

'Realm of the Senses' Director Returns

Oshima Delves Into The Spirit

by J.N. Thomas

Nagisa Oshima of Japan is one of the world's most inventive and profound film directors. Although he has made over 20 feature films since 1959, Oshima was all but unknown in the United States until his 1976 film in the Realm of the Senses shattered the complacency of American screens. Oshima visited the Bay Area recently for the opening of his new work, *Empire of Passion*.

Oshima was born in Kyoto in 1932. As a young student he was deeply involved in radical politics, drifting into cinema almost by accident. For five years he served as an assistant to such masters of

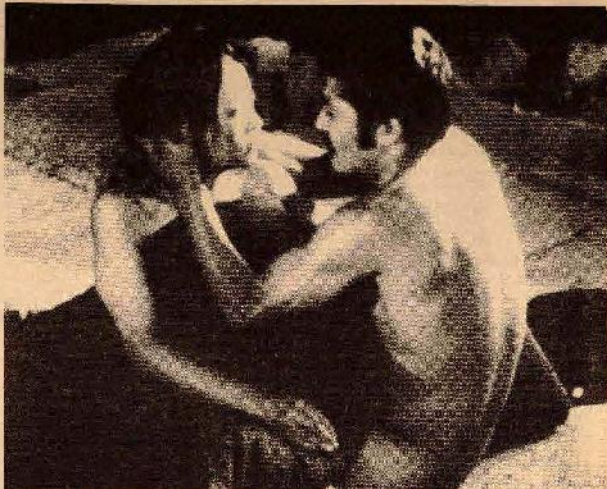
Japanese cinema as Masaki Kobayashi before making his first film, *A Town of Love and Hope*.

Oshima's films share many of the qualities of such other directors of his generation as Jean-Luc Godard and Bernardo Bertolucci. He is fiercely independent and has stated unequivocally that he is "proud never to have been a member of any political party or ever to have exposed any party line."

At the same time, he hasn't changed much from his days as a student firebrand. His films are among the most critical of capitalist society being made anywhere in the world, and he continues to address his films primarily to young people. Only they, he feels, have a chance to overcome the repressive, claustrophobic conditions of modern times.

Those who have seen only *Realm* are bound to get a shallow, one-sided impression of Oshima's concerns. The earlier films are closely akin to those made during the same period by Godard: highly experimental, violent, angry. If anything, Oshima's early works are even more directly political than Godard's. *Realm* was seen by many in Japan as something of a political retreat, an impression that *Empire of Passion* will doubtless reinforce. Actually, both works are extensions of Oshima's basic themes. He has moved from examining repression and rebellion in society to exploring the catacombs of the spirit.

In *Japan Realm* was released in a censored version. Oshima later issued the script as a book, with stills from the film. This book was confiscated and Oshima was charged with obscenity. A long and highly-publicized trial ensued; last



Oshima hopes to put sexuality into a larger social context in "Empire of Passion."



Oshima, director of "Empire of Passion."

October an acquittal was handed down. "What's a nice man like you doing at an obscenity trial?" I asked the outgoing, witty director. "Did you expect it? Do you feel it accomplished anything?"

"It was a total surprise," Oshima said, obviously eager to discuss the experience. "I selected the photographs very carefully to avoid censorship problems. I expected no problems."

"What's different about the way I presented my defense is that in previous cases, people have defended themselves by saying, 'This is not obscene.' My defense was, 'What's wrong with obscenity?' Nobody had ever approached it in this way before. That made it a case of freedom of expression, that there should be no suppression at all. In that sense, it was good, it brought that to people's attention."

I asked if anything had changed as a result.

"No, absolutely not," he answered. "The innocent verdict was reached by ignoring the nature of the defense. So the verdict is not going to have any effect on the law. However, this is only the first round. The government has appealed, and assuredly it will end up in the Supreme Court. The whole process will take something in the vicinity of ten years."

"One doesn't often have a chance to confront this issue," he added, "but for me this case is bound to drag on for a long time."

He denied the censorship of *Realm* inhibited him in making *Empire*.

"The new film doesn't just concentrate on a serial relationship in isolation, as with *Realm*," Oshima said. "The attempt was to put the sex relationship in a social context, to put it outdoors, to bring in a lot of other things that affect sexuality. That, not the trial, is why there's less explicit sex in *Empire*."

Empire appears to be a transitional work. The separate elements are all of a very high quality: the score by the leading composer Toru Takemitsu; the photography by Yoshio Miyajima; the lead acting by Tatsuya Fuji (of *Realm*) and Kazuko Yoshiyuki. It's a fascinating, searching work, yet it misses the cohesive, wrenching impact of such Oshima classics as *Boy*, *The Ceremony*, and *Realm*.

I asked why most of his films are based on historical incidents.

"The facts that form the basis of the movies are always some sort of shocking incident," Oshima explained. "What interests me is that when I research it and examine the actual records, they never really explain the motives, the process that led up to the incident. That's what I enjoy as the creative process in making the films: penetrating the fact and finding out how it came about, and what sort of human, psychological process went into it."

Does he intend to shock people? "I don't set out with the intention of shocking the public," he responded, "my main principle is something that interests me. If you want to look at it that way, it may be I want to shock myself — showing myself something new that I've never done before, or that someone else hasn't done before."

"In the States you sometimes make as many as three films in one year," I commented. "Now you seem to do one film every two or three years. Why? Will that continue in the future?"

As throughout the interview, Oshima's reply fairly whistled with clarity and energy. "There were two years when I made three films, 1960 and 1968," he said. "They're the result of a combination of circumstances. One side is what's going on in society and the other side is what's going on with me, personally. Those two years were particularly active years for young people in Japan, lots of student demonstrations and so on. It was sort of a rising tide that occurred, in big waves, in these two years."

"Simultaneously, I felt that I had a lot I wanted to say to those young people, a lot I wanted to share with them through my films. So the question now is whether that sort of social movement will return, and if it does, now that I'm much older," he said laughing, "whether I will be able to rise to the occasion and produce that many films in one year again."

"*Starart*" can be seen at the Vorpall Gallery, 393 Grove St., S.F. through March 18.

"Starart" Exhibit Opens In The City

Rock Stars Show Off Art

by Laurel Taylor

"In art you are total controller. It's a visual thing. You see the creation bit by bit and you have the chance to correct and to build it," says John Mayall, one of six musicians whose art is collected in an exhibit called "Starart," now showing at San Francisco's Vorpall Gallery.

Unfortunately, none of the six artists whose works make up "Starart" is in total control of his/her work. Considering that they are all rock stars, this is not very surprising. It's difficult enough to become a first-rate painter when that is all that you do, let alone when you have to squeeze it in between gigs.

In 1976, 22-year-old Debbie Chesher, a former art student with little connection to the music business, came up with the idea of putting together a coffee-table art book. She wanted to include the works of Joni Mitchell, John Mayall, Klaus Voorman, Cat Stevens, Ron Wood and Commander Cody — all of whom started out in art schools and all of whom still consider it a second talent. Mayall and Voorman have both worked for several years as commercial artists.

The show which first appeared in L.A., then went to New York, and is now wrapping up in San Francisco, was an outgrowth of Chesher's book. The book

was self-published, beautifully designed and is infinitely more interesting than the show.

Most everyone is familiar with Joni Mitchell's, Cat Stevens' and John Mayall's paintings and illustrations, since they have frequently designed their own album jackets. Klaus Voorman, who designed the then-radical black and white cover for the Beatles' *Revolver* LP, was featured in a show last year at the Oakland Museum. "Record Album Art," Voorman (the Manfred Mann Band) is a renowned session artist and is presently scoring the film *Popeye* with Harry Nilsson. His name was suggested to Chesher by Ringo Starr, who is an avid collector and owns many of Voorman's pieces.

The real surprise of "Starart" is Ron Wood, who seems to be constantly drawing his famous friends and who captures their essences and likenesses quite competently with colored pencils. "Belushi on Plane Killers" is the best of the exhibit. Wood's drawings of his wife and children, however, which only appear in the book, reveal that life as a Rolling Stone is not as hard-earned as it's cracked up to be.

Commander Cody has a MFA and used to teach art in Michigan. His real talent lies in sculpture, though none are shown here; the Warhol/Lichtenstein popstyle he chooses to paint in has been done to death, and done much better, by others.

All in all, "Starart" exhibits more vivaciousness than virtuosity. The paintings or drawings of other musicians are often the most exciting: Mayall's Dizzy Gillespie, for example, are great. Especially liked "Charlie Down in Mexico," which shows Mingus from behind, sitting in a wheelchair and wearing a large sombrero.

This study of shadows and shapes is evocative of the man himself. "Even though he was paralyzed and given to moodiness, he was still capable of enjoying things to a transcendent fullness. So I was compelled to paint this to balance out the other vision of him that contains the wrestling with fear and death," says Mitchell.

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Starart Photographs

"Starart" can be seen at the Vorpall