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CULTURE

ART | NEW ART SEEN

KEIZABURO OKAMURA

An animist explores old themes

BY MONTY DIPIETRO

Over the last few years, the traditional art form of *nihonga* has emerged as a player on the Japanese contemporary art scene. I can only guess why this is — something connected to nostalgia or nationalism perhaps? Or could it be that growing social and economic uncertainty has led Japanese to regard the practiced restraint informing the creation of *nihonga* as something of a comfort haven?

Nihonga as a term was coined in the early years of the Meiji Era (1868-1912) following the opening up of Japan to the world, and was meant to distinguish art made here from art in the West (which was termed *yoga*). *Nihonga* is characterized by media and subject matter — quotidian scenes, flowers and landscapes typically executed with *tanuki* (raccoon dog tail) brushes and mineral-based pigments applied to moistened *washi* paper.

The most persuasive manifestation of the new interest in *nihonga* was the Tokyo Museum of Contemporary Art's "From *Nihonga* to *Nihonga*" exhibition earlier this year. I think that had the museum organized a similar show, say, 10 years ago, critics would have bemoaned the venture as "quaint." Now, however, *nihonga* has a fresh new face, with subject matter ranging from hip-hop to *anime*.

The new crop of *nihonga* artists have found favor both in Japan and abroad. Keizaburo Okamura is not one of them.