

KENJI YOSHIDA - A CELEBRATION OF LIFE

KENJI YOSHIDA 1924 - 2009

A MESSAGE FOR THE SPECIAL EXHIBITION KENJI YOSHIDA - A CELEBRATION OF LIFE

My father, Kenji Yoshida, artist and painter, passed away aged 84 on February 24, 2009. It is a joy that for the first time since his death, a solo exhibition of his works is to be held at October Gallery, London.

In the past, Yoshida felt honoured to have his memorable retrospective exhibition at the British Museum (1993), as well as several solo exhibitions at the October Gallery. His major works were also displayed at Norwich Cathedral (2002) and Canterbury Cathedral (2003) in England. On the other hand, in Japan where Yoshida was born and lived for forty years, a major solo exhibition has never been held; and even in Paris where he had lived for forty-four years, his first major exhibition was presented at UNESCO headquarters in October, 2008, just a few months before his death. So, in a sense, London is a city for which he must have felt a far greater affinity than either Tokyo or Paris.

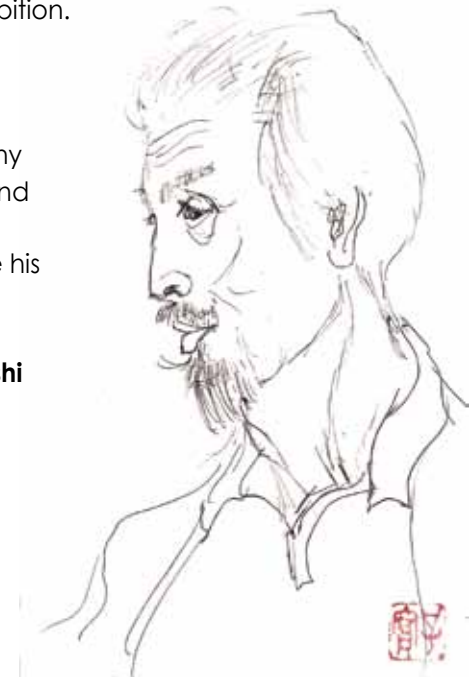
In 1976 and 1977, I lived with my father and mother at their apartment/atelier in Paris, and had the opportunity to closely observe my father setting about producing his paintings. Each morning when he got up and every evening before he went to bed, he used to pray in front of a wooden image of the Buddha. I am sure that in both his daily life and in making art, my father consistently turned his mind to life and peace, which he always adopted as the title of his paintings.

During the forty-four years of his stay in Paris, my father returned to Japan only on rare occasions. Whenever he was in Japan, his greatest enjoyment was to meet his old comrades-in-arms and his former pupils at the school where he had taught art.

My mother had started to fight against cancer early in 1986, and died in September that year. During her illness I witnessed my father devote himself to nursing her day and night. Some months after my mother's death, my father met the late José Férez Kuri, who, with Elisabeth Lalouschek, invited him to have his first exhibition at October Gallery. José later became his reliable agent and best friend for 23 years. As a joint organiser of this special exhibition with October Gallery, José devoted himself and greatly contributed to the realisation of the exhibition. I would like to offer my utmost thanks to José, to all the staff at October Gallery, to Mr. Lawrence Smith, Keeper Emeritus of Japanese Antiquities at the British Museum, and also to the many people who have kindly contributed to the exhibition.

I sincerely hope that people from the United Kingdom and from many other countries enjoy and appreciate my father's first solo exhibition since his death.

Kiyoko (Yoshida) Togashi







ARTIST'S STATEMENT

I paint to tell people the importance of *Inochi to Heiwa* or *Life and Peace*. My honourable professor, Furukido Masaru, once told me: "Yoshida, don't take up a rifle, take up painting". During the Pacific War, Mr. Furukido refused to take up arms and spent the rest of his life instructing others in the Pacifist cause. He died among the Vietnamese.

Against his will I became a soldier. I spent days in meditation on Life and Death, witnessing the death of many of my companions and civilians. After the war, I was still alive, and, when I thought about how I should live and what I should do, the lesson my professor once gave me came back to me.

What people consider most important is Life and Peace. War is the most horrible act that destroys them. War should not exist. The only way to build Peace and to give importance to Life consists in giving people mutual confidence to discuss these two values and to try to make them become real. I understood the teaching of my master: "Yoshida don't take up a rifle, take up painting" as my own mission from the gods, given to me at the same time as life itself.

Every morning and every evening I reflect with remorse on my own insufficiencies, praying for the souls of victims that wars produce all around the world. In accordance with my professor's words, I want to transmit my ideas through my painting, as best I can.

Life brightens most when Peace occurs.
Peace is supreme beauty.

Kenji Yoshida 2007



Kenji Yoshida at the opening of *Inochi to Heiwa - Life and Peace*,
October Gallery, June 2007.
Photo: Jonathan Greet

KENJI YOSHIDA: BETWEEN WORLDS

by Charles Darwent

In memory of José Férrez Kuri.

Migration to Paris apart, there seems little to link Kenji Yoshida with Vincent van Gogh. The only other likeness, perhaps, is that we run the risk of seeing both men as artefacts rather than as artists.

In the case of Van Gogh, the problem lies with the notorious ear-cutting episode – an incident which recent scholarship has questioned as myth, but which has nonetheless coloured public perception of the artist since his death in 1890. Self-mutilation suggests mental illness; so, as a result, have the swirls and experiments of Van Gogh's canvases, his anxious light, his agitated brushwork. But would we pathologise these things if we didn't know about Van Gogh's ear, his time at the asylum in Saint-Rémy? Would we rather see another painter, scholarly, accomplished, at the sharp end of a highly organised avant-garde? And so, in quite a different way, with Kenji Yoshida.

The one thing we all know about Yoshida is that he was a *kami-kaze*, or, rather (he died in 2009) a might-have-been *kami-kaze*. Conscripted as a pilot in the air wing of Japan's Imperial Navy late in 1943, the 19 year old ex-art student was offered the honour of dying for his Emperor by flying a bomb-laden aeroplane into an American ship. "Offered" is not, perhaps, quite the right word. Failure to accept the glory of joining the Divine Wind meant unthinkable shame, salvable only by the ritual suicide of *seppuku*. Like the vast majority of *gakuwashi* ["young eagles", or trainee *kami-kaze*], Yoshida was only saved from a choice between two forms of self-extinction by Japan's surrender in August 1945.

If this brought obvious relief, it also brought various forms of shame. Post-war Japan came to view the *kami-kaze*

episode as a kind of military madness; anyone involved in it – and this included the twenty thousand *gakuwashi* who had not joined their five thousand comrades in dying in battle – was tarred, unfairly, with the militaristic brush. And then there was the opposing shame of survival, of having debased the god-like status of the *kami-kaze*; of owing your life to Hiroshima and Nagasaki, to Imperial weakness. One way or another, Kenji Yoshida and his fellows would end the war with a particularly toxic form of survivors' guilt. If you can find it, watch *Wings of Defeat* (2007), a documentary by the director, Risa Morimoto. Sixty years after the end of the War, Morimoto interviews a group of old men, all ex-*kami-kaze*, about their later lives. All weep with mingled joy and horror at their survival.

Which is to say that I do not mean to belittle Kenji Yoshida's wartime experience, nor to question the role it played in shaping his art. To do so wouldn't just be disrespectful, it would be foolish. For the last thirty years of his life, all his canvases carried the same, eloquently brief title: *sei-me* in Japanese, or, in English, *Life*. In a Norfolk cathedral or on an Israeli kibbutz, at UNESCO headquarters in Paris or in the new Japanese galleries at the British Museum, Yoshida and his work were emissaries of life, and of the peace that allowed it. To some extent, I suppose, the *sei-me* canvases were a form of mourning for those young comrades he had seen fly off on *kami-kaze* missions and never come back; a kind of perpetuation. And none of this was unconscious. Life was, and was meant to be, the name of Yoshida's work, its subject and its care.

But, of course, Yoshida was not an ambassador or a peacenik or a monk: he was an artist. He was also a

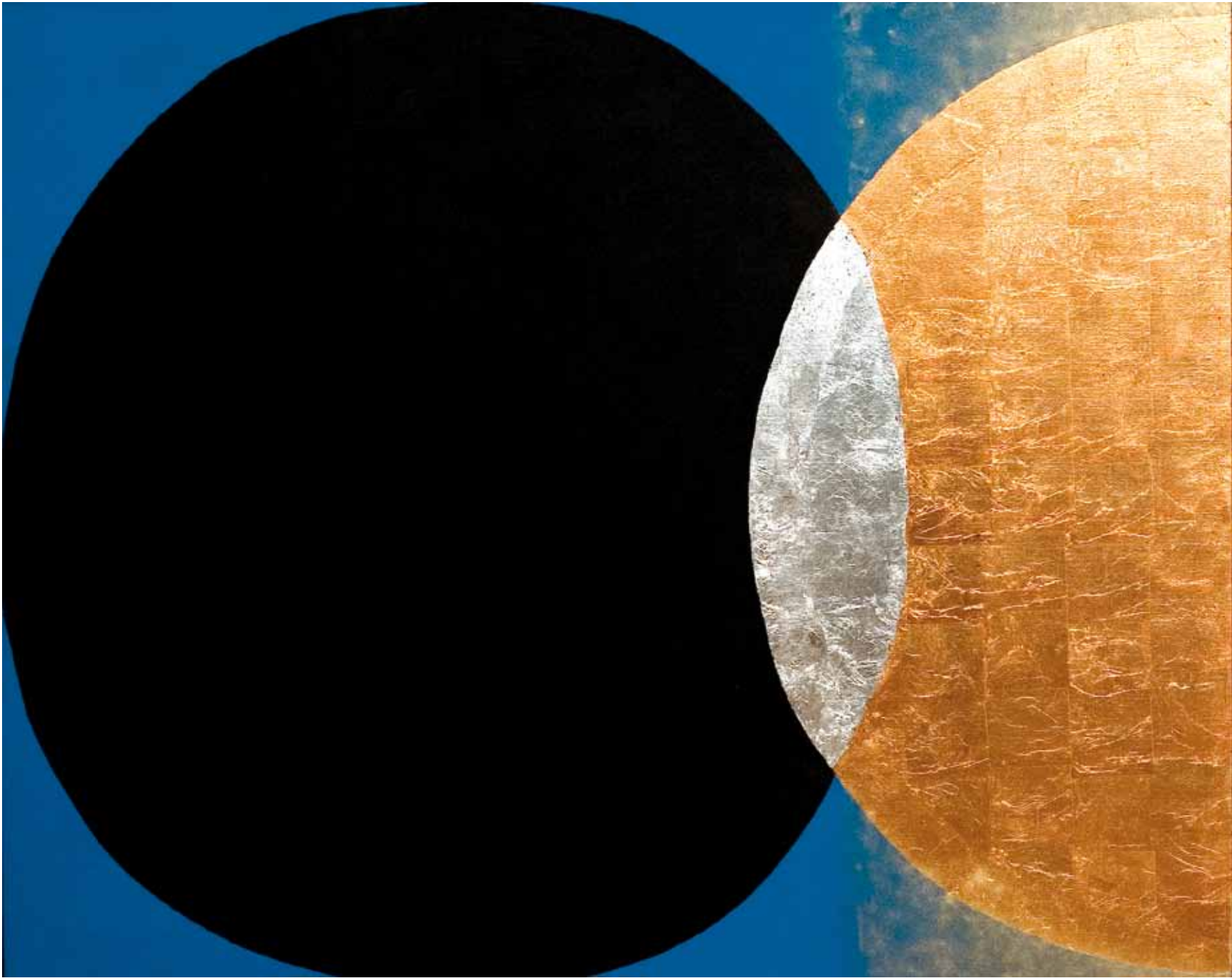
very specific kind of artist. In 1964, leaving a wife and young daughters and a teaching career behind him, he abandoned Japan for Paris. This, in itself, speaks volumes. If, as an artist in the early 1960s, you were going to leave Osaka for the searing centre of modernism, then, like the Gutaï, you went to New York. When Van Gogh moved to Paris in 1886, Impressionism was in full swing. When the Japanese painter, Tsuguoharu Foujita, sailed there in 1913, the city was the unrivalled painterly place to be. By 1964, Picasso was in his eighties, Yves Klein was dead and the École de Paris had given way to the New York School a decade and more before. The print studios of the once-famous Atelier Dix-Sept, where Miró and Braque had made work and to which the forty-year old Yoshida took himself on arrival, were in discreet but terminal decline. He was, apparently on purpose, joining a sinking ship.

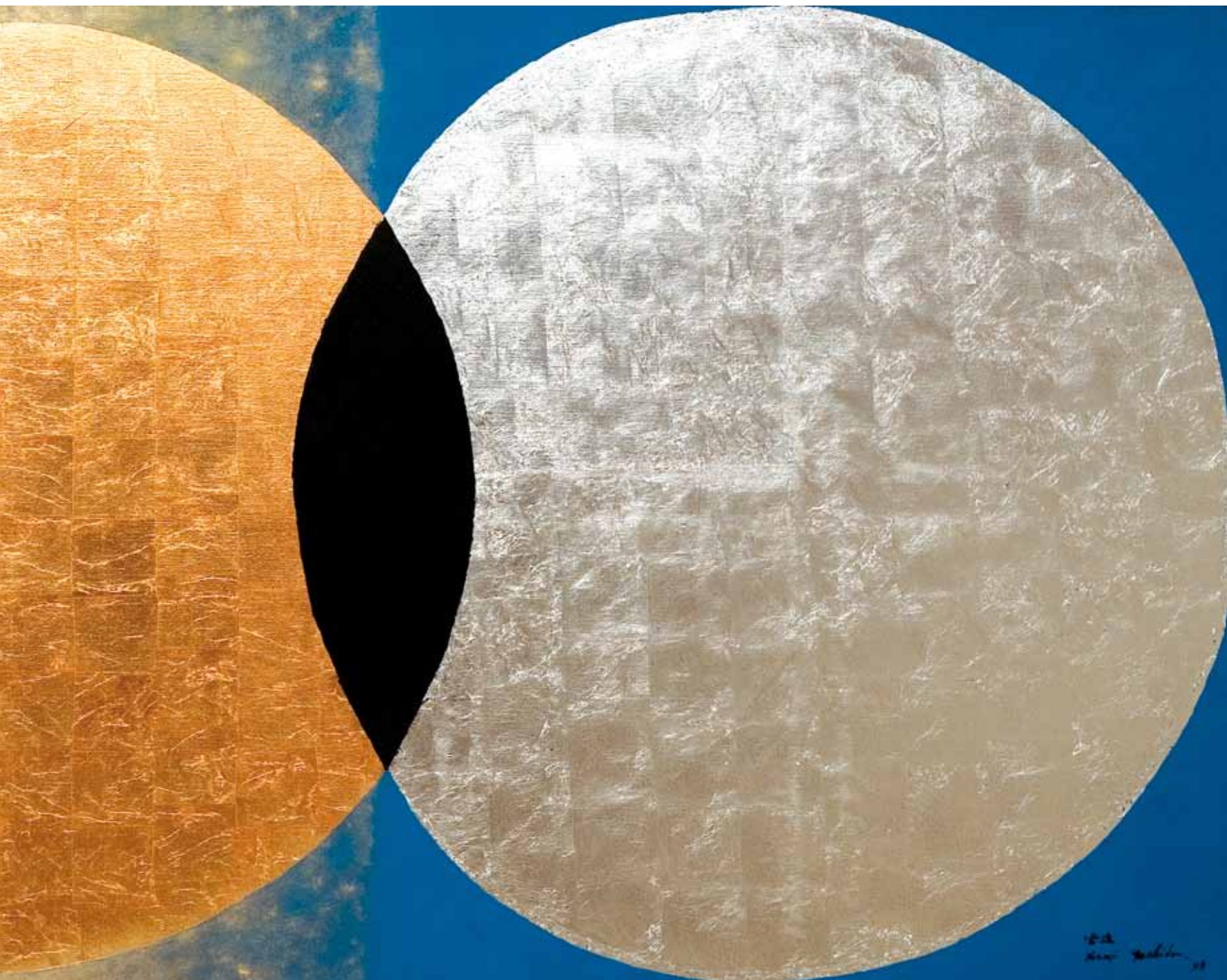
We have to assume that, just as Yoshida's dedication to peace would be entirely conscious, so his choice of Montparnasse over Manhattan was intended. It may simply have been a matter of age and taste, or a desire to turn back the clock to an artistic moment before the horrors of World War II; it may have been both of those things, or neither. But Yoshida's decision to identify himself with a specific type of modernism, albeit in a highly idiosyncratic way, means that we can judge him by the lights of that modernism. Just as we can see Van Gogh the Post-Impressionist as something more than an artefact, a loon with a bloody ear, so we can come to Yoshida as more than just a survivor of the Divine Wind. We can consider him as an artist, and ask how well he holds up.

The answer, from the evidence of this show, is extraordinarily well. I'm looking, as I write this, at a work called, naturally, *La Vie*, made in 2008 at the end of Yoshida's long career, a few months before his death. It is formed of two conjoined canvases, eliding a Western diptych tradition with the Japanese one of screen painting. In other ways, too, the work suggests resolution. In material terms, it is made of silver and gold leaf laid on oil paint laid on cloth. Formally, *La Vie* sets up a rhythm of interlocking circles or moons, overlapping so that gold-on-black areas produce a lozenge of silver, gold-on-silver of black. Its story is one of continuity, of perpetuation across the canvas.

More, maybe, *La Vie* finds unity in the breach that divides its two halves. In strictly formal terms, the line between the canvases acts as an axis or starting point for the composition as a whole. It reminds us that Yoshida was, and chose to be, that now rather old-fashioned thing, a geometric abstractionist. But it is difficult (and, I suspect, it would be unwise) to see this division in formal terms alone. Together with its Western function, the line also serves a Japanese one: it is that *wabi-sabi* imperfection which makes for true beauty, that renders geometry humane. It seems to me not too far-fetched to see in the split down the middle of *La Vie* a form of self-portrait; of a man caught between East and West, life and death; of the beauty of acceptance.

Charles Darwent is art critic of the Independent on Sunday.





La Vie, 2008. Oils and metals on canvas, 130 x 324 cm (2 panels)



La Vie, 2008. Oil and metals on canvas, 114 x 195 cm



La Vie, 2008. Oil and metals on canvas, 114 x 195 cm