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 1966, 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."

It is fitting that "The Bannister," a bemused version of his New York habitat, a perspectival view of the endless stairs one had to climb to reach the walk-up attic studio, the only type of housing we young artists could afford in the big city.

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

An active spiritual search

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

One is Hemingway, in a gloomy mood, saying that truthful all stories should end with death. 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.

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

Doi’s story parallels that of other master, Peter Breughel of Flanders. Breughel toured Italy when Michangelo 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 bought 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.

Doi’s "The Bannister"

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

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 looseness of the cursive, a favorite image of Greek poetry, finds here its Asian counterpart, the unifying 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 imbalance.

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

Centaurus, broken columns, sphinxes are snatched out of context from their neoclasical frame. They become his own personalized images.

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

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

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.

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 swirls 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 mitigate 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 in 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 face with 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 1938 with "Lingering Mists" of 1962. The picture of the 1930’s is sculpturesque, 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.

Doi’s "Red Kimono"

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 bends into the verdant slope of the valley below.

He belonged to Kauai

A key to Doi’s masterly work is that he belonged to Kauai. He belongs 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 esthetics. 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 by 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 complex 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"