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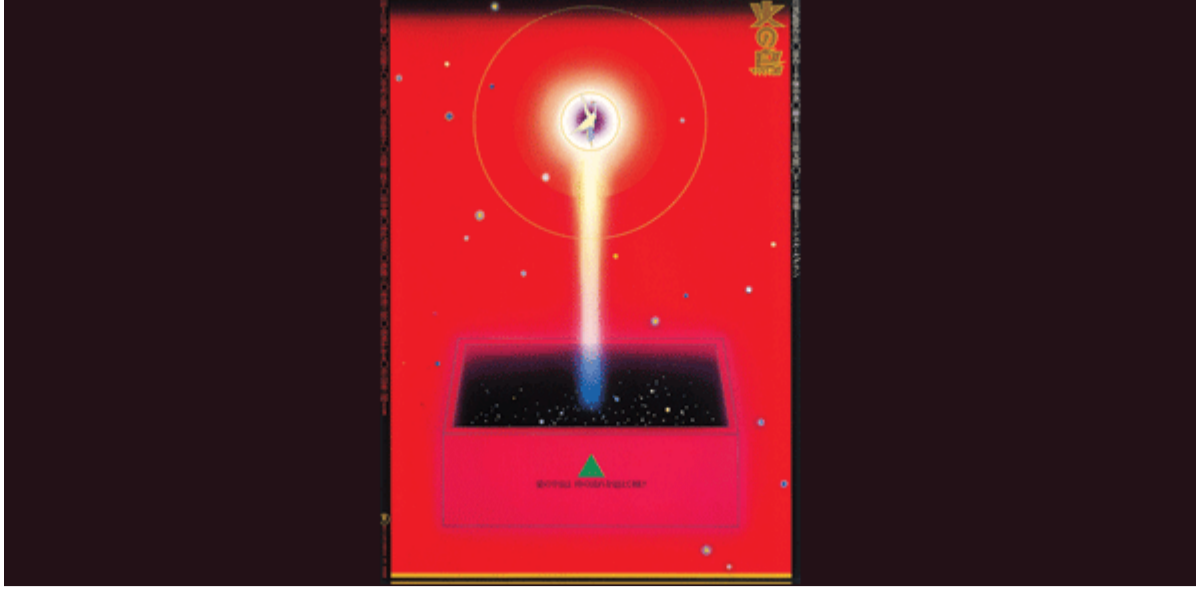
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Graphics in Bloom Koichi Sato Poster Exhibition

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BY DAVID BALZER September 09, 2009 21:09

EDITORIAL RATING:

To Nov 7, Mon-Fri 11:30am-4:30pm; Thu 11:30am-7pm; Sat (Sep 12 & 19, Oct 3 & 17, Nov 7 only) noon-5pm. The Japan Foundation, Toronto, 131 Bloor W, 2nd fl. 416-966-1600 x229. www.jfjtor.org.

Does Koichi Sato's poster work – currently on display at the Japan Foundation – presage digital design? Panels at the exhibit don't give any information on the evolution of his technique from the '70s until now, so it's not clear when he began using computers (or, for that matter, if he ever did) but regardless, it's an excellent example of how contemporary aesthetics are not always in thrall to technology, but instead tend to dovetail with it and, in some cases, dictate what it seeks to do.

Sato's line is characteristically thin, almost indiscernible. (In the exhibition brochure, Maggie Kinser Hohle calls it "tight.") This gives the work a satisfying tension: it is obviously informed by constructivism and expressionism, yet these movements are best known for their chunkiness. That Sato also likes surrealism – many of his posters feature lips (one has high heels), and recall pivotal thin-line painters Dali, Magritte and De Chirico – and occasionally collage, adds another layer. Sato seems to want all of the early-20th-century avant-garde in his work, without awkwardness or hesitation. This might, in fact, be the best definition of and defence for an '80s style that has, up until around now, seemed so abhorrent, though one must appreciate Sato's ever-present taste: his posters aren't dated, hardly ever seeming busy, risky or showy just for the sake of it. He is, perhaps primarily, a minimalist in the great Japanese tradition.

One of Sato's specialties is theatre posters – from butoh to musicals to Western drama. (Check out his design for On Golden Pond, simply colour gradations representing a sky at dusk.) The consistency of his vision, at times its only vague association with what it's advertising, can be compared to Eastern Bloc movie posters from the same period. It's a telling alliance, really, a case for how well avant-garde design jumps across periods, ideologies and continents. We North Americans are still waiting, however: we may have Sato's thin line and gradations ready to use on our computers, but we all-too-rarely see commercial examples of his intelligence and grace.

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