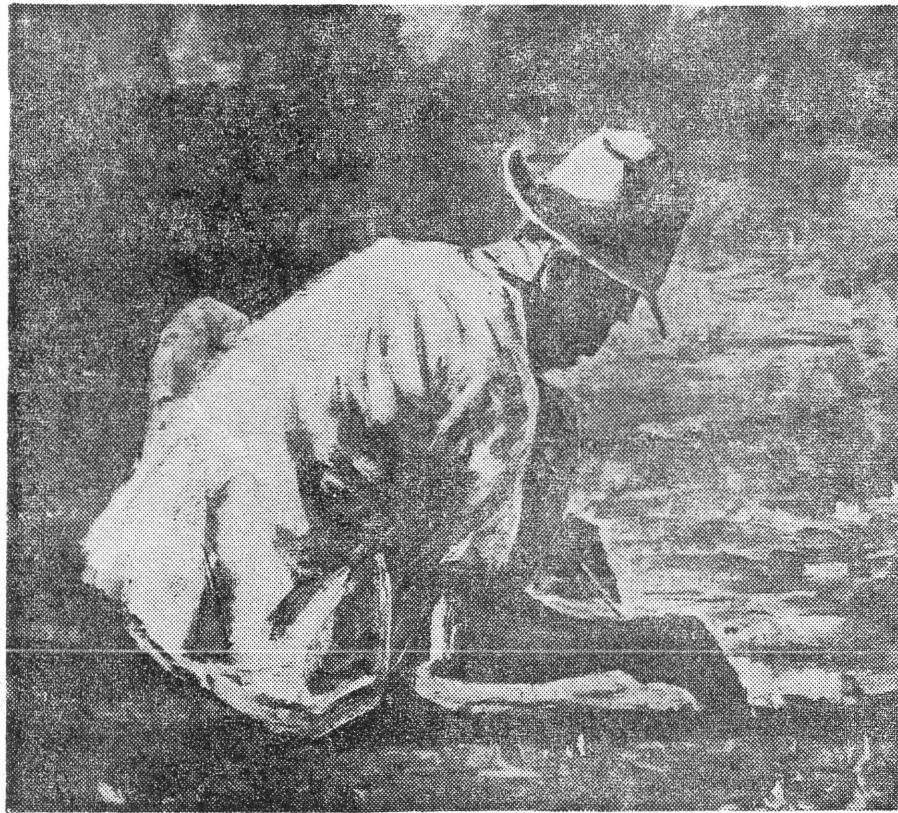
Shown currently at the Hawaii State Library are 13 oils by Hiroshi Tagami. He started painting in earnest only two years ago. He is now in his thirties.

I met with one of his works for the first time this August, on Kauai. Reviewing the Hanalei show, I mentioned that Tagami's painting reminded me of the French 19th century artist, Gustave Courbet.

For those who are not acquainted with Courbet, a few words about this realist master may shed light indirectly on the work of Tagami.

Courbet was born of peasant stock in the prosperous village of Ornans in France, at walking distance from the Swiss border.

Courbet, an unredeemed leftist, more than once escaped the imperial police who hunted him by crossing over onto the more hospitable foreign soil.



"Of the Soil"

The barren earth of Ornans

Ornans is austere, barren, rocky. Its geological vertical formations presage the magnificence of the neighboring Alps. Though Courbet painted landscapes, to equate the sunlight with pigments was not one of his preoccupations.

He rendered his native countryside in the very colors of soil and stone with grays, duns and blacks. With muscle and the palette knife he piled up impastos that contemporary connoisseurs, preferring a polished finish, rejected as plebeian.

It was said of him that he manipulated the tools of the fine arts as a mason handles mortarboard and trowel.

Towards the end of Courbet's career, the impressionists boisterously appeared on the scene. Their famed innovation consisted in "opening a window on nature."

City-born that they were, their contact with the countryside went no further than boating on the Seine and,

weather permitting, spreading picnics on the grass.

For a Parisian to open a window on nature was tantamount to communing with it.

Courbet could not subscribe to the new theory. For him nature meant much more than a spectacle or a relaxation.

As a child, all his senses had been brought to bear in escapades up the slopes of the cliffs and down the wet dark caves that dotted their flanks.

Smells of earth and grass, the texture and weight of rocks, the feel of a handful of turf, had forever spoiled for him the game of art. The concept of nature as seen through an open window was meaningless for the country-bred lad.

Loud colors versus earthy ones

Compared with impressionism's dazzling use of primary colors, Courbet's landscapes looked mighty black indeed. It was only posthumously that the

cubists rediscovered Courbet's genius on his own uncompromisingly constructive terms.

This pocket history of a moment in mid-19th Century art came to my mind when looking at Tagami's "Of the Soil".

This was a rare happening, the discovery of a definite personality. To judge from that single picture, here was a painter who worked as if the impressionists, and the 20th century as well, had never been.

His model was a garden-er bending low, lovingly engrossed at his task of weeding.

Had Tagami ever seen a reproduction of Courbet's "Stone Breakers": father and son similarly bent at their lifelong task, that of breaking large stones into small stones, so that the France of Napoleon III could boast of modern roads?

Was the painter an innocent as far as art fashions were concerned? Or was his denial of present-day esthetics wilful?

The current one-man show answers the query.

Tagami was born and raised at Wahiawa. He now lives in Kahaluu. As he came to art in his thirties, this suggests that he had ample time to refine his contact with nature without a thought of finding it "decorative."

His training was casual. He attended for a while classes at the Academy of Arts. We may take for granted that the would-be artist looked hard at the Academy collections.

In capsule form, the history of art, both Oriental and Occidental, was displayed there under his eyes. Incidentally, no Courbet.

Some lessons from Hayward

Further painting lessons with Peter Hayward left their trace. But Hayward is "a man of the world" as the quaint saying has it. His pictures are built on artful premises, both compositional and technical.

When Tagami borrows his

master's formula he remains ill at ease. His native grit and guts hardly harmonize with Hayward's gentler utterances. Tagami's knowledge of nature is different.

"Through the Wet Woods" is a landscape that goes beyond visual appreciation. Rendered in terms esthetically bold — strong impastos, radical simplifications — it surrounds us with dampness. As is the case with the landscapes of Courbet, it stands opposite to the "open window" attitude of city folks.

A giant tree with small child

"Banyan" conjures childhood memories. The maze of trunks, roots and aerial roots is felt as an awesome playground. Standing under the giant tree the lonely child is not only a compositional device, but a recaptured image of a younger self.

Unlike his landscapes, Tagami's figure paintings are unencumbered by school learning.

In "Paka Hiamoe" the brushstroke as such is solid, but there is no search for what was once called significant form.

Rather than man alone, it is the relation of man to nature that is depicted in the reclining body, the confident gesture of the pillowed arms. A patch of grass to roll in and to doze in, this is happiness.

Tagami's one apparent attempt at visual abstraction is "Koi". Definitely up-to-date is the whirling mess of colors and the maelstrom of brushstrokes.

It takes a while to realize that this is in no way an abstraction but the rendering of a sight keenly observed.

Suddenly I was looking directly into a fish pond. Food was being thrown into it. Carp leaped and overlapped each other in the frothy churning waters, the better to snap at the meal.

To the academic dictum that art imitates nature, Oscar Wilde answered that nature imitates art. "Koi" illustrates the pithy saying. Even though for centuries fish have been fed in ponds, only now can this happening take esthetic meaning.

The new awareness was made possible by abstract expressionism.

His most individual picture

"Of the Soil" remains Tagami's most individual picture. It projects into the future more forcefully than the better groomed landscapes.

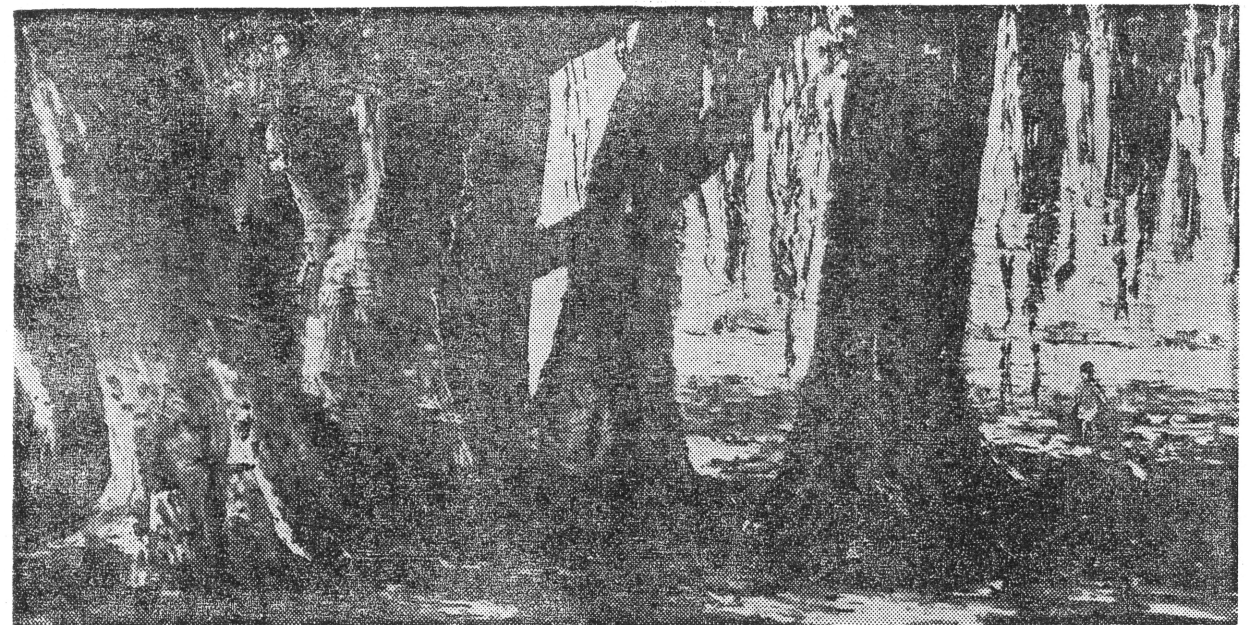
A related work is "Arm and Driftwood". It is a mirrored image of the painter's left arm, a fragmentary self-portrait.

As such, it has a disquieting element. We know ourselves from inside out and

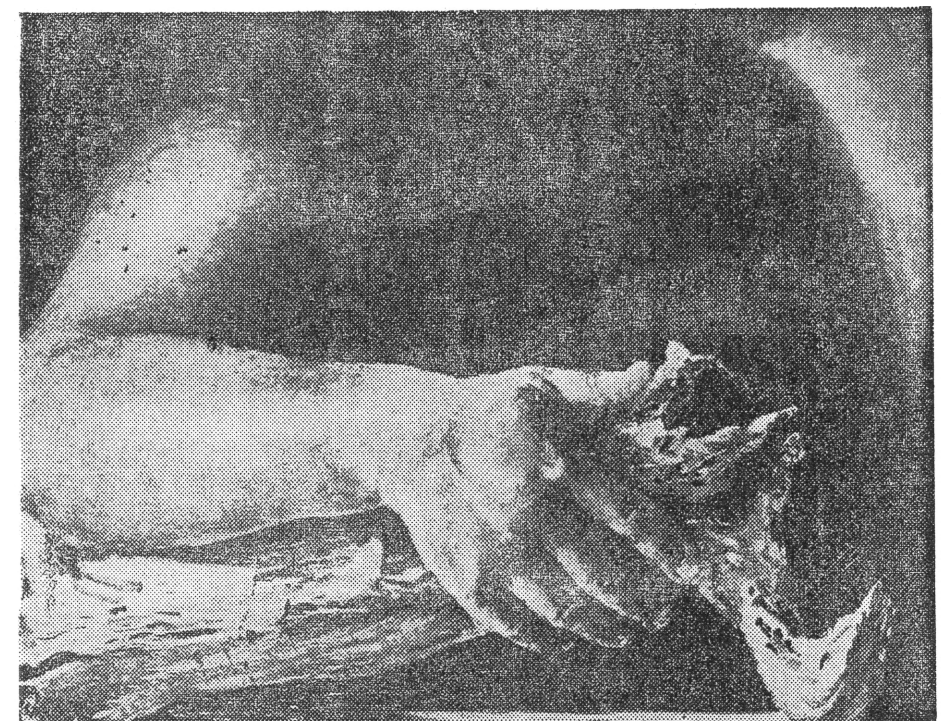
that knowledge we take for granted. It can be a bizarre and at times an unsettling experience to try and assess ourselves from outside in.

The intensely realistic rendering of the hand, knuckles, furrows and all, contrasts with the delicately outfocused view of torso and shoulder, half perceived in the mirror.

The driftwood that the hand holds also proposes its mystery, that of a form shaped by soaking, erosion and rotting. Wood and flesh become twin images of mortality.



"Banyan"



"Arm and Driftwood"