

ART

by Jean Charlot



The Isami Doi memorial show

The long awaited memorial show of Isami Doi opens tomorrow at the Academy of Arts. Prints and paintings range in time from the early twenties to 1965, the year of his death.

My first contact with Doi, or at least with his work, was in New York in 1931. We exhibited side by side in the annual juried show "Fifty Best Prints of the Year."

His linoleum cut, "The Bannister," was a bemused version of his New York habitat, a perspective view of the endless stairs one had to climb to reach the walk-up attic studios, the only type of housing we young artists could afford in the big city.

In Doi, the art and the man are as one. This show should not be reviewed as an exercise in esthetics. His works tie together to form a translucent recital of what joys and sorrows are the stuff that makes a very special human life.

An active spiritual search

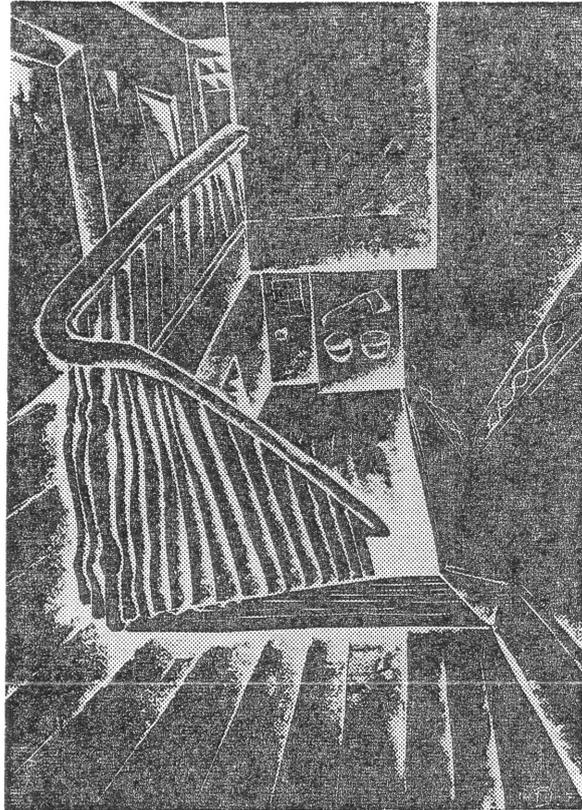
Perhaps more clearly than is the case with most, an even bigger theme dominates this recital. It is an active spiritual search that gives a unified flavor to this diary written with line and color.

Once Hemingway, in a gloomy mood, said that to be truthful all stories should end with death. In Hemingway's case, the ending came as a door slams shut.

In Doi's case, the end is more like the opening of a door to allow in at last a full share of light and of air.

Doi remains identified with his native Kauai. "Grassroots," "native son," are terms that have lost their freshness through political mouthings. Yet, in their pristine meaning they apply properly to Doi.

Doi's story parallels that of that other master, Peter Breughel of Flanders. Breughel toured Italy when Mi-



"The Bannister"

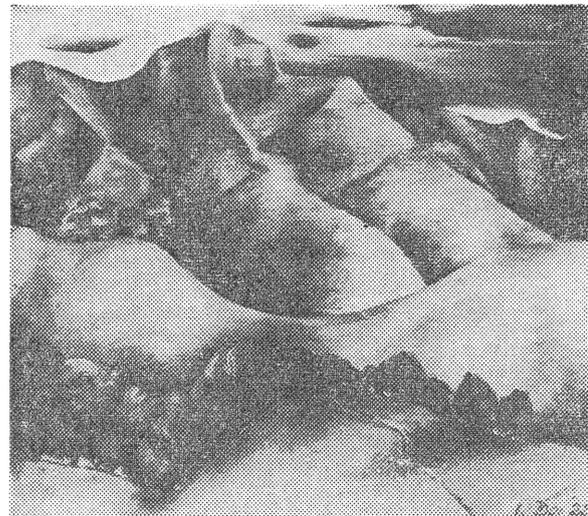
chelangelo was still alive. He returned home more Flemish than ever.

Doi's first models were the hills and cliffs of his Kauai. In New York he was featured by dealers and feted by collectors. The temptation crossed his path to become just another abstract expressionist. But his last pictures, as were his first, are inspired by the hills and cliffs of his own Kauai.

Content with their lot,

Breughel and Doi, by so-called international standards, remain provincial. But it is essential to remember that it is by their own choice. That is the very reason why they are true masters, while many an ambitious expatriate is forgotten.

As told in his pictures the story of Doi flows smoothly, if not uneventfully. To divide its text into chapters is but a device that allows for clarity.



"Hills" by Isami Doi

Rather than a book to leaf through page after page, his life work is more in the nature of a scroll to be unrolled.

Here, even in a figure of speech, the duality of East and West that cohabitate in his work is unavoidable.

Love usually is first

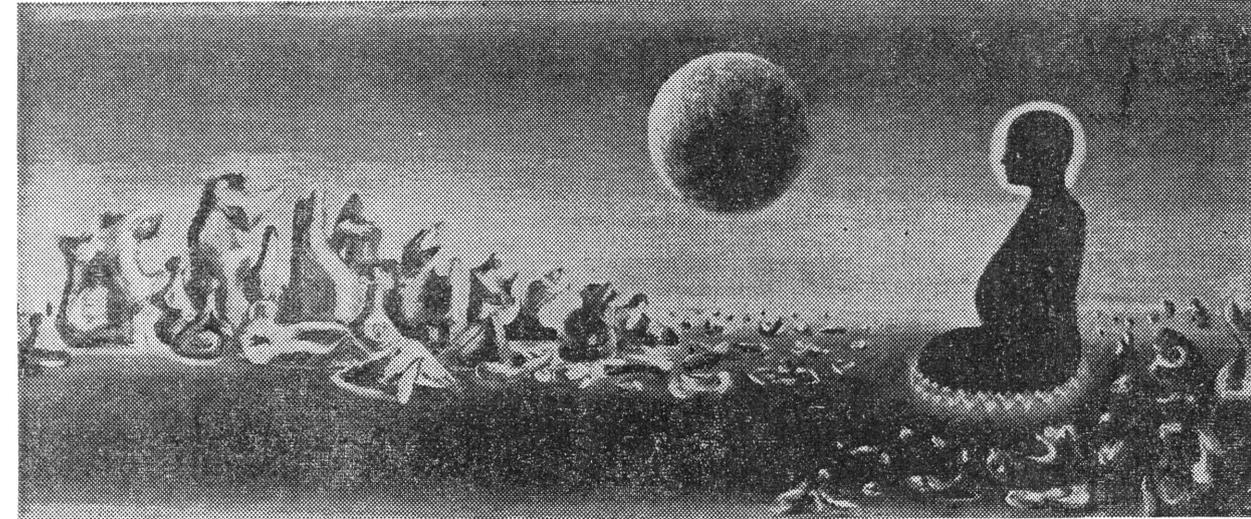
Young painters, the world over, meet and conquer love as a first esthetic affirmation. Doi's youthful pictures, painted in muted duns and browns, have a discreet erotic quality.

The loosening of the cincture, a favorite image of Greek poetry, finds here its Asiatic counterpart, the untying of the kimono belt. The peculiar modesty of the presentation suits Doi who, throughout his life, was to avoid theatrics.

In mid-course, one meets in his work deep drama and the resulting scars. The artist goes through a time of unbalance.

To describe emotional wounds, Doi turns for this once to the paraphernalia of symbols inherited from Greece and Rome.

Centaur, broken columns, sphinxes are snatched out of context from their neo-clas-



"Buddha Talking to the People of Another Planet About the Earth."—Photos by Honolulu Academy of Arts.

sical frame. They become his own personalized images.

Typical is "The Centaur," mutilated and its gallop reduced to the aimless rocking of a hobby horse.

A turn to the East

The healing of the wound meant, in Doi's case, turning from the West towards the East. Most explicit in its imagery is "Buddha Talking to the People of Another Planet About the Earth."

Doi's spiritualization deepened. Borrowed symbols, be they from East or West, are replaced by personal ones. Mystics have been at a loss to put their visions into words. Doi found it hardly easier to translate his in-

terms of line and color.

The works of that period come close to pure abstraction. His oranges and vermillions signify flames and light. A simplified Buddha shape is Doi's hieroglyph for meditation.

Faceless, seen from the back, it assumes at times the dark musty outline of a mortuary bundle. At others, it whirls and blazes with light. For Doi light equals enlightenment.

The realm proper to the visual arts is, needless to say, that of the visible. There was a real danger that the artist, having crossed this borderline, would stop work. To intimate he would mention his intent not to paint anymore.

He changed his mind

We should be grateful that he changed his mind. Towards the end, warmed by a sort of Indian summer, he painted some of his best paintings.

Peace had been found the hard way. Doi left aside all symbols. He did not need them anymore. His search, in a circular motion that had lasted his lifetime, ended face to the hills, cliffs and valleys of Kauai.

In his youth, he had used them as models in his search for form. Now he saw them as spiritual entities. Wisdom was not to be sought anymore in other planets or in yoga postures. Wisdom was all around him.

In the paintings of the 60's form and spirit are, at the end of the long search, reconciled.

Compare "Hills" of 1928 with "Lingering Mists" of 1962. The picture of the 1920's is sculpuresque, its values strongly contrasted. In the 1960's, form gives way to space. The color thins. The bare canvas plays an in-

creasingly dominant role.

Two curtains of clouds barely open up to disclose a narrow strip of landscape. One guesses at the grassy plateau on top the cliff, at the darkening vertical of its wall that blends into the verdant slope of the valley below.

He belonged to Kauai

A key to Doi's masterly work is that he belonged. To Hawaii of course, but Hawaii includes the skyscrapers of Waikiki, the hotels of Kaaanapali. He belonged most singularly to Kauai.

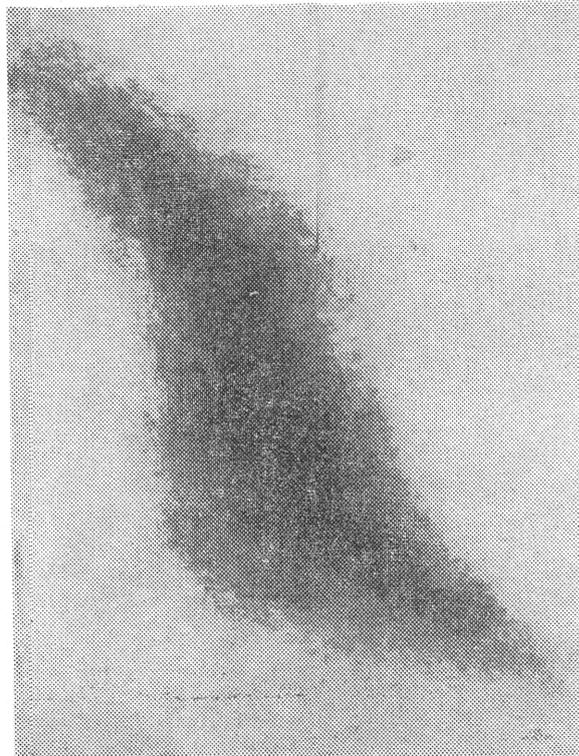
As we grow in size, now that we are one State among

the many, a second wave of do-gooders rushes our way.

They are the missionaries of esthetic. They proclaim international artistic formulas as a cure-all for ills we have not.

We should be wary of the sort of hit-and-run wisdom with which they deliver their admonitions before returning home. Could we give them in turn an advice they do not ask for, it would be to try to empty themselves of selves long enough to look at our cliffs and sea, long enough to try and unravel the intricate complexity of our Hawaiian ways.

That there is here, right at home, matter enough to inspire great art is proved by Doi of Kauai.



"Lingering Mists"



Doi's "The Red Kimono"