

**Dalí's *The Three Sphinxes of Bikini* and Soka Gakkai's  
Anti-Nuclear-Weapons Campaigns**

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**ABSTRACT:** American nuclear weapons tests in the Bikini Atoll of the Marshall Islands started in 1946 and continued until 1958. They had a powerful echo in popular culture, from comics to drinks, and French fashion designer Louis Réard in 1946 gave the name “bikini” to a new “explosive” two-piece female swimsuit. They also had echoes among leading artists, and in 1946 Salvador Dalí painted *The Three Sphinxes of Bikini*, a sober meditation on the possibility of a nuclear apocalypse and of a destruction of the environment by irresponsible humans. The paper compares the message of *The Three Sphinxes of Bikini* with the ecological and anti-nuclear-weapons teachings of Soka Gakkai and its third President Daisaku Ikeda. It also compares Dalí's painting to works of contemporary artists from East Asia who offer similar meditations, such as the installation *Fu Dao* of the late French-Chinese artist Chen Zhen, and the *Kaki Tree Project* and the installation *Mega Death* by Japanese artist and Soka Gakkai member Tatsuo Miyajima.

**KEYWORDS:** Nuclear Tests at Bikini Atoll, Bikini Atoll, *The Three Sphinxes of Bikini*, Daisaku Ikeda, Soka Gakkai, Chen Zhen, Tatsuo Miyajima, Kaki Tree Project.

*The Bikini Tests*

The name “bikini” evokes today the two-piece swimsuit for women created in 1946 by Louis Réard (1896–1984). He could not find a “respectable” model willing to present his “scandalous” swimsuit and had to hire nude dancer Micheline Bernardini to introduce his creation (Felix 2017).

Both Réard and Bernardini became immediately and internationally famous. Réard is still widely remembered as the inventor of the bikini, although there were already two-piece female swimsuits on the market. Another French fashion designer, Jacques Heim (1899–1967), had already launched one of them.

Interestingly, he had called it “Atom” (Gayomali 2012). The comparison between the atomic bomb and an “explosion” of femininity was very much in the air. The name of Réard’s bikini also had a nuclear connection, although today it tends to be forgotten.

When Réard launched his swimsuit, the U.S. had just detonated the first of twenty-four nuclear weapons it will drop on the Bikini Atoll in the Marshall Islands until 1958. These bombs were much more powerful than those used in the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings of 1945 (see Appendix A). Réard took the name of his swimsuits for “explosive” women from the Bikini atomic tests.

The 167 inhabitants of the Bikini Atoll had to be relocated elsewhere. Despite what had been promised, radiation continued to make it too dangerous for them to go back home. An ill-fated attempt between 1972 and 1978 exposed islanders to serious health risks (Niedenthal 2001). Only in 2012, it was determined that Bikini was safe enough to be inhabited again, but of the more than 4,000 descendants of those who lived there in 1946 less than ten returned. They take care of the tourists who come to what is both a diving paradise and a living memory of the nuclear tests of the Cold War era.

In 2010, UNESCO declared the Bikini Atoll a World Heritage Site (UNESCO World Heritage Committee 2010, 20) because it is

a testimony to the dawn of the nuclear age, the start of the Cold War and the era of nuclear colonialism—stages in human history of global significance (Republic of the Marshall Islands 2009, 11),

“in the context of a paradoxical image of peace and of earthly paradise” (ICOMOS 2010, 148).

### *Bikini and Popular Culture*

The Bikini atomic tests had a large impact on popular culture. In a story published in October 1946 in *Action Comics*, Superman is forced by villain Specs Dour to drink a preparation that makes him insane. He ends up in Bikini just while the atomic tests are being performed. Paradoxically, the atomic explosions cure him from insanity (Siegel et al. 1946).

As American scholar David W. Kupferman has demonstrated, the Bikini nuclear tests entered the realm of kitsch too. For example, Marshall Islands bars

started serving drinks with atomic-derivative names, such as “Nuclear Survivors’ Special” (Kupferman 2015, 2).

Kupferman argues that kitsch is used to exorcise mourning and the fear of death but can also dangerously corrupt them and deprive mourning of its capacity of generating a moral reaction. Kupferman writes that,

The problem with kitsch is that it leads to [Immanuel] Kant’s [1724–1804] “pathological love,” and so we drink our Bravo Shots [another drink taking its name from a nuclear test] and read through the list of beach movies on the Bikini Atoll website without any sense of moral obligation to those whose lives were affected, and often destroyed, by the reality of the experience and the horror of the event (Kupferman 2015, 12).

While kitsch may be fun, confronted with the Bikini tragedy it is our moral duty to

consider the effects of kitsch, and the ways in which the conditions of possibility delineated by kitsch corrupt the work of mourning. For if kitsch totalizes the other and violates the requirement that we interiorize the dead while allowing them to speak, it also denies the face of the other, and the ethical epiphany of that face (Kupferman 2015, 17).

### *Dalí and Bikini: The Three Sphinxes*

While these examples are from popular culture (and the distinction between a “high” and a “low” culture is increasingly controversial), other reactions to the Bikini tests came from leading artists. They had already reacted to the 1945 bombings in Japan.

*Uranium and Atomica Melancholica Idyll* by Salvador Dalí (1904–1989) may well be the first painting by a well-known artist following the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki (August 6–9, 1945: see Introvigne 2022). “The atomic explosion of August 6, 1945, shook me seismically,” wrote Dalí, and he immediately started the painting (Dalí 1976, 216).

Later, in 1951, Dalí will publish a “Mystical Manifesto” on atomic issues and the path that after Hiroshima brought him from anticlericalism to a return to Roman Catholicism. As other artists, Dalí was both fascinated by the new physics of the atom, which offered painters and sculptors seemingly infinite possibilities, and terrorized by atomic weapons (Dalí 1951).

Some Italian artists believed they had manifested similar attitudes and used the expressions “nuclear art” and “atomic art” before Dalí. They even sued him for

trademark infringement (Taylor 2016). In fact, there were two rival groups of Italian artists involved in the controversy, one in Milan around Enrico Baj (1924–2003) and one in Livorno around Voltolino Fontani (1920–1976) (Sauvage 1962; Anzani 1980; Corgnati 1998; Cagianelli 2002; Fontani 2005–6; Introvigne 2022).

Just as he had reacted to the bombings in Japan, Dalí also reacted to the tests in the Bikini Atoll. The result was his celebrated painting *The Three Sphinxes of Bikini* (1947).



**Image 1.** *The Three Sphinxes of Bikini.*

The painting was purchased by Daniel Sickles (1900–1988), a famous American collector and the grandson of the Civil War general who had his same name (1819–1914). It passed through three other private collections until it was sold by Sotheby's in New York in 1993. The buyer was one of the leading international Dalí collectors, Teizo Morohashi (1934–2003), founder of the

Japanese sporting-goods retailing company XEBIO Corporation (Fundació Gala-Salvador Dalí 2023, 629).

In 1999, Morohashi donated his Dalí collection and the building hosting it to the newly established Morohashi Museum of Modern Art in the Aizu-Bandai-Kogen area of his home prefecture of Fukushima (Morohashi and Morohashi 2003). Ironically, or perhaps symbolically, considering the presence of the *Three Sphinxes* in the collection, Fukushima will become in 2011 the theater of one of the worst nuclear accidents in human history at its Daichi Nuclear Power Plant.

In Dalí's works, the reference to sphinxes in the title has often a negative connotation. In 1931, he had painted *Remorse: Sphinx Embedded in the Sand*, which may have alluded to his partner and later wife Gala's (1894–1982) sadness for not being able to have children from him.

Coming back to *The Three Sphinxes of Bikini*, if we eliminate the “sphinxes” from the painting we are left with a waste land whose most apparent feature is the absence of life. A study of the shadows projected by the sphinxes, and on the neck of the larger one, allows us to recognize the effects of one and perhaps two explosions, which are not part of the painting. What Dalí is showing us are not the nuclear bombs tested in Bikini but their possible effect: a post-atomic, apocalyptic desert.

However, in another way, Dalí does include atomic explosions in its painting. The heads of the first and the third sphinx are atomic mushroom clouds. Although Dalí shows us these human-atomic heads only from the back, the first, larger sphinx is clearly looking at the third. Her tense neck indicates concern and fear. However, perhaps the first sphinx does not realize that the third one is a mirror image of herself. When humans look at atomic destruction, they necessarily look at the same time at themselves as causes of the destruction, whether they understand it or not.

But then we have the second sphinx, which is totally different. There are no nuclear explosions there. We see a beautiful tree. In fact, two trees embracing each other. It is a triumph of nature, which when left alone, flourishes in harmony and love.

*The Three Sphinxes of Bikini* enacts the couple purity/danger of British anthropologist Mary Douglas (1921–2007: Douglas 1966). The purity of nature is in danger of being annihilated by nuclear weapons, whose destructive power

has been demonstrated by the Bikini tests. Yet, the strength of love and harmony represented by the two embracing trees leaves some hope that avoiding the apocalypse may not be impossible.

*The Three Sphinxes and Daisaku Ikeda's Anti-Nuclear-Weapons Thought: A Comparison*

Soka Gakkai is well-known for its campaigns against nuclear weapons. However, Daisaku Ikeda, Soka Gakkai's third President and now Honorary President, teaches that the fights for preserving the environment and to avoid the nuclear annihilation of all life on earth are two sides of the same coin, based on the principle of the "oneness of life and environment":

The destruction of nature is the destruction of humanity. Nature is our home. All life on this planet, including of course human life, was born from the natural environment. We don't owe our existence to machines or science. We are the products of nature (Ikeda 2010, 188).

We find in Ikeda's and Soka Gakkai's message against pollution and nuclear weapons the same fundamental themes Dalí tried to call our attention to during the Bikini tests with the *Three Sphinxes*:

- Nature (the second sphinx) embodies purity and hope.
- Both nature and humans are threatened by the danger of nuclear annihilation.
- We (the first sphinx) look at the possible apocalypse (the third sphinx) with awe and fear but do not realize that the "enemy" is within us (the third and the first sphinx are almost identical).

As Ikeda wrote,

If we are to put the era of nuclear terror behind us, we must struggle against the real 'enemy.' That enemy is not nuclear weapons per se, nor is it the states that possess or develop them. The real enemy that we must confront is the ways of thinking that justify nuclear weapons (Ikeda 2009, 12).

*East Asian Artists and Ecological Disasters: Chen Zhen's Fu Dao*

While Dalí's references are taken from Western culture, there are East Asian artists who have reflected on the same themes. The first case I would like to

present here is the installation *Fu Dao* by Chen Zhen (1955–2000), a Chinese artist from Shanghai who moved to Paris after the Cultural Revolution and became a French citizen (Chen Zhen et al. 2007).



**Image 2.** Chen Zhen, *Fu Dao* (1997).

While maintaining an ambiguous relationship with his youth during the Cultural Revolution, Chen Zhen was deeply interested in Buddhism and Taoism, which he saw as an antidote to the evils of an anti-ecological and consumerist society (Zhong 2014, 117–22). Indeed, he saw his art as a Taoist experience. He stated in an interview:

In Taoism, the Void is only what is ‘between.’ Within this perception, the world can be seen as a ‘juncture’ in space. So why not see art the same way? (Sans 2003, 156).

*Fu Dao*, created by Chen Zhen in 1997, is a typical contemporary (as opposite to “modern”) work of art consisting of a site-specific installation. That means that the work is installed for a limited period in a gallery or museum and adapts itself to the location. Each installation is slightly different from the others, and new versions can be installed even after the artist’s death. Two of the most famous versions of *Fu Dao* were installed at the Guggenheim Museum in New York in

2018, and in 2020–2021 (during the COVID pandemic) at the Pirelli HangarBicocca in Milan.

“Fu” (福) is the Chinese character for “good luck.” The character also indicates the Buddha. Two different Chinese characters, 倒 and 到, meaning respectively “upside down” and “to arrive,” are both pronounced as “Dao.” Thus, “Fu Dao” may mean “Upside-Down Buddha” or “Good Luck Upside Down,” or “The Arrival of Good Luck.” Chen used all these titles in English for his installation.

The work consists of a pagoda-like structure with a roof made of real bamboo wood and leaves. Two kinds of objects are suspended to the structure, upside down. In the upper level, there are objects typical of modern consumeristic and materialistic society such as discarded parts of bicycles, tubes, aluminum and plastic toys. At the lower level, small Buddha statues are suspended, also upside down.

The use of real bamboo indicates the glory of nature. However, this uncontaminated nature is attacked by pollution, symbolized by the industrial and consumer product wastes hung upside down from the first level of the structure. It seems that spirituality is also lost, as the Buddha statues are small, are placed in the installation upside down themselves, and hangs from the lower level. However, the message of the work does not end here. “Fu Dao” means “Buddha [or good luck] upside down” but also “the arrival of the Buddha.” Good luck and the Buddha have a possibility of “arriving,” of coming back. The upside down Buddhas can be put back on their feet. It is up to us. We have a roof made of real bamboo, i.e., a loving and caring Mother Nature, upon us. The process of pollution and destruction can be reversed, and we find how to reverse it by looking at the “in-between” Buddhist-Taoist space.

### *Tatsuo Miyajima and Kaki Tree Project*

The second Japanese work I would like to mention is Tatsuo Miyajima’s *Revive Time: Kaki Tree Project*. Miyajima is a member of Soka Gakkai, and Nichiren Buddhism is crucial for his artistic experience. His work has been described as “a mimetic representation of Ikeda Daisaku in the art world” (Woolsey 2019, 41). He is well-known for his light installations based on LEDs.



**Image 3.** Planting a tree as part of *Kaki Tree Project*, Ormea, Italy, April 29, 2019.

As American scholar Jeremy Woolsey tells it, the story of *Kaki Tree Project* starts with

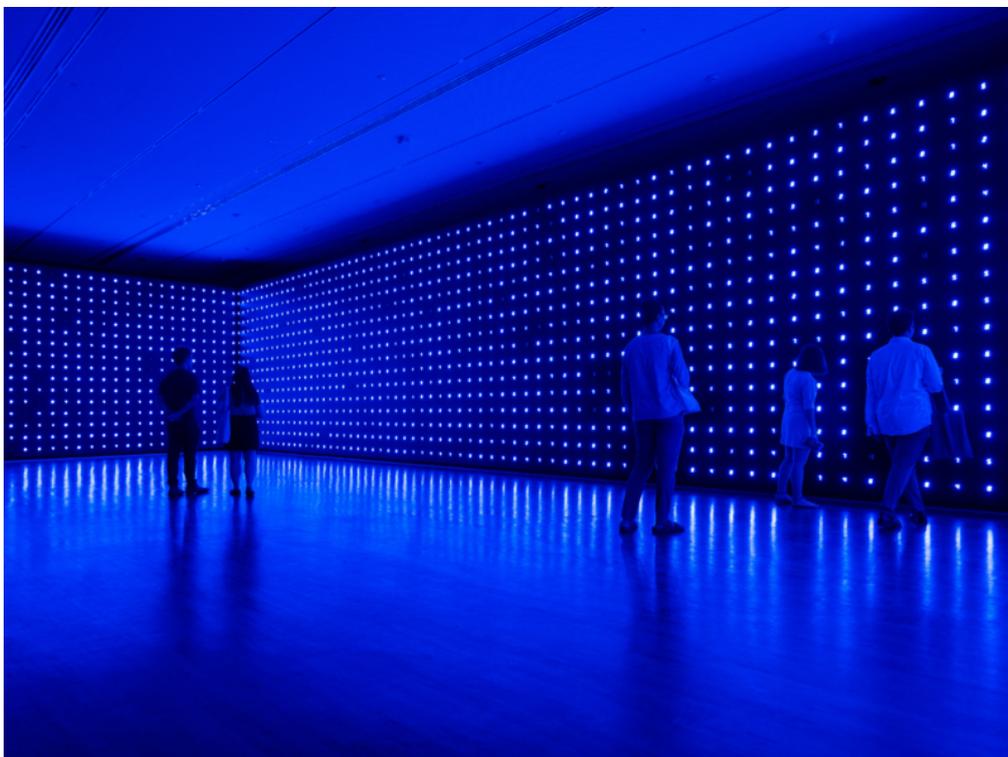
Ebinuma Masayuki 海老沼正幸, an arborist in Nagasaki, [who] managed to foster back to health a persimmon tree (kaki tree) scarred from the atomic bombing of Nagasaki on 9 August 1945. The tree began producing seedlings and, eventually, Ebinuma started to hand these out to children in Nagasaki to plant as symbols of peace. Miyajima met the arborist in 1995 when he was in Nagasaki for an exhibition, and, with his permission, began *Revive Time: Kaki Tree Project* in 1996 (modeled on Ebinuma's approach), with the first planting at the former Ryuhoku Elementary School. His aim was to decenter the role of the artist and allow each individual to make an artistic statement by planting a kaki sapling. Here, the kaki tree can be seen as a symbol of the continuity of life through horrific destruction (Woolsey 2019, 52).

*Kaki Tree Project* is part of contemporary art (as opposed to “modern”), which does not necessarily manifest itself in paintings and sculptures, operates through a different “paradigm” (Heinich 2014), and can even go beyond installations. Continuing to plant descendants of the Nagasaki tree throughout the world is an artistic form like what German artist Joseph Beuys (1921–1986), whose spiritual

context was Anthroposophy (Zumdick 2013), called “social sculpture.” Beuys himself in 1982 placed 7,000 basalt stones in front of Museum Fridericianum in Kassel, Germany, and suggested each was paired with an oak tree to be planted in the city. This was eventually done and became *7,000 Oaks*, one of Beuys’s most well-known works (Beuys et al. 1982).

The difference between the *Kaki Tree Project* and Beuys’ *7,000 Oaks* is that each tree planted as part of Miyajima’s project is a genetical descendant of the tree hit by the Nagasaki bombing and saved by Ebinuma. That tree was a *hibakusha*, one of the survivors of the bombing whose memories Soka Gakkai has devotedly collected and preserved for posterity.

The *Kaki Tree Project* is a story of rebirth but also of death. In this sense, it can be compared to Miyajima’s famous installation *Mega Death* (1999). There, 2,450 blue-light LED counters count, appear, and disappear. After one hour, all LEDs suddenly switch off and the room “dies.” However, hope is not lost since after a while the lights start to turn on again. It is a tale of death and annihilation, alluding to nuclear destruction, followed by rebirth. It is also, as the artist himself said, a symbol of reincarnation (Miyajima 1996, 103).



**Image 4.** Tatsuo Miyajima, *Mega Death* (1999).

Miyajima wrote that,

When I started thinking about art based on eternal life, *daimoku* (*Nam-myoho-renge-kyo*), Soka Gakkai and its great leader, Teacher Ikeda, were there to show me how to judge my works... Because we subscribe to this vision of eternal life, we can rigorously judge each moment. My mission as an artist is to render the accumulation of these judgments into powerful works of art (Miyajima 1996, 103–4).

As Woolsey wrote, Miyajima offers “visually appealing and persuasive representations of Sōka Gakkai doctrine and practice through his work” (Woolsey 2019, 54). Among the doctrines and practices represented are Ikeda’s teachings about the purity of nature and the danger of the nuclear apocalypse, and Soka Gakkai’s efforts to save the world from annihilation. Miyajima “is first and foremost a member of Sōka Gakkai, and then an artist” (Woolsey 2019, 54). As such, he confronts the questions of the *Three Sphinxes of Bikini*, but he believes he knows where to find the answers.

## APPENDIX A

### Chronology of Nuclear Weapons Tests on Bikini Atoll

[By comparison, the bomb dropped on Hiroshima had an actual yield of 15 kilotons, and the one that hit Nagasaki of 25 kilotons]

*30 June/1 July 1946.* “Able.” 23 kilotons.

*24 July 1946.* “Baker.” 21 kilotons.

*1 August 1946.* “Charlie” (cancelled).

*1 March 1954.* “Bravo.” 15,000 kilotons.

*27 March 1954.* “Romeo.” 11,000 kilotons.

*7 April 1954.* “Koon.” 110 kilotons.

*25 April 1954.* “Union.” 6,900 kilotons.

*27 April 1954.* “Yankee II.” 13,500 kilotons.

*4 May 1954.* “Yankee I” (cancelled).

20 May 1956. "Cherokee." 3,800 kilotons.

27 May 1956. "Zuni." 3,500 kilotons.

6 June 1956. "Flathead." 365 kilotons.

11 June 1956. "Tewa." 3,500 kilotons.

25 June 1956. "Dakota." 1,100 kilotons.

10 July 1956. "Navajo." 4,500 kilotons.

28 April 1958. "Yucca." 1.7 kilotons (nuclear device carried by a stratospheric balloon).

11 May 1958. "Fir." 1,400 kilotons.

21 May 1958. "Nutmeg." 25.1 kilotons.

31 May 1958. "Sycamore." 92 kilotons.

10 June 1958. "Maple." 213 kilotons.

14 June 1958. "Aspen." 319 kilotons.

27 June 1958. "Redwood." 412 kilotons.

29 June 1958. "Hickory." 14 kilotons.

2 July 1958. "Cedar." 220 kilotons.

12 July 1958. "Poplar." 9,300 kilotons.

22 July 1958. "Juniper." 65 kilotons.

[A last test, "Piñon," scheduled for August 1958, was never performed]

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